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I, Catherine T. Collopy, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in History.

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Seeking the Middle in a Sectionalizing America: James Dinsmore and the Shaping of Regional Cultural Economies, 1816-1872

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Seeking the Middle in a Sectionalizing America: James Dinsmore and the Shaping of Regional Cultural Economies, 1816-1872

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the evolving American landscape from the Early Republic to Reconstruction through the lens of one man’s life. During James Dinsmore’s lifetime, Americans experienced rapid change in all aspects of their lives. Industrialization created new opportunities just as the extension of democracy gave increasing numbers of white men decision-making powers within their government. As Americans like Dinsmore moved west to the frontier, they often confronted new conditions: economic, social, environmental, political, and cultural. How they, and he, chose to accommodate themselves to these new realities is fundamentally a story about creating cultural economies.

Further, this dissertation analyzes Dinsmore’s migrations. Raised in New Hampshire, he moved to Natchez in the Mississippi Territory, Terrebonne Parish, Louisiana, and Boone County, Kentucky. In choosing these locations he confronted new conditions that he either adapted to or he risked isolation. His early life in New England encouraged him to be proud of its imagined free heritage; nevertheless, he accepted plantation slavery in the Southwest and created a mixed labor force in the border region. These economic realities were accompanied by social and cultural influences that were not always compatible with Dinsmore’s own convictions, leaving him in an uncomfortable position.

Dinsmore’s adaptations to the regions he successively inhabited and his subsequent discomfort, offer a unique perspective on how those regions were changing. Educated at Dartmouth College to appreciate the economic contributions of all sections of the nation, the transformation of that region into a more competitive, urban, and
industrial society influenced his decision to move south. Natchez and Terrebonne Parish represented the transformation of the Old Southwest from a frontier to a plantation-based, hierarchical cultural and social economy based on the labor of large numbers of slaves. Boone County, Kentucky, with a mixed economy founded on yeoman-based agriculture, evolved from its former Whig-friendly cultural economy, based on diverse interests and compromise into a sectionalized, proslavery, Democratic, political economy. As a perpetual outsider, Dinsmore’s attempt to create compatible social and cultural economies in each of these places was only partially successful. He was never able to construct a middle space where he could feel content. A nationalist from his youth, he witnessed the growing sectionalization of those around him. Though he argued for the emancipation of slaves, others successfully argued for increased protections for their property. The Civil War, which engulfed his region, reinforced his status as an outsider.

Always on the periphery of the regions he inhabited, Dinsmore’s failure to find a center attests to the varied and contested meanings of nationalism and regional cultures during this time period.
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Introduction

James Dinsmore grew up in New England with the Early Republic and died in a border state during Reconstruction. His life is a story of changes and accommodations. As the country around him expanded and developed, he relocated several times and was optimistic that he could adjust to the new conditions he met. Successfully adapting in some ways to the realities surrounding him, he was unable to completely accommodate his own values to the beliefs and practices of the regions he encountered during his life. Attempting to carve out for himself a space free from local and sectional prejudices, he was disappointed. Through his life, as he benefited from the country’s growth, he retained his love for the Union. His preference for leisure over labor allowed him to accept slavery as a means to wealth, but this preference made it more difficult for him to construct a middle ground in an increasingly sectional world.

Born in Rockingham County, New Hampshire, he moved away in several brief steps after graduating from Dartmouth College: to northern New York, Lexington, Kentucky, St. Genevieve, Missouri, and then to Natchez in the Mississippi Territory. Befriended by the wealthy Minor family, he studied law and became the managing partner in a sugar and cotton plantation in southern Louisiana, where he then moved. But
the plantation lifestyle, with its correspondent debt and large enslaved labor force, did not suit him and he dreamed of a life of leisure on a diversified farm in Kentucky, where he could manage with a mixed labor force of slaves, tenants, and day laborers. Moving to Boone County, just hours downstream from the cosmopolitan city of Cincinnati, he strove to live out his dreams. At the age of seventy, he was drawn into the maelstrom of the Civil War, reaffirming his Unionism but threatening to destroy the world he had created.

As the America that Dinsmore was born into grew and matured, political and economic freedom unleashed a new confidence in the ability of individuals to forge their own paths in life. The market revolution created favorable circumstances for opportunistic men seeking to attain the wealth and position that had eluded their forefathers. But as these changes opened up opportunities, they drew participants into an economic game of roulette where chance, as much as skill and education, fostered success.¹

As an urban, middle-class manufacturing culture was spreading from the Northeast to the Old Northwest, a rural, slaveholding, patriarchal, and aristocratic plantation culture was likewise flowing westward in the South, spurred on by the invention of the cotton gin. Though both regions shared much, they increasingly emphasized their differences. Priding itself on free labor and progress, the North viewed the South as economically backward and violent. The South, meanwhile, ascribing more to a community-based understanding of honor and adhering to a rigidly Calvinistic evangelical Protestantism, interpreted northern society as infused with greed and impatience and unappreciative of the social hierarchies southerners deemed natural and
essential. Historians argue that in the South, this perception of differences evolved into a belief on the part of southerners that their institutions would be safest under their own separate government. Even as people of the North, South, and West perceived men and women of other parts of the country to be different, there were common attitudes that most Americans shared. Among them were republicanism, Christianity, white supremacy, and the importance of property ownership. Capitalism was expanding throughout the country, regardless of terrain or climate and it was affecting how a growing number of men transacted their business and lived within their community.²

As the country expanded, the white men who settled the West brought democracy and individualism with them. Aided by the accelerated flow of information, men and women followed regional and national events, and engaged in national debates that increasingly focused on sectional differences. Participatory democracy, evangelical Protestantism, and the steam-powered printing press also encouraged northern Americans to become involved in a variety of reform movements in an effort to perfect the world they inhabited.³

Occurring simultaneously throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, these social, economic, cultural, and political changes compelled Americans to respond continually to new conditions. Dinsmore, like others, confronted change throughout his life, by choice and by necessity. Like many of his generation, he pursued a path to material success by putting faith in the national economy and government. Moving to the frontier, he confronted a world where land and slaves helped to determine status. He began purchasing African Americans to work on the Minor plantations and managed the family’s business while they were away. Following the customary path to financial
reward, he purchased a plantation. As the managing partner of a cotton and sugar plantation in southern Louisiana, Dinsmore was master of more than seventy slaves. Believing that each section of the country contributed to its economic health, he was not content to focus only on his plantation. He also invested in a textile mill in New England and financed another for his brother to manage in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Unlike other plantation owners, though, he felt uncomfortable with the level of debt he was experiencing. The capital necessary to start a sugar plantation and the slow process of bringing the frontier into production combined with the Panic of 1837 to sour Dinsmore on the cash crop business, and prodded him to move north. Choosing to settle in Boone County, Kentucky, he hoped to create a diversified farm with a mixed labor force that would allow him the leisure to study the science of agriculture. All of this was accomplished with a mixed labor force of slaves, tenants, and day laborers. Slavery was not as essential to the border state’s economy as it was in the sugar country, and he confirmed this reality in supporting an effort to gradually emancipate the state’s bondmen in 1849.

That he was unable or unwilling to accommodate himself completely to his surroundings elucidates the cultural markers he accepted as most essential to his self-definition. Believing in the importance of self-improvement, he valued leisure as an avenue toward such progress. Indeed, he overcame his distaste for slavery as long as it provided him with the freedom to cultivate his mind. His aversion to democratic politicking was cured by the emergence of the Whig Party, which, even if it stooped to making appeals to the common man, it at least promoted a proper path to national economic development in Dinsmore’s mind. His desire for wealth was transformed into
an acceptance of relative comfort as a result of his plantation experience. As he matured, married and became a father, he became unwilling to accept risk and his immediate and extended family became more important to him. But two aspects of his nature never changed: he retained a strong curiosity about the natural and supernatural world and an attachment to his family and country.

The Civil War threatened to disrupt Dinsmore’s farm just as it upended his nation. Having supported Clay, Dinsmore favored compromise on the issue of slavery, a position that was easier for him in Kentucky than it would have been in Louisiana. A gradual process of freedom might have been more agreeable to him, but with a large pool of landless men to hire as laborers, the wartime emancipation of slaves that led to the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 did not mean economic ruin for him or for many of his white Kentucky neighbors. The Civil War split the state, but its end and the repercussions from it united Kentuckians once again, though not as Clay compromisers; now they were staunchly against the Republican-led federal government. For Dinsmore, the war tied him more firmly to the union.

Dinsmore’s middle dilemma speaks to a significant part of the American story. Willing to travel to a new region to shape his future despite the differences he knew he would encounter there, he was in essence creating a middle space for himself. With his nationalist outlook, he would carry his New England culture to the Southwest. But the Southwest was changing, becoming more like the South, and he had assisted and benefited from those changes before he became discouraged. His comfort with the material advantages and status that derived from his Southwestern plantation life, and his discomfort with its landscape, debt, and labor requirements, reflect his belief that balance
was needed, in his life and the nation’s. To retrieve his dream of independence he moved northward to the border state of Kentucky, a state that toyed with emancipation and profited from a lively trade to both the north and south. Regrettably, Kentucky was also changing, and Dinsmore’s search for a place in nineteenth-century America where sectional differences carried little weight proved elusive. The middles he had created, in the Southwest, in the border region, and in his life, were untenable because his moderation—economic, geographical, political, cultural—could not accommodate the changed boundaries between slavery and freedom.
Endnotes


Chapter One

Between Worlds: The Unmaking of a New Englander

When James Dinsmore chose to remove himself from populous New England, he traveled with the values and traditions he had acquired from his Scotch-Irish and New England background. Some of those values he expressed in an essay he composed as part of his senior examinations for Dartmouth College in 1813. The essay prompt was, “Is Civilization Conducive to Human Happiness?” In his response, Dinsmore defined happiness as “possessing a body free from pain and a mind tranquil and serene” and stated his belief that the accumulation of wealth meant the accumulation of cares and, therefore, unhappiness. “It is true those who are independent in circumstances and have the wisdom and firmness to keep within the paths of virtue, and set bounds to their passions, may enjoy more happiness.” Europeans, in his view, had lost sight of this, and their greed resulted in an undesirable level of social and economic stratification. He concluded that Native Americans (representing to most white Americans savagery rather than civilization) in fact lived lives that were eminently preferable to those of materialistic Europeans. In particular, Native Americans were to be valued, according to
Dinsmore, for their “simple manners and loyalty,” “perfect equality,” and their belief in a “natural aristocracy of talent.”\(^1\)

There is nothing very unusual in this expression of early American republicanism. Americans of this generation, whose births coincided with the presidency of George Washington, were eager to emphasize the differences between their new country and the old, worn-out aristocracies of Europe. Praising the virtues of Native Americans who had ceased to be a recognized presence was not that unusual in New England. As the son of an innkeeper who worked each summer to finance his college education, Dinsmore would have been remiss in not paying homage to his belief in a “natural aristocracy of talent.” Indeed, the ability to attend college at all was a rare privilege. But if Dinsmore was depending on his education alone to produce independence and happiness, he soon would, like most men of his era, realize his mistake. Although barely visible to those living through it, his world was in revolution. The honesty, equality of opportunity, and aristocracy of talent he and so many others of his generation admired in the new Republic, were already becoming relics of the past, replaced by individualism, ambition, and the capriciousness of the market.

The example of Dinsmore’s life is useful in analyzing these changes because his life spans this period of tremendous change and because, as these changes are occurring, he moves several times: first, to Natchez; next, across the river to lower Louisiana; and last, to northern Kentucky. By studying the relationships he created in the Old Southwest of the early nineteenth century, the changing currents of American culture and how men and women individually responded to them become more apparent.
As children of the revolution, Dinsmore’s generation transformed the concept of republican virtue to that of modern individualism, creating a new American. Integral to this creation was the opening up of career choices and the placement of increased value on success in one’s chosen field. More than ever before, Americans were free to choose their path in life, and more of these careers required at least a rudimentary education. People were increasingly judged on how well they performed their jobs, as measured by monetary gain. Similarly, Americans of the antebellum era began to redefine their earlier definitions of independence and equality as the market dominated their lives. It is significant that such sweeping changes were not the result of natural forces beyond man’s control; in fact men had set them in motion. Dinsmore, too, made choices that affected his personal independence in ways he could not have predicted.²

James Dinsmore was born in 1790 into a close-knit Scotch-Irish community in Rockingham County in southern New Hampshire. Like his ancestors who moved from Scotland to Ireland in the 1600s, and then from Ireland to the American colonies a century later, he likewise chose to leave his paternal homestead and settle in the Old Southwest. The family became so associated with the South that another hundred years after his move, a close relative evinced surprise that the Dinsmore’s roots had actually been in New England.³

With a New Hampshire governor on both his mother’s and his father’s side of the family, James Dinsmore would not have been lacking in name recognition had he chosen to stay in New England. But the same economic forces that were affecting the rest of rural New England made southern New Hampshire no paradise even for sturdy families like his. As land was subdivided by families, the plots became smaller and smaller as the
generations passed and were less likely to support a successful farm. Many left for nearby cities and towns. Population growth there meant increased competition for those who were contemplating a career in business or the law. With new lands opening up in the West, many striving young New Englanders chose to move on in pursuit of fertile and cheaper land. There, the formation of new towns that promised to be prosperous cities capable of vying with eastern cities as centers of manufacturing and finance, meant a potentially quick path to success for Dinsmore’s age. In a letter to his grandparents a few years later, he wrote, “poverty compelled me to seek for employment.”

Indeed, a combination of pecuniary and personal reasons compelled him to leave New Hampshire. His mother died in 1807, followed by the deaths of two of his sisters in 1812 and his father in 1814. At twenty-four years of age, he was left as the eldest of five children, two brothers, John and Silas, Jr., who were twenty-two and eighteen, respectively, and two sisters, Susannah, fifteen, and Catherine, nine. According to his father’s will, as executor he was also bound to provide for his father’s second wife and his young half-sister out of the proceeds of the estate, of which he received only a share. While New England seemed to push him out, the West beckoned him. But unlike many other New Englanders, Dinsmore headed not to the Yankee enclaves in the Old Northwest. He would choose to head to new frontiers farther south. Perhaps the example of his uncle, Silas Dinsmoor, U.S. agent to the Cherokees and later Choctaws and acting deputy surveyor near Mobile, Alabama, helped convince the younger Dinsmore that more southern areas of the vast western region offered possibilities.

The choice of the Old Southwest as a residence was not made quickly. After his father’s death in 1814, he worked his way west and south while considering his options.
Moving first to Canandaigua in upstate New York in 1814, he read law while teaching at a local academy. He toyed with the idea of joining the military toward the end of the War of 1812, until a maternal uncle advised him to doggedly pursue the course he had already set out for himself—the legal profession. Then he moved on to Louisville, Kentucky, where he stayed just long enough to teach one semester of school and receive a recommendation for a position in the small French settlement of Ste. Genevieve, south of St. Louis. He did not remain there long, arriving in Natchez, in Adams County, during the summer of 1816. There with strong recommendations of his intellectual abilities, he studied law in the office of a prominent local attorney, Edward Turner.6

On the cusp of becoming a state, Mississippi was still very much a frontier, whether the town of Natchez itself or in the territory as a whole. Large sections of land were owned by the Choctaw and Chickasaw, allowing for white settlement as new land became available. Slow to sell the best of it to the United States government, Native Americans remained in the area, although their numbers were dwindling, and they regularly brought their produce to Natchez to sell on market days. Their proximity was seen as a threat to the many planters of the area who feared their slaves might find protection among the Indians or hide themselves in the wilderness of tribal lands.7

Natchez, a town on the western edge of Adams County, was among the earliest settlements in the territory and had passed through the hands of the Native Americans, French, British, and Spanish empires, before becoming a part of the United States in 1798. If traveling by steamboat, visitors rounding the bend in the Mississippi would first see the unpromising sight of Natchez-under-the-Hill. Comprised primarily of wooden buildings, many of them constructed with wood from flatboats and many of which were
taverns, this part of Natchez had been taken over by the boatmen, and was considered unfit for polite society. Atop the bluff stood a more orderly Natchez, with brick buildings, well-organized streets, churches and a Spanish-influenced town square. The terminus of the Natchez Trace, an old buffalo and Indian trail that had become one of the major north-south trading routes for Americans west of the Appalachian Mountains, Natchez and the surrounding area had become notorious as a haven for outlaws and brigands. The nearby Trace was known as the “Devil’s Backbone.”

Despite the area’s reputation, Adams County’s cotton planters had quickly become some of the wealthiest residents in the nation. But the Mississippi Territory was a region of contrasts: the “sophisticated and worldly” Natchez amid a “rustic and primitive” world beyond; “large-scale wealth” versus “violent, materialistic lawlessness.” Described as “more western than southern” the residents of the Territory had not yet decided if it would be a land of small yeoman farmers or one of large planters monopolizing the best lands. By 1817, “a planter elite [there] had emerged and taken control” of Adams County. As such, Natchez had a cosmopolitan, wealthy feel to it, compared to the few other towns in the Territory, boasting everything necessary for a comfortable life, including tailors, grocers, wholesalers, cabinetmakers, hatters, saddlers, and gold- and silversmiths. Not surprisingly, eight doctors, and seven lawyers were among its prominent residents.

Visitors were impressed with the affluence of the area. As materialistic frontier planters were contending with the difficult work of clearing their land to plant a crop, Adams Countians had long since replaced its mixed forests for cotton fields and planters were able to focus on conspicuously displaying their wealth. They built magnificent
houses with breezy central halls surrounded by spacious galleries and Cherokee rose bushes to emphasize and beautify their borders. Visitors like artist and naturalist John James Audubon, who was in the area in 1820, described “romantic” scenes of inescapable beauty. One observer reported that he was “much astonished to see the stile [sic] (truly elegant) these families I visited lived in. They are in fact all rich.” Several families were conspicuous by their investment in slaves. Catherine Minor and Calvin Smith each had over one hundred slaves. In Mississippi in 1818, there were 2,520 whites and over 6,000 bondpeople, signaling the overwhelming reliance residents had by this time placed on the raising of cotton.\textsuperscript{10}

In the South, the ownership of slaves and land signaled wealth and status not only for visitors from outside the area, but also among men in the same neighborhood. While historians may parse the nature of the status given to slaveholding men, they agree that it existed. Landowning may have been losing its social and economic significance in the North, but visitors and newcomers to the South would have immediately recognized its importance in that area. Coming from southern New Hampshire where land was at a premium and African American inhabitants were few, Dinsmore would have quickly noticed this distinction.\textsuperscript{11}

For him, the frontier nature of the extended Natchez area was appealing. Adams County was yet in the early stages of settlement, and could still be a place of opportunity. More particularly for him, it meant that many people would recognize him because of his last name. His uncle, Silas Dinsmoor, had served more than ten years at the Choctaw agency house on the lower end of the Natchez Trace, near the small town of Washington and less than ten miles away from the town of Natchez, where he had cultivated a worthy
reputation among the local elite. The younger Dinsmore’s choice to settle there was not made randomly. This was a place where society was yet fluid enough to allow for advancement, but also where the more genteel people would recognize his name and regard it positively.\textsuperscript{12}

His time in Natchez would prove short, in fact. When cotton prices began to fall in the mid-1820s, striving planters began to cast their eyes farther to the southwest, to Louisiana where sugar cane was producing large profits. Natchez planters purchased “more than $50,000 worth of woodlands on the bayous” around Lafourche Parish in one week in 1827. One year later, Dinsmore and his friend, John Minor, bought a sugar plantation Terrebonne Parish.\textsuperscript{13}

Newly formed from Lafourche Parish, Terrebonne was a part of the sugar country southwest of New Orleans, an area when compared to the rest of the state was as anomalous as Adams County was to most of Mississippi. It was distinct from the northern and western portions of that state, which had more in common with the Deep South of Mississippi and Alabama. Although the frontier exchange economy of the lower Mississippi valley had waned by the time Dinsmore moved to the area, cash crop economy survived in isolated areas. Recently arrived Anglo-American and Creole residents had not yet supplanted the old system in which Native Americans, African slaves, and French and Spanish colonists had swapped goods along with cultural habits. Indeed, the lingering Houma tribe of Terrebonne Parish supplemented their own traditional farming and hunting economy by vying with Canary Islanders and French Acadians for seasonal plantation labor. With populations as diverse as the various empires over it, lower Louisiana, unlike Natchez, retained strong influences from the
French and Spanish. Its population included the French Canadian and French settlers who established New Orleans in the early 1700s, African Americans, Native Americans, French Acadian farmers, French and Afro-Caribbeans from Saint Domingue, German immigrants, Spanish-speaking Islenos from the Canary Islands, and Anglo-Americans. Although some of these groups practiced endogamy, there was also a measure of intermarriage, layering the convergence of its various peoples.14

Dinsmore’s new plantation lay along Bayou Black in Terrebonne Parish, about fifty miles southwest of New Orleans on the Gulf Coast. His decision to become a partner in a plantation in southern Louisiana would take him to an area of the Old Southwest unlike the dominant cotton-producing regions often used to represent the antebellum South. By the time Dinsmore moved to his property in 1830, Louisiana had been a state for almost twenty years. The largest pockets of population were in Orleans Parish, along the lower Mississippi River, and in the Atchafalaya basin. Outside these areas, the land was still rather sparsely settled by all but the Native Americans. But the agricultural future of southern Louisiana had already been decided. Like the early Natchez settlers, the French and Spanish Creoles were actively searching for a cash crop in the late eighteenth century, one that would make their settlement worthwhile. Rather than turning to cotton and aided by refugees from Saint Domingue, they found sugar cane well-suited to the soil and climate of lower Louisiana. In the late 1820s and throughout the 1830s, Anglo-Americans flocked to the area to take advantage of the cheap land and high sugar prices.15

Focusing on sugar cane as the dominant cash crop was not the only factor that distinguished this area from the cotton Black Belt. It brought with it social and cultural
differences as well. In 1828, Terrebonne Parish would have displayed many of the features of a frontier. Unlike Adams County, it was sparsely settled with no major towns until the 1830s when Houma (which never matched Natchez in population or opulence) was incorporated. According to a resident of Lafourche Parish, just to the east of Terrebonne and with a similar developmental history, the land was good for cattle and grain, “so it cost but little labor to secure comfortable living.” There were few slaves in the early 1820s because there was no need for them. By 1830, conditions were quite different. A promising sugar crop in 1828 convinced Anglo-Americans to move in and invest in mills and slaves. Of a total population of just over two thousand in 1830, 1036 of them were enslaved African Americans, 798 were of French descent, and the remaining 263 were Anglo-Americans. Compared to the Anglo community where there were 109 adult males to the forty-five adult females, the French-speaking population, most of whom were Acadians, more closely resembled a settled community, with families that included women and children. If slave holdings are a measure of economic standing, the Anglo population was considerably wealthier. Anglos owned some eighty percent of the Parish’s slaves, while the French-speaking population owned barely two hundred slaves, seventy-three of whom belonged to just two men, both officers of the parish. Not surprisingly, Anglo-Americans dominated the fertile land in the parish even at this early stage of development.

With his partner, John Minor, Dinsmore purchased about 2400 arpents (a little less than an acre) of land in Terrebonne Parish in several purchases in 1828, 1831, and 1838. With the arrival of large-scale plantation farming, those with smaller parcels of land (primarily Acadian farmers) either sold out and moved on or continued to support
themselves by farming and fishing, marketing their produce to their new gentry neighbors. They also provided seasonal labor to the planters in return for money to help them sustain their semi-subsistence lifestyle. On this frontier, slaves did the labor that white pioneers had performed on other frontiers: draining the land, clearing the trees and stumps from the fields, killing wild cats, bears, and alligators that interfered with planting and harvesting, and constructing the roads and canals that criss-crossed the region in order to accomplish the harvesting and selling of sugar cane.  

In this changing early nineteenth-century world, historian Joyce Appleby notes that men were placing increasingly higher value on individual rather than familial or community accomplishment. In America, a French visitor noted in 1817, “fortune, reputation, and pretensions went unappreciated while the capacity to make something of one’s life garnered public approval.” A young man who was able to move up in the world through his own intelligence and enterprise now earned more respect than a man who inherited money and assets from his family. In truth, both forms of influence existed in different locales within the emerging frontier. Wealth could be accumulated through a propitious marriage or through a lifetime of labor, a reality particularly true in Natchez, where the frontier stage had passed in the early 1800s. But it was also true on the sugar frontier where a large amount of capital was necessary to provide large profits, and that investment capital often came from family members. More, while the hardy, individualistic men who moved west may have valued their own accomplishments and sneered at those who inherited or married into wealth, once a man had achieved success as a planter and moved within the upper echelons of society, he then expected that his name would carry weight and he was careful that his children married well, lest his hard-
earned property be thrown away. He then became one to be sneered at from the outside by those wishing to be accepted as equals.19

As an educated northerner, why would James Dinsmore believe that such a hierarchical community as the Old Southwest would provide him opportunities to succeed? For a man with confidence in his talents, what better place than one that would allow him to become part of an established aristocracy, rather than the more typical frontier experience where men from all classes of life battled it out for supremacy? He expected the battle to be short, and more of an exhibition than a struggle. When Mr. Butler, from Louisville, recommended Dinsmore for a teaching position in Ste. Genevieve, he described him as “one of the learned but unfortunate sons of N. England who are destined to laborious struggles against the [hurdles] of life.” Dinsmore did not want “laborious struggles.” An acquaintance who graduated with him from Dartmouth believed that a man considering a move to Kentucky required a “very hardy persevering character” in order “to fight his way through a new country peopled with uncivilized Kentuckys.” With his talent, Dinsmore need not fight with men who lacked similar education; he could settle in Natchez where people would immediately respect him for his family connections and then he could impress them more with his education. In the Old Southwest, Dinsmore sought an unlevel playing field, an aristocratic democracy of opportunity.20

Dinsmore looked to the Southwest to provide him with opportunities to demonstrate his abilities. Yet he would rely on the prestige of names and wealth when choosing his acquaintances, intimate and casual. He was not alone. Other migrants, like Dr. Stephen Duncan, John Quitman, and Thomas Butler, married into some of the richest
families in the area, providing themselves with a financial support network and softening their transition from the east coast to the Lower Mississippi Valley. On this frontier, marriage and friendship counted as much as the Turnerian concepts of individualism and masculine strength.\textsuperscript{21}

By using social relationships to propel himself upward in society, Dinsmore shed some of the values and beliefs he had brought to the Old Southwest. Because a person’s worldviews are affected by the relationships they form with those closest to them, by considering the various social interactions Dinsmore engaged in during the twenty-six years he lived in the Old Southwest, one can better appreciate the ways in which that society reinforced and challenged his views. His interactions with others, including those with whom he developed a relationship of equality and those with whom his relationship was built on inequality, will illustrate that he, like most men who moved from the North to the South, adopted southern definitions of equality and inequality and revised his belief in an aristocracy of talent so as to confine it to a small segment of society that had already achieved status.

Marriage was the common method used by newcomers to Natchez to cement their ties to the elite. A propitious marriage would not only bring with it the friendship and respect of other elites, but it certainly presaged access to land, slaves, and credit—the means by which all southerners achieved status. The future governor, John Quitman, a Pennsylvanian who arrived in Natchez in 1821 with very little money, married the daughter of Henry Turner, a wealthy merchant in the area and niece to Edward Turner, who served the area as lawyer, judge, town magistrate, and chief justice of the state supreme court. Another native Pennsylvanian, physician Stephen Duncan, used his
marriages into the Ellis and Bingaman families to amass an estate worth almost two million dollars by 1856. Unlike these newcomers, Dinsmore chose as his spouse a woman with national recognition rather than local connections. Alexander Macomb had once been a wealthy merchant in New York City with family connections to the Livingstons and DePeysters of New York and the Wetherills of Philadelphia. Having lost money in land speculations, he was now an elderly man supported by his son and did not have much to offer his fourteenth child for a dowry. Martha’s prominent brother, Alexander Macomb, Jr., was named commanding general of the U.S. Army the year the couple became engaged. She was almost thirty-two and he was thirty-eight when they married in Burlington, New Jersey in 1829.22

Although Dinsmore was no doubt impressed with his pretty wife’s fine education and entertaining sense of humor, her family tree was in fact a substantial dowry, offering important connections. When he returned with her to the Southwest, most recognized her name as much as her genteel manners and speech. That she brought little financially to the marriage meant Dinsmore did not have to worry about the “accumulation of cares” he referred to in his senior essay at Dartmouth. But his marriage choice illustrates a growing distrust with his early idealistic notion of an aristocracy of talent. He surely could have found a suitable wife in the Natchez area, but he chose to pursue a woman who was born in the house that had, at one time, been occupied by George Washington, a relationship few could boast in Mississippi or Louisiana. That Dinsmore did not approach her parents to ask for her hand until just after he had made his first purchases of land in Louisiana and became a sugar planter suggests more than a need for a respectable occupation. He
had adopted the southern modalities for success, whether economic or social, while rejecting southern women. 23

Dinsmore became increasingly distant with family members who remained in the North. Although he occasionally wrote to them suggesting places they could remove to as a group, he never appears to have had his heart set on such a change. His brother, John B. Dinsmore, had bought a farm near Ripley, New York, on the shores of Lake Erie, and his two sisters, Catherine and Susannah, lived with John, as did Silas, Jr. for a time. John suggested that his brother relocate to Ohio or Indiana, convinced his prospects were as good or better as in Natchez, and much healthier. Likely believing that even with plenty of lawyers Natchez held out the possibility of using his connections to wealthy planters to move from the law profession into something more lucrative, James continued to hedge on the topic and remained in the Southwest. Not one of Dinsmore’s family joined him in Natchez or Louisiana, and family letters between the Dinsmores in New York and the Old Southwest became increasingly sporadic over the years. When notifying James that their sister, Catherine had died in 1839, John commented that he had not heard from James in more than two years, and that James had not seen his sister in almost twenty-five years. 24

Historians are divided over the importance of kin relationships on the Southwest frontier, with some contending that “kinship was power,” while others insist that the frontier allowed for, and even encouraged a break with kin that led to a fierce independence. Without kin in his new surroundings, Dinsmore managed to form relationships with other men of similar circumstances, and he elevated the importance of his own bonds with his wife and children. Had he created kin networks with local
planters through marriage, the trajectory of his life would certainly have diverged from its ultimate course. That he did not choose that route suggests dissatisfaction with the women he met and their culture.\textsuperscript{25}

Yet Dinsmore’s nuclear family was far from being the hyper-patriarchal relationship described as common on the Southwest frontier among transplanted planter families. As men became “aggressive” and “self-absorbed,” acting out their visions of independence, their isolated wives became more dependent on them than they had been in their seaboard neighborhoods. Martha Dinsmore might have agreed to a potentially isolated life far from her many family connections in the North, but she did not similarly become a caricature of dependence within their marriage. In frontier Louisiana amid mosquitoes and alligators, Martha never gave up her independence of mind and her husband does not appear to have resented her voicing her opinions, financial and otherwise. When he was looking for someone to purchase his half of the plantation in 1841, she advised him not to sell because others believed sugar was going to make for great fortunes in the coming years. (Dinsmore had, in fact, already found a buyer.) Her willingness to give her opinion on the subject suggests an egalitarian marital relationship, different from most description of marital inequality and female dependence.\textsuperscript{26}

Still Dinsmore’s closest relationships suggest he never fully inserted himself in the center of the planter’s cultural universe of hierarchy, patriarchy, and kin networks. But he was ever on its periphery. As a New Englander whose closest relationships were with family and migrants from his home region, Dinsmore certainly created relationships with southern-born men based on their equal statuses in society. Primarily they were born of business dealings, like William Brune, a wealthy Natchez merchant. Brune, the
son of an early Adams County settler, was known to Dinsmore through their mutual connection with the Minor family and he became someone Dinsmore could count on when he required security for his debts. He served Brune in the same manner. But as a young man, Dinsmore found himself encountering men in venues at which southern masculine culture prevailed. He took part in a popular Natchez pastime—gambling—and accumulated debts to other men. Though he became closely associated with the Minor family, renowned for their race horses, Dinsmore seems not to have had much interest in horse racing and rarely if ever placed bets at the local track. (Presumably wagering was too steep for his pocketbook.) In 1826, Dinsmore rented a stable in Natchez for his horse and brought in two acquaintances as partners to help him pay for feed and rent. Henry Daingerfield and Duncan Walker were not only young lawyers, but also hailed from the upper echelons of Natchez society. Forming relationships like these made sense for a young man who was looking to get ahead in life because they were men who counted, Brune for the business his father left him and Daingerfield and Walker for their kinship networks.  

By the mid 1830s, after he had moved to Louisiana, Dinsmore had elevated himself considerably, both socially and economically. A sugar and cotton planter who owned half of an approximately two thousand-acre plantation and with over seventy slave laborers who raised sugar cane and cotton, he was the equal of any planter in the area and at the top of society. To cement his status, he had joined a militia unit of cavalry and worked with other planters to create a system of canals that would ultimately link Bayou Black to the Mississippi River. Unlike some families in the area, Dinsmore had no extended family to cushion the isolation that came with living on a plantation. When
Andrew McCollam and his wife moved to their plantation on Bayou Lafourche, she had relatives and friends to bring the couple food and animals whenever they needed. Likewise, the Thomas Butler family, with a plantation in Terrebonne Parish, had relatives and friends with whom they constantly exchanged visits. Young Charles Slack, whose father moved from upstate New York to Louisiana early in the century had an uncle who visited from back east every winter.\textsuperscript{28}

With the isolation of the plantations along the bayous of southern Louisiana compounded by the frontier environment and the neighboring Acadians, Dinsmore socialized with a “neighborhood” of planter families that he may not have otherwise cared for. The names he mentions are primarily Anglo-American names, indicating that he either chose not to associate with the French-speaking residents of the Parish or that none lived close. Unlike others who left their writings behind, Dinsmore illustrates no negative feelings toward the Creole or Cajun populations, but he dealt with them primarily in business situations. According to Carl Brasseaux, a noted historian of the Acadian migration and Cajun settlers, Anglo-American sugar planters who inundated southern Louisiana in the 1820s and 1830s tended to view their French-speaking neighbors as “nuisances who ‘demoralized’ their slaves” by their apparent laziness and also by their hiring of enslaved people for odd jobs. Sargent S. Prentiss, a fellow New Englander who became a lawyer and popular Mississippi politician in the mid-1800s, wrote of the French in Terrebonne Parish (without distinguishing between Creoles or Cajuns), that they were “the poorest, most ignorant, set of beings you ever saw – without the least enterprise or industry.” Likewise a friend of Dinsmore’s, Lewis Cruger, who owned half of a plantation in Lafourche Parish, chose to identify his French-speaking
neighbors as one of the major obstacles to his own success when he described his “miserable situation at the fag end of the World stuck in the mud of the swamp wilderness of an uncivilized creole country.”

Although the neighborhood Dinsmore occasionally referred to included both planters and small farmers, he was more likely to mention the planters than he was the non-slaveholding small farmers. The men Dinsmore chose as close friends in Louisiana were selected less for their social connections (although such connections were evident to all who knew them) than for what they could offer Dinsmore in companionship. He already had his plantation and status, what he needed more was friendship. Tobias Gibson was Dinsmore’s closest companion. Although Gibson had moved to Terrebonne Parish from Mississippi, the two men did not meet until they were both in Louisiana in the 1830s. The friendliness of the wives and the similarity in their children’s ages helped keep the families together through the end of the century. When both wives were in Kentucky, Dinsmore passed his time with Gibson, whose Kentucky-born wife spent several months each year in that state. While Gibson was extroverted and witty, his wife’s kinship to the Breckinridges, Harts, and Shelbys of Kentucky might have been seen as potentially useful to James. Occasionally, he relied on his friend for loans, but they were generally small amounts and were repaid quickly. More often he and Gibson corresponded about the activities of their children and wives, their planting prospects, and politics. Another close friend to the Dinsmore family was Lewis Cruger, a cousin of Martha’s through her New York City kin. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, Cruger was, like James, a partner in a sugar plantation. Often depressed over his financial prospects, Cruger nevertheless provided Dinsmore with stimulating intellectual
conversation, sending the family pamphlets, newspapers, and books as he traveled and
remarking on the latest trends in agriculture and politics outside of Louisiana.\textsuperscript{30}

The men of the Minor family served several functions in Dinsmore’s life. They
provided him with the path toward social success in the frontier South that went hand-in-
hand with potential monetary success. They publicly exhibited their trust in him by
allowing him to tutor their young boys, act as their financial agent, manage their several
plantations when they were absent in the North, and, finally, took him as partner of the
Bayou Black plantation in Terrebonne Parish. John Minor launched James Dinsmore
into the planters’ world by suggesting to him in 1828 that they become partners in a
plantation in Terrebonne Parish. Cotton prices were down and sugar appeared promising.
When the younger William J. Minor inherited half of the Terrebonne Parish plantation at
his uncle’s death in 1831, he was the silent partner and worked well with Dinsmore,
continuing their correspondence for years, only to be broken up by the Civil War. In the
Dinsmore home today there survives a photograph of Concord, the Minor home near
Natchez, a memento of the regard James had for the family and perhaps as a sign of what
he might have achieved with more ambition.\textsuperscript{31}

If any place in the United States failed to fit the Jeffersonian idealism of the
Dartmouth student who in 1813 professed a belief in a natural aristocracy of talent and an
equality of opportunity for all, it was the Old Southwest to which Dinsmore had moved.
Natchez and Terrebonne Parish were, in the words of the historian, Ira Berlin, slave
societies as opposed to societies with slaves, whereby the peculiar institution was the
“foundation on which the social order rested.” The plantation was the basic economic
unit of slave societies, and with cotton well established in Natchez by 1816, its society
and households reflected the patriarchal nature of slave society. Had he then chosen the Vicksburg area as his destination, he would have found himself in a frontier community that was still aggressively searching out its future. According to Christopher Morris’s findings from his study of Vicksburg and Warren County, in 1810 families were still pooling their resources together and living in somewhat egalitarian households. Similarly, the Terrebonne Parish he moved to in 1828, was then seeing large numbers of slaves transferred into the area, almost instantly transforming its recent frontier into a slave society.32

One offshoot of the slave society with which Dinsmore was familiar was the non-slaveholding poor white farmer. These men existed in New England, but the stratification between poor, even landless, farmers and the larger landholders was far narrower there than in the Old Southwest. Slave society strangled the ability of these small farmers to work their own way up the social ladder in a way that was not evident in the North. Plantation owners on the frontier had built upon their initial advantages of being able to purchase better land and employ enslaved people to work that land, and were able to practically isolate small farmers in the pine barrens. As a non-landholder in Adams County, Mississippi, Dinsmore became accustomed to the rhythms of plantation life as the Minor family’s agent and needed only to visit the Minor family’s various plantations to verify conditions with the overseer and keep the places well stocked with food, clothing, and shoes. He hardly came in contact with the petty existences of small farmers.33

But when he removed to Bayou Black, Dinsmore came into contact with neighboring farmers of diverse backgrounds who owned little or no land. Many were
Cajun farmers who had lived a subsistence lifestyle since their removal from Nova Scotia. Raising enough corn, rice, and vegetables to support themselves they grew a little cotton on the side for clothing and fished, hunted, and herded cattle for their meat. The recent arrival of Anglo plantation owners threatened this way of life. Some Cajuns adapted by embracing the ways of the newcomers while others moved further into the bayous, emerging only to work on the plantations during the sugar harvest. Living among the Cajuns were also remnants of the Houma tribe, some of whom had intermarried with the French and African Americans. Like the Cajuns, they earned some money working at the sugar harvest.  

These were not men with whom Dinsmore would socialize; in fact, it is likely that he rarely saw these men outside of grinding season unless associated with a business deal. The cultivation of sugar was different from cotton in that the cane, once harvested, had to be quickly cut, ground, and properly boiled, if the product was to be worthwhile. For this reason, the grinding season was fast-paced and required extra shifts of work from everyone and often included both black and white laborers. Dinsmore often hired ten to fifteen free men to help with the sugar harvest and paid each of them daily wages amounting to anywhere from five to twenty-five dollars per grinding season. Their family names, when used, help to visualize the diverse work force Dinsmore was using in his sugar house. In addition to the enslaved people, there were Native Americans, Islenos, or men of mixed-race (Alexandre, Antoine and Manuel, Napoleon Domingo), Cajuns (Jose Campeche, S. Laby), and Anglo men (D. M. Smith and P. Fletcher). Profit was dependent on the speed and skill with which these men ground and boiled the cane after harvesting, so Dinsmore was not picky about who assisted him.
When Dinsmore became a planter on Bayou Black, his actions suggest that he preferred to be an absentee planter and only became a full-time planter when his first manager ended his contract early. In general he sought plantation managers who were educated and came to the position with a stake already in it. The agreement made between John Minor and Dinsmore, called for Isaac Y. Gibson to “superintend” the plantation for five years, with his ten slaves added to those owned by the other two men. Each man would receive one share of the profits for each working slave and one extra for Gibson himself. In striking this deal for five years, Dinsmore and Minor were showing a familiarity and respect for the ability of Gibson to produce a profitable crop of sugar.

Another manager hired by Dinsmore, S. H. Hazard, worked under a similar agreement. Hazard was a Presbyterian clergyman who had several children and brought slaves with him to the bargain. When Dinsmore was spending time in Louisiana by himself in 1839, he made note of “a number of valuable books” he found in Hazard’s library.36

At no point in the documents setting the terms of either of these agreements is the word “overseer” mentioned. The plantation overseer was unique to the South, and he was someone Dinsmore would have to work closely with if the day-to-day operations of the plantation were to be successful. According to historian William Kauffman Scarborough overseers were generally illiterate and forced to live in a kind of social vacuum—shunning the bondpeople he forced to labor in the fields and was in turn generally shunned by the planter. Initially, Dinsmore lacked the natural inclination of southern planters to attach a social stigma to the career of overseer. Soon after arriving in Adams County, Mississippi, he considered accepting a position as overseer. Had he taken this job, he would have had little reason to belittle overseers later in life. Once he
became a planter himself, he most often acquired the services of capable and learned men with whom he could form social relationships, perhaps imagining himself more a factory owner of the North than the usual plantation owner. The great sugar estates were run more like manufacturing establishments than were cotton plantations, with the “sugar masters . . . combining elements of factory and farm.” Such practices as William J. Minor’s instructions to his overseers to use bells to mark the time for the slaves are proof of this attitude.37

The most obvious inegalitarianism that Dinsmore faced in the Old Southwest was the enslaved labor force. As a white man he might have been able to work his way up to a respectable position in other parts of the United States without compelling anyone to do his work. In the South, his social status was defined almost wholly by his possession of land and slaves. Indeed in 1813, just prior to his relocation to the Southwest, he seems to have been imbued with antislavery sentiments. When traveling to Kentucky to fetch his brother, he wrote in his journal that he had “cross[ed] the Ohio at Limestone and Alas! see for the first time in my life a Slave O fortunate New England! all thy sons are free.” Although from New Hampshire, he would not have been entirely unfamiliar with slavery before his relocation to the Southwest. His grandfather, John Dinsmoor, owned three African Americans as late as 1790, the year James was born. Historian Joanne Pope Melish has found that the “narrative of a historically free, white New England” developed as an obfuscation of the long existence of slavery there, and contentious debates over its Revolutionary demise. It was not long before Dinsmore adjusted his idealism to meet what he saw as the potential rewards.38
Although Dinsmore may have strongly identified himself as a New Englander in his youth, when he moved south his nationalist identity helped him to overcome some of his regional bias. His situation was unusual but not unique. Historian Fletcher Green compiled a list of Yankees who became prominent southerners in the early nineteenth century, arguing that their acceptance by southerners was not affected by whether or not they supported slavery until abolitionism became a vocal force in the North in the 1830s. Many of the men he chose for his mini-biographies, such as Joseph Holt Ingraham, a professor at Jefferson College near Natchez, and George D. Prentice, a journalist in Louisville, accepted slavery. The latter went so far as to use the press in support of the institution. “We think that where the climate and soil are favorable the blacks are better off in slavery than out of it. We wish to see it left everywhere to the will of the whites and the operation of natural causes,” wrote Prentice. Similarly, John Quitman, a New Yorker by birth, accepted slavery because of the society it created. Arriving in Natchez in 1822, he was “awed by the cotton plantations” and the “kind of society which he had craved in more middle-class Ohio.”

Because of the material benefit and society it offered him, Dinsmore identified himself with white slaveowners and not with the enslaved black people. But as a northern-born emigrant, what kind of slaveowner was he? According to James Oakes, Dinsmore should have been a paternalist by reason of birth in New England. Indeed, he matches several of the conservative cultural traits attributed to that group. Paternalism, in the words of Eugene Genovese, grew out of the slaveowners “need to see their slaves as acquiescent human beings” in their enslavement and the mediation between master and slave inherent in the paternalist mindset allowed the former to ignore the fact that his
wealth was founded on the forced labor of other human beings. Acknowledging that wealth was almost completely independent of one’s own special talents and instead was more reflective of the ability to use coercion would have been difficult for a proud planter like Dinsmore to accept.\textsuperscript{40}

Oakes would not have been surprised to find a number of paternalists in Adams County, Mississippi, though it was a frontier area. Specifically mentioning Natchez and the Louisiana sugar country, he argues that paternalists there were common because a small minority of men were able to create a greater degree of social stratification with their monopoly on fertile land, passing it on to their offspring. Sugar cane, protected by a tariff, helped to cushion these planters from the ups and downs of the cotton market to which the majority of southern whites were subjected. When he moved to the Old Southwest, Dinsmore chose, wittingly or not, two of the more conservative locations in the entire South.\textsuperscript{41}

Yet Dinsmore moved slowly into the slaveholding world and he did not behave like a paternalist. As a law student and practicing attorney in Natchez, he would have become familiar with the lives of the local planters and their relationships with their bondsmen. In 1825, Dinsmore purchased his first slaves; a group of four from the estate of a local man and another group of seven from John Minor. He kept these bondpeople on Minor’s plantation in Louisiana, an arrangement that allowed him to share in the profits of the harvest. At an auction later in the year, he purchased two men, Caesar and George. While it appears that he kept George to clean his office and attend to his personal needs, Dinsmore hired out Caesar. Common in many areas of the South and especially on its various frontiers, such arrangements allowed slaveowners to reap the
rewards of slavery directly, in cash, every month, without waiting for the harvest and without having to worry about medical bills, clothing, and food. After several months of hiring Caesar out at twelve to fourteen dollars per month, Dinsmore allowed the man to hire himself, in return for a payment of twelve dollars per month. Caesar was now responsible for his own meals and lodging but had the independence to choose who employed him. Such an arrangement, presumably based on the trust developed between the two men, would have allowed Dinsmore the satisfaction of feeling that he was allowing Caesar to advance in society, while at the same time providing himself with a trouble-free monthly return on his investment. Obviously, without the promise of freedom, Caesar’s options were limited. No manumission is extant in surviving Dinsmore records.42

Although a popular practice in more urban areas, rural slaveholders in the plantation states argued against the practice of allowing slaves to hire their own time. It threatened the paternalistic bond between master and slave, thus weakening the entire institution. Others, especially in the cities and the upper South, believed that allowing slaves to hire their own time had a beneficial impact on the institution by stabilizing white slaveholding society through broader access to an institution which they might otherwise not support. A young mother might hire a bondwoman for ten dollars a month, and in doing so confirm her family’s status in the neighborhood. Her husband, who otherwise would never have experienced the mastery that planters held, would be more likely to support the politics of slavery. This desire to live like wealthier neighbors was one factor explaining why some middling families participated in the slave economy.43
By 1840, Dinsmore’s prediction that owning a sugar and cotton plantation would be valuable proved sound. His plantation had seventy-five bondpeople on it, some of them he owned, some of them he owned in partnership with William Minor, some of them were hired from neighbors, and some were owned by S. H. Hazard, the manager. With this permanent work force and a seasonal assortment of men from the neighborhood, Dinsmore attempted to bring more and more of the land along Bayou Black into cultivation. Most of this back-breaking work was performed by the enslaved people. In a paternalistic attempt to co-opt their labor, Dinsmore, like other slaveowners in the area, allowed his bondpeople to raise fruits, vegetables and poultry to add to their diet or to sell for small sums. More, he paid them cash wages for work on Sunday, not an unusual arrangement on sugar plantations. According to historians these arrangements were as various as the plantation owners, with Louisianan Valcour Aime paying his slaves $1,600 for their corn crop. Richard Butler, who moved south to Louisiana from Pennsylvania in the early 1800s adopted the practice on his plantation of paying his bondpeople for working on Sundays, typically a day free from work. Dinsmore also incentivized the picking of cotton on Sundays by paying slaves (and neighboring men) a dollar per one hundred pounds picked. This agreement reinforced the master-slave relationship, adding the carrot of economic motivation to the stick of the law and physical punishment. For the enslaved people, they bought into the system for their own reasons. They were now able to purchase their own clothing and other luxury items that they used to distinguish themselves from laborers on other plantations or even from their neighbors in nearby slave cabins.44
To encourage the slaves to put in the amount of labor at cutting and grinding time necessary for a successful harvest, sugar planters generally paid them a small amount for their extra work. As with his payment for Sunday work, Dinsmore was reinforcing the paternalistic bond he believed existed between himself and the slaves, but he was also recreating the argument used by white southerners in their own defense of slavery: that it was more humanizing than the way the factory workers were treated in the North. Dinsmore likely viewed his efforts to create an incentive among his labor force as bringing a little of what worked in the North to the South. One should not be too surprised then, to see his notation a few weeks into the grinding season of 1834, “[A]greed to give my men 10 bits [$1.25] hereafter when they take their tour at night,” he wrote in his ledger. Obviously, Dinsmore’s free and enslaved laborers chose November, when every hour counted, to push for higher wages. One wonders how surprised Dinsmore was that his workers rejected his evaluation of their labor’s value, insisting that he accept their own valuation of it.45

From the New Hampshire of his youth to the Old Southwest of his mid-life, Dinsmore had traveled a long way. He adopted much of what the region had to offer men in the way of a promising future, and accepted much of what he experienced because the elite of the area were not that different from what he would have expected from the elite of New England. But he was ever between worlds, adjusting the reality of what he confronted to his own preconceived ideas while simultaneously adjusting his own preconceived ideas to the conditions surrounding him. Those aspects of the Southwest that he found troubling—especially slavery—he managed to adapt enough to satisfy himself that his methods were beneficial to those whose labor and lives he owned. While
he may have still considered himself a New Englander by birth, his travels and experiences gave him a different worldview. Perhaps he would have identified himself more as an American than either a southerner or New Englander. Socially, he fit in to the southern societies where he lived; one wonders how well he would have fit into the southern society of the Black Belt.
Endnotes

1 James Dinsmore Dartmouth Journal, ca. 1813, Roll 21, Dinsmore Family Papers (DFP), MS 1016, Dinsmore Homestead Foundation, Burlington, KY.


5 John Dinsmore’s Will, 7 December 1813, New Hampshire State Archives and Records Management, Concord, New Hampshire.

6 Jesse Hawley to Mr. Weaver, April 1815; certificate from Ezra Witter, n.d.; Mr. Butler to Dr. Scott, 31 October 1815; John Bell to James Dinsmore, 6 December 1814; Edward Turner to Jas. Dinsmore, 15 February 1820, file 64, all DFP.


11 For James Oakes, who was most concerned with the acquisitiveness of southerners, “land and slaves became the two great vehicles through which slaveholders realized their ambitions of fortune.” He points to pressure from family and friends that influenced young men’s desires to be successful, and success meant the accumulation of slaves. In her study of yeoman farmers in South Carolina and their “claims to masterhood,” Stephanie McCurry argues that freemen based such claims on the number of dependents whose labor they commanded, but that planters with “vastly greater
wealth, property, and numbers of dependents” had an even greater claim than their yeoman neighbors and in the public realm everyone recognized this. Bertram Wyatt-Brown noted that while in the North landowning was no longer the only route to wealth and status available to men, in the South, “ownership of slaves and land continued to offer a distinction and moral imprimatur beyond their monetary value.” James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998, 1992), 73; Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 95; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 73.

12 Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 109; Silas Dinsmoor was the younger brother of James’ father, John Dinsmore. John and at least one of his siblings changed the spelling of their last name, eliminating one ‘o’, but Silas refused to follow their example.


20 Butler to Dr. Scott, October 31, 1815; Walter Hubbell to James Dinsmore, May 1815; DFP.
3. Jas. Dinsmore to Jane Macomb, 21 October 1828, DFP.
4. John B. Dinsmore to Jas. Dinsmore, 15 June 1817; Silas Dinsmore, Jr. to Jas. Dinsmore, 4 August 1817; Silas Dinsmore, Jr. to Jas. Dinsmore, 10 May 1818; Silas Dinsmore, Jr. to James Dinsmore, 4 August 1817; John B. Dinsmore to James Dinsmore, 22 April 1839; Silas Dinsmore, Jr. to James Dinsmore, 4 August 1817; John B. Dinsmore to James Dinsmore, 22 April 1839, all DFP.
6. Cashin, *A Family Venture*, 99; Martha M. Dinsmore to James Dinsmore, 14 December 1841, “. . . it is believed here [in Kentucky] that any one who has a sugar Plantation ought to hold on as sugar is to be the only profitable & sure product raised in the country . . . . Don’t you think you give him too much time for the payment 6 years!”
7. DFP.
11. James Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 11 November 1841 and 20 February 1839; for example, Lewis Cruger to James Dinsmore, 20 March 1842, among others, DFP.
12. James Dinsmore to _____ (unknown recipient), 6 March 1854, DFP.


35 James Dinsmore Daybook, 1832, File 1963, DFP.


Chapter Two

The “Principle of Hope”: Exploiting Opportunities on the Southern Periphery

The nineteenth century was an era of profound change. The century opened with farmers at the apex of their power in the nation. The market revolution transformed the American landscape and filled it in, with frontiers giving way to towns and cities, canals and railroads, banks and factories. Machines were replacing men and steam power was replacing horse and water power.

Into this transforming world James Dinsmore was born, and to it he sought to accommodate himself. Although some of the changes above had a significant and perceptible influence on his life, the impact of other changes would have been more internalized and less obvious. During his lifetime, Dinsmore not only confronted the same problems other striving white Americans were forced to face, but he also dealt with issues arising from the personal decisions he made. Economically, his decision to move from a settled location in the North that was experiencing some of the more profound effects of the market revolution to the southwestern frontier was the result of ambition, self-interest, confidence in the future, and the desire to establish financial independence.
By the early 1800s, the market revolution was felt throughout most of the United States and created new economic men. Arguing that capitalist behavior began in colonial cities of the North, historian Gary Nash found that many of the behaviors necessary for a liberal economy were shaped by events that occurred quite early in American history, between 1690 and 1776. While the men he labeled liberal Whigs did not believe that an open economic system should be accompanied by an open political system, they already had developed the belief that self-interested economic behaviors were productive of general wealth and general wealth was good for all in society. Left to the next generation was the task of transforming these beliefs into liberal economic policy. In the interest of creating more equality through a “yeoman’s republic,” the Jeffersonian Republicans fostered the environment necessary for capitalist development and increasing inequality.1

Men of this new generation chose to make money in life so it could be invested to produce more wealth, whereas their forebears accumulated money in life to preserve their status. These changes in economic motivation do not mean that Americans became entirely self-absorbed and turned their back on the new nation. Rather, “new” Americans, according to a French visitor to the United States in 1817, believed that financial success “made you a contributor to the resources of the nation.” This new liberal ideology merged with the earlier notion of virtue, which attempted to subsume the classical republican citizen’s individual desires to the common good. Soon after 1800, the notion that by pursuing one’s individual desires all people would be materially benefited became common currency. Using this thought process, when one section of the country pursued its material interests, the entire country would feel the advantages.2
Although in the New England of Dinsmore’s youth the Federalist Party dominated, by the time he was a young man and thinking about his future, the new liberal ideas influenced him. Included within his Dartmouth papers, perhaps forming the basis for his senior essay, were notes he made of ten advantages that accrued to countries that pursued manufacturing. One of these read, “nothing would so effectually confirm the union of the states as manufactures.” Although the northern, middle and northwestern states had superior advantages for manufacturing over the southern states, he recognized that the entire country would benefit from manufacturing even if not all sections engaged in it equally. Cotton from the South could be sent north to be manufactured into cloth by factories in the North or West and purchased by southerners. Additionally, hemp produced in western states could be purchased by southern states and used for cotton bagging. In these ways, the country relied on its several parts to do what they were most suited to do geographically, and the sections would not be alienated from each other but would instead be knit closer together in a dependent relationship.

This new generation was not bound by tradition or pessimism, but believed they could create their own destiny; they were “competent actors in a rational world.” Dinsmore, too, judged this to be the case, suggested by his decision to move from New Hampshire to the southwestern frontier. Although his family may have believed him to be lazy, he had enough ambition and independence to stake his future in a section of the country that was unknown to him and where he would be in turn relatively unknown. Like others of his generation, Dinsmore’s confidence in his ability to succeed in the Southwest suggests his faith in the future of American progress. Appleby finds the roots of this “principle of hope” in American exceptionalism. But in the early 1800s, this
exceptionalism, she argues, was the outgrowth of a free government and a free economy and not a utopian, New England trope of a “city on a hill,” however recognizable Dinsmore might have found such a vision. Such optimism was necessary in a world where men were encouraged to take risks and invest in manufacturing and agriculture.5

The economic optimism inherited as a young American coming of age in the first decades of the nineteenth century allowed Dinsmore to imagine that he could travel anywhere in the United States to make his fortune; north, south, or west. His decision to move to Natchez confounds historian Frank Owsley’s argument that antebellum Americans tended to migrate west along latitudinal parallels consistent with their place of origin. The relocation he made exposed Dinsmore to a society, culture, landscape, and economy that differed from what he had previously experienced. Based largely on the 1850 and 1860 U.S. censuses, Owsley explains that farmers would move to a place where they could “continue . . . to grow the field crops, fruits, and vegetables, the tillage, habits, and marketing of which are part of his mental furniture.” Because Dinsmore did not move west to engage in agriculture, his choice of the Northwest or the Southwest would not initially have made much difference. But Natchez was a slave society, and Dinsmore’s initial opposition to slavery would naturally put his visual world in conflict with his “mental furniture.”6

Although the North, South, and West belonged to the same young country, they differed from each other in significant and noticeable ways. Before sectionalism became a potent political force, Americans recognized that people they encountered from different parts of the country had distinct cultural markers. It was in the West where Anglo-Americans migrated, that the melding of these differences would occur.
According to one observer in Buffalo, New York, several of the men he met in the West of the mid-1830s were “a fair sample of the hospitality and good feeling predominant in the West of those of higher order and have been long enough to wear off the little peculiarities of other sections.” Americans generally recognized cultural differences between the peoples of different sections and the use of the word “peculiarities” was mild enough not to be insulting. The idea that one could lose such peculiar traits when mixed with other people indicates that contemporaries believed there was an American-ness that transcended sectional differences within the country.\(^7\)

More significant than the “little peculiarities” that marked men and women from different sections was the growing importance of slavery. In revolutionary New England, slavery was gradually being phased out. But in the Lower South, with Eli Whitney’s invention of the cotton gin in 1793, the importance of slavery was reinforced as planters and yeoman farmers moved farther west from the Atlantic coastal regions, filling in newly-formed western and southwestern states. By 1816, when Dinsmore landed at Natchez-under-the-hill, the South and parts of the Southwest had become distinguished by their dedication to slave labor, while in New England slavery had been unknown since at least 1800. The West, of which Mississippi was a part, was a mixture of settled and unsettled frontiers, where farmers utilized slaves according to established law and their previous experience.\(^8\)

However different the sections might have been, Dinsmore’s travels south and his adoption of the southern economy as his own, illustrates that at a basic level, many Americans of all sections shared in this liberal individualism for which slavery was no obstacle. In describing how a nineteenth-century man might adopt the tenets of liberal
individualism within an environment of slaveholding, historian James Oakes argues they based their acceptance of individual freedoms and rights on their “natural” claim to such inalienable rights as life, liberty, and happiness, or property as they would have preferred the Declaration of Independence to read. African Americans, Native Americans, women and children, were not naturally fit to share equally in the rights and freedoms the Constitution conferred on white men. Considering the prejudice African Americans faced in northern states, by the time Dinsmore left New Hampshire, he and many northerners shared in this assumption.9

As a young man, whatever moral misgivings about the institution of slavery, he had little first-hand knowledge of it. When he was born in Rockingham County, New Hampshire in September 1790, slavery was still legal. By 1820, only 789 African Americans lived in the entire state, including twenty-three in his hometown of Londonderry. These free men, women, and children certainly lived less constricted lives than the bondpeople of the South, but they were reminded every day of their perceived inferiority to whites in a society that, according to historian C. Vann Woodward, “was dedicated to the doctrine of white supremacy and [African American] inferiority.” Indeed, exclusionary racial laws were born and matured in the “free states, where African Americans were forced to sit separately in theaters, trains, omnibuses, and churches and they were often kept in the lowest-paying jobs.” New Hampshire might have been one of only five states to grant suffrage to African Americans by 1860, but white residents there reacted violently to proposed schemes of school integration and refused, like those in most northern states, to allow blacks to sit on juries.10
When Dinsmore left Londonderry in 1814, his racial understandings were based on New Hampshire’s dialogue with its African American population. It attempted to erase residents’ slaveholding past and make the degraded present experiences of that minority group appear to be a result of their own shortcomings rather than their treatment at the hands of the dominant white society. The fact that he believed all the “sons” of New England were “free,” as he wrote upon reaching Kentucky in 1813, is a strong indication that he had little knowledge of the difficulties and prejudice free blacks faced. Historian Joanne Pope Melish argues that New Englanders like Dinsmore created their own racial identity from this understanding of their racial past, rather than from their comparative knowledge of slaveholding southern society. However he felt about slavery as he left New Hampshire, Dinsmore had already formed ideas about the fitness of African Americans for enslavement or freedom during his youth, before he ever traveled to the South.\textsuperscript{11}

No amount of New England racialism could have prepared Dinsmore for the starkly different realities of slavery and freedom in Adams County, Mississippi. In the town of Natchez, where he eventually rented a law office, the 1820 Census listed 1,448 whites, 654 slaves, and 82 free blacks. The figures for Adams County, not including Natchez were far more lopsided: 2,557 whites, 7,299 slaves, and thirty-six free blacks. Dinsmore walked into a life he might have heard about from his uncle. But words would not have prepared him for the reality of living in a world where the overwhelming majority of people were enslaved African Americans. As a white man he traveled there willingly and with the expectation of material success. To achieve this success, his beliefs were forced to adapt to this changed racial landscape.\textsuperscript{12}
In these early years of settlement, it is difficult to find any northerners who moved south to Mississippi and found themselves disappointed enough in the area’s racial composition that they returned home. More commonly, those who did find their way south in the early Republic changed their views of slavery once they encountered it in plantation society. Seargent S. Prentiss, who was born in Maine and relocated to Adams County in the 1820s, altered his initially negative view of slavery to one of acceptance. Likely comparing their situation with the plight of free blacks in New England, he observed that slaves appeared “to enjoy life, and are, for aught I see, as happy as their masters. It is not often that they are treated so cruelly as we are accustomed to suppose, and in general they are better off than they would be if they were free . . . .” So too with Connecticut-born and Dartmouth-educated George D. Prentice, who moved to Louisville, Kentucky, and became a successful newspaper editor. Like Prentiss, he originally thought of slavery as a moral blight, but later came to believe that “where the climate and soil are favorable the blacks are better off in slavery than out of it.” Closer to Dinsmore’s own origins, was Daniel Morrison, whom James’s brother, Silas, Jr. encountered in 1831 in the Atchafalaya country of Louisiana. Born near Londonderry, Morrison was currently the owner of a plantation that produced sugar cane with the labor of six slaves. White northerners and southerners, while becoming more divided over the future of slavery in the nation, were generally in agreement on white supremacy and the place of African Americans in society.13

Even after the Civil War, northerners who went south were influenced by their own racial prejudices when they encountered the freedpeople. Although imbued with free labor principles that recognized the “equal opportunity for social mobility and
economic independence,” as Eric Foner writes, throughout the southern Black Belt and the Sea Islands of South Carolina northerners insisted on profitable farming enterprises at the expense of the economic independence of the laborers. When African Americans resisted, their intransigence became a sign of backwardness. Yankee missionaries in the Sea Islands, despite their real moral commitment to uplift, discouraged the very economic independence they insisted on for themselves. The inability of northerners to imagine their black employees as anything more than “agricultural peasants” and consumers of northern goods significantly weakened their “free” labor experiment. Yankee paternalism included a sincere desire to instruct the freedpeople with those skills best suited to economic success, including “regularity, punctuality, sobriety, and frugality,” but northerners who invested in southern cotton plantations were influenced by a racially-tinged view of their laboring force. They “wanted to give them a fair chance to find their own natural level somewhere near the bottom of the social scale.” The pervasiveness of the institution of slavery in the plantation states conflicted with northern ideas of free labor, and resulted in transplanted northerners having difficulty envisioning an African American population that was capable of achieving economic equality. Many southerners themselves believed that northerners who came south as antebellum planters or overseers “earned reputations for being the hardest drivers of slaves” and were likely to adopt southern values after the Civil War because they “knew that the Yankee, by and large, had no special love for the Afro-American.” British correspondent William Howard Russell corroborates this view in the diary he kept during his visit to the United States in 1861. While visiting a French Creole plantation on the Mississippi River, he
was told that the Creoles were the “kinder and better masters” and the “New England Yankee is reputed to be the severest of all slaveowners.”\textsuperscript{14}

Yet by the 1840s, the negative influence of sectionalism made itself felt in the form of southerners’ prejudices against all outsiders, even those who owned slaves. A statistical study of five cities in the South in 1850 and 1860 where there was a conspicuous presence of migrants and immigrants found that transplanted northerners and immigrants, particularly at the lower end of the economic spectrum, owned slaves in a smaller percentage than their southern-born associates. Southerners were justified in their suspicions of outsiders, and especially urban outsiders, because those groups were viewed as less willing to purchase or hire slaves.\textsuperscript{15}

Still, the pursuit of planter status was not foremost in Dinsmore’s mind as he considered relocating to the Southwest, and opportunities were open to men of various backgrounds. Initially, he staked his future on the law and in that profession he might have become successful without ever owning a bondman. But he soon made friends with men in and around Natchez and in due course began buying and selling African Americans. Dinsmore was then able to fit slavery into his future without upsetting any past cultural constructs he might have sought to uphold. He was in good company. Other outside men quickly or gradually rose to the position of planter. Richard Butler and Stephen Duncan, both from Pennsylvania where gradual abolition laws meant that men and women were still enslaved into the early 1800s, married soon after moving to Adams County and immediately came into plantations and slaves. Others, like Dinsmore, Prentice, and Prentiss, all from New England and with professional careers such as the law and journalism, only gradually became masters; slavery becoming part of
their lives later, if at all. John Quitman, future governor of Mississippi, was enticed to Natchez from New York to further his law career, the promise of an immediate license bringing him south. He wrote his brother that he had been told of Natchez that “Men of [talents] are much wanted, and the general profligacy and idleness that prevail render young men of talents, morality, and application to business, objects of public confidence and esteem.” According to Dinsmore’s contemporary, Joseph Holt Ingraham, lawyers in Natchez often worked their way into the planting profession, dropping the law when they had “a few hundred acres of the rich alluvial lands and a few slaves.”

John Knight, for one, took the path of non-slaveholding professionals to the master class. Born in Maryland, he was unable financially to invest in a plantation and slaves when he moved to Natchez in the early 1830s. Instead, as he wrote in 1834, to accumulate capital “sufficient to establish me in the planting business on a respectable scale,” he began a mercantile business. Two years later, he was looking for land to purchase in Arkansas but could find none that would be a good investment. In 1839, he was still expecting to trade in his mercantile business for the planting business if he could only find “the right kind of a cotton Plantation & Negroes, for the right kind of price.” In the meantime, he settled for one or two slaves to assist him in his store and his wife at home. His view of a plantation and slaves was that of investment and he advised his father-in-law that he ought to trade his land in Maryland for cotton land in the Natchez area to realize a better profit. By 1850, he had five domestic slaves but still no farm laborers. No record indicates that he ever did raise enough capital to become a planter, but his view of a plantation and slaves as investments rather than a way of life is similar to the position of Dinsmore.
The first business encounter Dinsmore would have had with slavery certainly reinforced the notion that New Englanders could as easily become planters as southerners. In 1817 he wrote to his uncle, Silas Dinsmoor from the plantation of the Calvin and Philander Smith. James was unsure of what course to pursue as he studied law and was considering employment as overseer for the Smith brothers, who had come to Adams County in 1776 with their father Jedidiah, a Yale graduate and Presbyterian minister from Massachusetts. After the elder Smith died, the children were able to slowly establish themselves as successful planters near Second Creek, just outside of Natchez. The elder Dinsmoor was acquainted with the family, with whom he shared a similar background. By 1818, after being in Adams County for over a year, and having been rejected for a job as president of Jefferson College, located in nearby Washington, Dinsmore was debating whether to move to Indiana to continue with his law studies or to remain in Adams County and accept the job of overseer. Although he does not state specifically for whom he would be overseeing, it was likely for the Smith family. When questioned, his brother thought overseeing would be the better profession than the law. “The office of overseer in Mississippi is I presume twice as profitable as the average income of the Lawyers in Indiana, & as for the honor there can be little difference.” Indeed, according to William K. Scarborough, overseeing was “held in social disesteem by a large segment of the planting community.” Although northerners could make outstanding overseers, Scarborough finds them to be a very small minority, given their unfamiliarity with coercing the labor of slaves. While overseeing was often a step on the ladder to economic independence, planters, including Dinsmore’s future partner, William J. Minor, demanded their overseers “give the whole of [their] time and talents to the
interests of [their] employer” and remain on the plantation at all times except on planter’s business. Evidence does not indicate whether or not Dinsmore accepted the overseer’s position.\textsuperscript{18}

It is doubtful he did, as he soon found a position with a prominent local judge, Edward Turner. This relationship gave him personal access to some of the elite families in the area, including the Minor family. Owners of several plantations and over one hundred bondpeople, they introduced Dinsmore to the kind of lavish lifestyle that large-scale slaveowning allowed. Peer acceptance might have been among his motivations, but as sectionalization deepened, the peculiarities of southern white elite society demanded more of outsiders. In his discussion of honor culture in southern elite society, Bertram Wyatt-Brown identifies kin networks as a significant impetus for adherence to the southern code of honor. “Without relatives one was helpless, and shorn of a major reason to exist.” Dinsmore likely had to work hard to earn the approval of the community, knowing he would be judged by the norms of association within southern kin-based communities. The Minor family provided Dinsmore with a protective shield behind which he could begin to accumulate wealth. In the Southwest, even on the frontier in Adams County, cotton was the established route to success and slavery was the bedrock of the cotton economy. Socially and economically, accepting and taking part in the slave economy was the easiest path for Dinsmore to gain both financial independence and community respectability.\textsuperscript{19}

Doing so demanded Dinsmore’s appropriation of southern constructs of societal standing, offered along three pathways. First, concurrence with the position of most white Americans of the time period that African Americans were inferior to them;
second, acceptance of the view that slave management was little different from that of a factory manager in the North, with many men and women working long hours under his control; third, embrace of the paternalistic pillar that what he was doing was actually helping inferior African Americans.

As a liberal capitalist, Dinsmore viewed slavery primarily as an investment, secondarily as wealth producer, and lastly as an enhancement of social standing. In 1820, then a tutor in the Minor household outside of Natchez and paid the “liberal salary of fifteen hundred dollars” a year, he had no need for slaves of his own. Not until 1825 did he purchase his first slaves, and left them on one of the Minor plantations. Perhaps the impetus for this purchase was his employment in 1824 as manager of the family’s plantations. Serving in the capacity of agent and attorney for John Minor, who was spending several months in the North, Dinsmore not only visited the plantations, tracked down runaways, and made decisions about food and crops, but he also took charge of John Minor’s finances, which included transactions as small as forty dollars and as large as two thousand dollars. This experience opened to Dinsmore the entirety of an influential planter’s world: the operation of a plantation and the management of slaves. The experience gave him a sense of power, but it was a power that did not necessarily reflect the ownership of other human beings. Rather he felt the power one might associate with being able to successfully manage all aspects of a large business concern: the financial aspects and relations with middle management. His frequent references to the large financial notes he dealt with on a daily basis served a recording function, but also embodied the almost dizzying economic power and connections a wealthy planter was able to exert and create.20
In 1825 Dinsmore bought thirteen slaves. Most of them he placed on one of the Minor plantations, giving him an investment in the profits of the crop there. According to typical deals he made years later with his partners in Louisiana, the several slaveowners involved in the partnership would divide the profits from a plantation’s crop according to the share of slaves each investor owned. Later that same year he purchased two men, hiring one of them out to a Natchez resident. As an investment, he expected that he would receive his purchase price in monthly payments after a few years of ownership. Neither of these arrangements required much oversight on Dinsmore’s part because those who hired slaves were required to clothe, feed, and medicate them.21

Dinsmore’s pursuit of slave owning likely arose from multiple motives. In hiring out the man named Caesar (who later became Perry) in Natchez, his desire for a return on investment coexisted with a belief that he could offer vital life skills, even uplift, to African Americans by allowing them the independence to find their own employment and provide themselves with room and board. He expressed this motivation in a letter to his agent, John Adams, who oversaw the hiring of a group of Dinsmore slaves in Mobile, Alabama to the federal government:

With regard to allowing the negros to hire their own time I have generally found it advantageous when the negros themselves were not of a character to render it probable that they would take advantage of the indulgence & get into bad habits. It often gives some pride of character & orderly habits of industry.

Such an “indulgence” on Dinsmore’s or his agent’s part was likely appealing to enslaved African Americans who, like free blacks, benefited from economic motivation and had their own desires for independence. As a paternalist, Dinsmore recognized that some slaves could manage, even thrive, on their own while at once benefiting him. All he required from them was a monthly payment.22
This method of hiring slaves, much more common in more urban areas of the South where there were opportunities for blacks to find short-term employment contrasted sharply with the nakedly economic motivations that underlay his hiring of slaves to the Minor plantation. Allowing slaves to hire their own time was not a popular practice anywhere in the South as it gave too much independence to the bondpeople who were thus encouraged to create bonds with other slaves and free blacks in order to find lodging and food. Towns and cities worked to end the practice but it was apparently so useful to slaveowners that they were rarely able to eradicate it completely. However advantageous the hiring of slaves was to masters, the enslaved were also able to make it work to their benefit. While Perry may not have been able to earn his own freedom, he was able to accumulate money and presumably other assets. Years later, in 1836, Perry had produced two notes that, with interest, amounted to $138.67 owed to him by Dinsmore. Not only had Perry shown ambition in earning over one hundred dollars in a constricting environment, but he proved that he was aware which men in society were going to be of use to him in obtaining the money due.23

The prevalence of hiring slaves in urban areas has been a focus of historians, but less has been written about slave-hiring in the rural South. Walter Brashear, a Kentuckian who moved to the Attakapas region of Louisiana to become a sugar planter, was on the lookout for a similar sort of investment of slaves and money which would serve the “purpose of ridding the [plantation] of many dollars of debt.” Dinsmore could expect to receive a dividend on his investment each year, and could withdraw his investment when he saw fit. It was also a useful way to accumulate slaves slowly. If he could not yet afford to purchase a profitable plantation, then he could at least begin
building a slave force for that eventuality. As with Perry, he would have little physical contact with the bondpeople he now owned; someone else would be responsible for their food, lodging, and medical costs. In 1828, Dinsmore was convinced by his employer and friend, John Minor, to go into the planting business. The initial plans appear to have been that they would split the costs of the plantation down the middle and hire someone to manage the concern so their permanent presence would not be required. This would allow Minor to continue managing the family plantations around Natchez and would allow Dinsmore the freedom to pursue other interests. The sugar cane and cotton plantation, located in the southern bayou country of Louisiana, would be an investment for both of them. After furnishing the place with the necessary tools and bondpeople, the two men hired a man, A. Kees who was a skilled carpenter and an engineer. His job was to construct houses for the slaves, a sugar house or purgery for the grinding of the cane, a boiling house for making the syrup, a connection to the saw mill and sugar mill from the steam engine, carrier tables for the cane, and a cane shed. Isaac Y. Gibson was installed as manager, but he did not stay long. By 1831 Dinsmore found himself permanently lodged along Bayou Black in Terrebonne Parish. For the first time he was personally immersed in planting on a large scale. Eventually he owned about forty slaves and had more than eighty bondpeople working his plantation. (The rest belonged to the overseer, manager, or the Minor family or they were hired from his neighbors.)

Dinsmore’s belief in the importance of motivation and efficiency among the enslaved people fit well with some of the practices that were already present in the sugar region, and in some parts of the Cotton South. Because the sugar harvest had to be
completed in a timely manner (its season began in October or November and lasted for about two months), bondpeople were compensated with money to encourage them to stay at their job in what were grueling, dangerous conditions. Dinsmore was not the only planter to use alternative means of motivating their laborers during the grinding season: some used credit at a plantation store, others granted Christmas bonuses, extra food, and even extra rations of tafia, a molasses rum drink. As historian, Mark M. Smith argues, planters, like northern businessmen accepted time thrift as a way to maximize their profits, even though they were an agricultural society. Increasing the efficiency of their workers, time management increased the power of the planter over the bondpeople, who owned no clocks or watches. Sugar planters like Dinsmore, more than cotton planters, needed speed and efficiency. Splitting his work force into shifts, or “tours” as he called them, Dinsmore compensated both the free and unfree laborers for the number of tours they worked, noting the comings and goings of various workers, illustrating that he accepted the free labor ideology that is often depicted as a purely northern ideology. Dinsmore would have understood these practices in the same way as any northerner: a motivational technique that induced the bondpeople to work steadily, regularly, and efficiently, all of which contributed to maximizing his profits without resorting to force. He also paid his slaves to pick cotton on their off-time at the same rate he paid local Cajun men: one cent per pound. Again, this was not an unusual practice in the sugar country, illustrating a general agreement about the importance of developing “orderly habits of industry” among the slaves.26

Additionally, Dinsmore and his wife created an economic world of their own on their plantation while still allowing the bondpeople a certain amount of freedom in
purchasing goods off their plantation. Martha Dinsmore kept an account book, perhaps reflecting the presence of a plantation store, that detailed purchases she made of local white women who sold her butter which she in turn traded to the slaves for items they had raised or made, primarily chickens and eggs but also oranges, honey, flour, and baskets. James Dinsmore also kept double-entry accounts of market-oriented activities for which he compensated slaves such as collecting moss, cutting timber, making brooms, and picking cotton. More typical in a frontier area like Terrebonne Parish, he apparently allowed some of his slaves to carry a gun for hunting and occasionally paid someone for killing a bear or what he called a “tigre”, likely a small panther or bobcat. How his neighbors felt about this practice is not recorded, but historian Eugene Genovese argues that what one planter allowed his bondpeople to do, others in the neighborhood would have to allow also “or risk a deterioration in the morale of the labor force.”

Dinsmore settled his accounts with his slaves by purchasing clothes, tobacco, and whiskey for them, or even a padlock to keep their possessions safe. At times he even gave them a note to take to the local store in Houma to buy a certain dollar amount in goods of their choice. He also used the accounts to settle debts owed to his slaves by local men (free or slave) or vice versa. The effects of this practice was to create in the African Americans a sense of ownership over spaces within the plantation that otherwise he or she would have no claim to, and to create a feeling of independence and individualism through their ability to earn money and to spend it as they chose.27

Such a level of economic freedom was not unheard of, but it was certainly not the norm. More often, planters did what they could to keep their bondpeople on the plantation, extending them credit to purchase items at a plantation store. Purchasing
goods that whites also purchased was frowned upon, particularly when such goods included alcohol, which the Dinsmore slaves occasionally bought. On the other hand, Joseph Holt Ingraham, who traveled to Natchez to teach in the 1830s, noted that Sundays brought many slaves into town to shop and visit. Local slaveowners made a practice of giving them small gardens of their own and they used those to advantage and “generally make enough to keep themselves and their wives in extra finery and spending money throughout the year.” Dinsmore appreciated the positive influence of the market economy on African Americans and adopted a similar system. One man in particular, Lindor, was especially industrious, as by 1834 he was the overseer on the plantation and was paid one hundred dollars for the duty. Additionally, he picked cotton and Spanish moss, raised bees and chickens and sold the birds and honey, then used his income to dress himself and his family well in calicos, stockings, and pantaloons. Dinsmore sent him to local stores to make purchases that were strictly between Lindor and the storeowner.28

The regular mixing of men and women of different groups in this slave economy illustrates what historian Daniel H. Usner, Jr., contends were “flexible circumstances” that prevailed during Louisiana’s colonial days. He notes the importance of cultural differences in the eighteenth century, and those were even more exaggerated in the presence of the newly-arrived, wealthy Anglo-American planters who attempted to assign themselves the role of arbiter of trade through the use of money or slips of credit. In the nineteenth century, Native Americans largely disappeared from this exchange economy, yet slaves and whites continued to trade occasionally with Native Americans and Cajuns in the neighborhood, with Dinsmore or his wife often serving as mediator. With general
stores now in the area, unlike in the colonial period, bondpeople on the Bayou Black plantation entered the market on equal terms with local Cajuns and Native Americans and without direct mediation.\(^{29}\)

Dinsmore’s desire to form “habits of industry” in his slaves and instill pride in their work adapted his plantation needs with the internal and external slave economy. His bondpeople made use of the opportunity on Sundays, their only full day without assigned work, to cut wood, make pickets and baskets, tend to their gardens, and make beds and presses, all with the goal of making money. Did Dinsmore view this as a way to contribute to the overall economy of his Bayou Black neighborhood? Probably not, but that would be an obvious result of his practices. No evidence suggests storeowners or neighbors complained about these slaves’ exchanges and sales. Dinsmore was certainly not alone in using internal and semi-external economies to create or further encourage good habits of industry among his bondpeople. Sugar planters allowed slaves’ independence, and “prompted enterprise, not subservience,” as historian Roderick A. McDonald contends. The lesson was surely not lost on Dinsmore, who allowed slaves to own livestock and tend their truck gardens and orchards.\(^{30}\)

Industrious bondmen benefited from Dinsmore’s cultivation of their independence. Lindor spent freely for material goods, while Allec accumulated larger sums of money without spending much. According to Allec’s account, which included what may have been family members, Judy, Henry, and Vincent, Dinsmore eventually wrote him a note for the large sum of $162.70. Several years later, when he had already purchased a farm in Kentucky and was trying to sell his plantation, Dinsmore wrote to his wife about the slaves, “My mind is more resolved than ever to do [them] justice & more
than justice if God spares my life. Allec will be able to free himself soon and I have promised him a piece of land to cultivate. He is in fine spirits.” Two years later, in 1841, he made the notation, “Settled this day with Allec & gave him my receipt for $422.60 & promise to set him free when he shall pay me the farther sum eighty-five dollars & forty cents.” In a letter to his wife in December 1841, just months after this notation, Dinsmore refers to Allec as free; despite no emancipation record registered in the parish courthouse. This absence of evidence might mean that his “freedom” was understood by planters in the neighborhood to mean that he could make his own labor arrangements. Nevertheless, three years after he had settled in Kentucky, Dinsmore noted that he had received forty-seven dollars from the new plantation owner “lent to me by Allec” and had previously received seventy-five dollars “which was also lent.” These smaller sums indicate that Allec was either unable to earn the larger amounts of money he had with Dinsmore or that, since he had his freedom, he could live more comfortably and not work extra hours. That he trusted Dinsmore to keep his money safe, both in Louisiana and Kentucky, is surprising but understandable given that a free African American with money among poor whites and enslaved blacks would have made him an obvious target. Indeed, just before Lindor died in 1846, he “was seen with considerable money” although none was ever found on his person.31

Taken together with the payments Dinsmore made to the bondpeople for their extra work in cotton and for “taking tours” in the sugar house, his relationship with his slaves was clearly more than a strictly exploitative system whose sole purpose was to enrich himself. Where others might have viewed themselves as bringing moral uplift and civilization to the lowly African Americans, Dinsmore did not see them as needing
civilization and he was not overly concerned about their religious practices. He showed little concern for the kinds of purchases they made with their money, so alcohol and tobacco were not difficult to get on the Bayou Black plantation. On the other hand, he did reward ambition and thrift; those bondpeople who chose for their own reasons to play by Dinsmore’s rules were rewarded with skills that would serve them well in freedom, but they were skills that Dinsmore deemed important. Slaves were not free to make decisions about when they would begin and end work or what crops they would raise. But with money, they could enter the local marketplace, learning the skills of making purchases and earning interest without someone taking advantage of them. Whether or not he recognized it, Dinsmore was preparing some of his bondpeople for freedom.

Externally, the economy of lower Louisiana and plantation agriculture allowed Dinsmore to imagine his position was similar to that of the owner of a manufacturing establishment in the North. Like a northern factory, his plantation relied on steam power and heavy machinery that required engineering knowledge to keep it running, relied on time management, and used an assembly-line method of production. Referred to as “factories in the field,” the labor on sugar plantations became more “routinized, business-oriented, commercialized.” According to one planter, “A regular and systematic plan of operation of the plantation is greatly promotive of easy government.” This became more prominent as industrialization increased in the North and planters like Dinsmore likely did not fail to see the similarities. But while Mark Smith points to the railroad, steamboat, and scientific farming as the incentives for clock time in the South, Dinsmore had other reasons for regularizing his labor force. The fast pace of labor required for the sugar harvest greatly induced planters to stress efficiency and timeliness.
Juxtapositioning successful sugar and cotton harvests on Louisiana plantations required tremendous human and time management skills and cooperation by planters, overseers, and slaves. Although the cotton crop needed to be harvested in a timely manner, because the crop was picked in the late summer or early fall the weather did not usually create as much havoc during the harvest as it could for sugar cane. A planter had to be familiar with the signs of maturity in both crops as he made the decision to begin the harvest. Cotton only required ginning before being sent to factors in New Orleans, while sugar cane had to be processed into sugar immediately upon being harvested or the entire crop could be ruined. Charles A. Slack, a cotton planter in Louisiana who turned to sugar in the 1840s noted the importance of the weather: “We are at the moment in great dread of a freeze every thing indicates one, should it come we will loose (sic) cane, but if it holds off two weeks longer I think we will save the whole and make a fine crop.” For Dinsmore, the cotton harvest was the beginning of a busy season, for if the picking was not completed by the time the sugar cane was ripe he had to put cotton on hold until the sugar grinding was completed. In December 1835, he made note that the grinding was completed; two days later, hands had gone back to picking cotton.33

Once his hands began the sugar cane harvest, the tempo on the plantation picked up considerably. Outside the sugar house, delicate cane plants were greatly affected by the weather, so harvesting usually began in late October or early November and had to be completed by the end of November or early December. If not, the plants would freeze and die. Dinsmore made careful note of temperatures and moisture as the harvesting continued. Occasionally, he had the slaves windrow the cane plants, or turn them into long piles that protected the bottom plants from the cold weather. As men and women
used their cane knives to cut the tall stalks, others followed with carts to collect the stalks and move them quickly to the sugar house where they were fed into the mill machinery, powered by an early steam engine.34

As the work moved into the sugar house, the labor intensified with the hastening of people arriving and leaving the plantation. For the 1835 sugar harvest, for example, Dinsmore employed from ten to seventeen white men in the sugar house, most of them local Cajuns or Native Americans. He usually had a Cajun man employed as sugar maker and an Anglo-American as engineer, both skilled positions. The sugar syrup had to be “struck” or turned out from the last kettle (the “batterie”) at just the right moment or the quality of that portion of the crop would be inferior. Determining when to do this was a skill that Dinsmore likely felt he had not yet acquired. The rest of the whites would have assisted the slaves in sending the cane through the grinding mill and tending the syrup as it passed from one kettle to the next before allowing the molasses by-product to drain into barrels while the sugar crystallized. Unskilled laborers, slave and free, worked “tours” that usually lasted from six to eight hours each. When grinding and boiling twenty-four hours straight, the slaves worked two grueling tours each; the white men showed up when they needed money and worked as long as they chose, which Dinsmore found frustrating. These men, and the slaves with whom they worked side-by-side, were paid for their work when the grinding was completed.35

Considering the pace and skill required during the sugar harvest, Dinsmore might well have viewed himself as the owner of a manufacturing concern. Specific steps had to be followed one after the other in assembly line precision and he employed both skilled and unskilled workers in order to produce quality sugar that would sell for the highest
prices on the sugar market in New Orleans. Additionally, Dinsmore’s detailed accounting of all aspects of the plantation reflected a belief that he was involved more in a business than a rural farming concern. He or his manager noted the comings and goings of individual workers and slaves, created individual debit and credit notations for every transaction that involved labor or goods, and then moved those to an account book that summarized the economic activities of each neighbor, laborer, and slave. Dinsmore noted the smallest of expenses, including a demijohn of molasses, to offset his use of his neighbors’ labor during the harvest. However, this also illustrates the extent to which this rural, almost frontier society had moved from an exchange economy, where neighbors might wait years to settle debts, to a cash economy, where every penny mattered.36

Yet the dual nature of his plantation, and the differences between Dinsmore’s sugar cane and cotton plantation and a northern factory were obvious. At one extreme were “Frenchmen and Indians” who came and went as their economic needs dictated; at the other were the enslaved men and women tethered to the plantation, unable to choose whether they would work or not. Though Dinsmore offered them opportunities for earning cash and purchasing goods in the market, he also provided them with their mainstay, pork and cornmeal, their clothing, housing, and medicine. If he chose, he could sell any of them at any time.37

Even as Dinsmore made the decision to settle in Natchez and then become a partner in a Louisiana plantation, he continued to consider other options and made investments elsewhere. In her biography of Stephen Duncan, a Pennsylvanian who migrated to Natchez and became one of the wealthiest Americans of his day, historian Martha Jane Brazy expressed well what might be described as Dinsmore’s hybrid
sectional economic and social identity. “The familial roots and economic connections that he maintained in both the North and the South . . . allowed [Duncan] to connect his identity to both regions in very specific ways . . . he saw himself as neither a northerner or a southerner, but simply as an American.”

By 1839 Dinsmore had been exposed to aspects of plantation business that made him increasingly uneasy. Among these were the dependence he felt on factors that were out of his control, particularly purchasing agents, shipping costs and selling prices, and the continued debt he found himself in year after year. In 1835, running the plantation without a manager, Dinsmore had a run-in with the agent of a New Orleans factor that tested his self-confidence. M. L. Eastman was employed by Abijah Fisk to purchase sugar in Dinsmore’s neighborhood. When he arrived at the Bayou Black plantation, Dinsmore was hesitant about selling his sugar because he did not know the current prices for sugar in New Orleans. Assured by Eastman that several of his neighbors had already sold him their sugar to him for 5 ½ cents per pound, Dinsmore contracted with him to sell at 5 1/8 cents for his crop. Later, he discovered that sugar was selling for upwards of seven cents per pound on the levee at New Orleans, and that Eastman had misrepresented the nature of his contracts with Dinsmore’s neighbors. Piqued that “a person who bore the appearance of a gentleman could have uttered such barefaced falsehoods for the purpose of inducing me to sell,” Dinsmore suggested sending the sugar for six cents per pound. Fisk declined and threatened legal action. When Dinsmore suggested arbitration, Fisk appealed to the local Chamber of Commerce, a poor prospect for Dinsmore given that the Chamber was not familiar with the personal qualities of the planters Dinsmore would need to rely on as witnesses. Dinsmore then proposed arbitration by Terrebonne
and Lafourche planters, whom the agent would select. The conflict revealed Dinsmore’s naiveté; Fisk won the dispute. Dinsmore’s agents in New Orleans advised him that other planters always referred traveling factors to their own agents to avoid similar problems, and his crop that should have fetched two cents more per pound left him disadvantaged. The affair was also illustrative of the two worlds in which these men lived, one oriented toward a past where a man’s word was more important than a paper contract, and the other oriented toward the future where it was considered good business to take advantage of those who were not as well-informed about the market.39

Personal debt also shook Dinsmore’s faith in his ability to become a successful planter. Compared to cotton planting, sugar planting required an enormous outlay of capital up front. Bringing land under cultivation was a slow process and a laborious one, requiring an enormous amount of labor and large numbers of bondpeople. The Bayou Black plantation was covered with timber when Dinsmore and Minor purchased it, so they invested in a steam-powered sawmill to help them get the wood off, but it meant the land for crops grew very slowly each year. In addition to the steam engine, mill equipment and large iron vats had to be ordered before any harvest could begin. Ditches, “run every fourth mile or so” had to be dug perpendicular to the bayou and three miles to the back of the plantation to drain excess water. Roads had to be built to allow for moving the crop to the mill and then off the property. Because the bayou was unnavigable much of the year, a planned canal to connect it to the Mississippi River was a tedious project that never seemed to be completed. In 1832, Dinsmore took out a four thousand dollar mortgage because his sugar and cotton sales were not keeping up with his household and plantation expenses. While plantation expenses for labor in 1834 were
over one thousand dollars for the sugar and saw mills, the revenue amounted to less than three thousand. By 1839 he needed a loan of thirty-five hundred dollars. Meanwhile the size of the crop slowly inched upward. For the crop of 1838 he expected to bring in about eighteen thousand dollars which would be split three ways, and he would be able to devote even more land to cane the next year and could expect over three hundred hogsheads, a good harvest for him. William J. Minor, on the other hand, on his Waterloo plantation, closer to the Mississippi River and long under cultivation, could boast of a crop of almost seven hundred hogsheads.40

Large debts did not distinguish Dinsmore from his neighbors or planters elsewhere in the sugar country. Many planters were similarly in debt, particularly in the wake of the 1837 financial troubles. What differentiated Dinsmore was his debt aversion. Planters, in general, were well-known for their willingness to go into short-term debt in pursuit of long-term wealth. As he traveled through the South in 1853 and 1854, Frederick Law Olmstead noted the sectionalized attitude toward debt as a distinguishing characteristic from the North. “When any one made a good crop,” he was informed by a Louisianan, “he would always expect that his next one would be better, and make purchases in advance upon such expectation.” Dinsmore noticed the same rage for debt among sugar planters, writing to a friend: “If you planters do not get out of debt now [your] case is hopeless, but all experience seems to be lost upon sugar growers only give them high prices one year and they will plunge over head and ears in debt the next.” For Dinsmore, being in debt was a loss of independence that was only compounded by the general lack of control planters had over the weather and the prices of their crop.41
If, in this new market economy a man was to be judged by what he accomplished in life, by the late 1830s Dinsmore might have felt that he was lacking a certain drive that determined the difference between success and failure. But he was unwilling to give up his quest for happiness, although he might have to find it elsewhere. He had failed to “set bounds to [his] passions,” resulting in a mind that was far from “tranquil and serene.” He had not meant for his plantation to consume his life, rather he expected it to be an investment that was run by a capable and trustworthy other, while he dabbled in hobbies funded by money drawn on a firm in New Orleans. He tried to induce his peripatetic brother to manage an olive plantation in Mobile Bay and then move sheep from Kentucky to Alabama, but neither business amounted to much. After investing in his uncle’s Hooksett Manufacturing Company, Dinsmore saw an opportunity for himself. With Silas Dinsmoor then in Cincinnati, he thought it would be an ideal place for his own textile company managed by his brother. In 1829 James purchased the necessary machinery and gave his brother a large line of credit, but within a year his brother was too ill to continue the business and the machinery had to be stored for several years before it could be sold, resulting in more of a headache than a profit.42

In the end, his presence was required on Bayou Black where he was constantly confronted with what he found to be a stressful financial situation. Historian John Lauritz Larson argues that in this new economy, “A man’s fortune was supposed to bear witness to his character, industry, and frugality, and his attention to hearth and home.” Yet at the same time the market made it more difficult for a man to be in control of his destiny. Dinsmore refused to be defined by his debt and resented the lack of independence cash crop farming entailed even if there was a fortune waiting for him in
the future. For him, being in control of his present was more important than amassing a fortune. Refusing to see his plantation experience as a failure, Dinsmore had confidence in his ability to succeed once he regained control over his fate.⁴³
Endnotes


3 James Dinsmore, “Notes on Manufactures,” ca. 1813, Dartmouth notebook, Dinsmore Family Papers (DFP), MS 1016, Dinsmore Homestead, Burlington, Kentucky.

4 Larson, Market Revolution in America, 99.

5 Appleby, Capitalism and a New Social Order, 86-87.


7 Dan to Townsend Lawrence, 26 June 1834, in Brashear and Lawrence Family Papers, Ms 3355, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina (UNC), Chapel Hill, North Carolina.


14 Eric Foner, Free Soil, Free, Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 29; Willie Lee Rose,


19 James Dinsmore draft letter to [?], 6 March 1854, DFP; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 34, 43-44.


21 James Dinsmore Memorandum Book, 1825; F.L. Claiborne heirs to James Dinsmore, 20 April 1825; John Minor to James Dinsmore, 17 May 1825, DFP.

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37 James Dinsmore Daybook, 1835, file 1963, DFP.

38 Brazy. An American Planter, 151.

39 James Dinsmore to Abijah Fisk, 22 May 1835; Abijah Fisk to James Dinsmore, 21 April 1835; James Dinsmore to Abijah Fisk, 4 May 1835; Lambeth and Thompson to James Dinsmore, 28 March 1835; DFP.

40 Indenture between James Dinsmore and Mr. Pratt for steam engine to power sawmill and sugar mill, 1829, file 1994, DFP; Indenture between James Dinsmore and Mr. Harkness for sugar mill, May 1830; file 2009, DFP; Sitterson, Sugar Country, 113; Act of Mortgage, 6 June 1832, James and Martha Dinsmore to New Orleans Canal and Banking Company, Terrebonne Parish Records, Houma, LA; James Dinsmore Business Accounts, file 1964; James Dinsmore to Martha Dinsmore, March 1839; James Dinsmore to William J. Minor, 8 August 1839; William J. Minor to James Dinsmore 22 February 1840, DFP.


Chapter Three

Culture in the Old Southwest: Expanding the Boundaries of Southern Identity

The political and cultural changes that were occurring in the early decades of the nineteenth century, as the Old Southwest moved from a frontier region to one of plantation agriculture, greatly affected James Dinsmore’s ability to construct a comfortable middle in that environment. As slavery strengthened its hold on the southern states and spread westward, divisions turned into a widening gulf between the northern and southern sections of the country. Interpretations of honor, evangelical Protestantism, and the patriarchal household were some of the more obvious cultural markers that began to distinguish the two sections.¹

Moving from a northern state to two states in the Deep South, where he lived comfortably among some of the wealthiest planters in a slave society, Dinsmore likely never saw himself completely through either sectional lens. First and foremost, he was an American. But his presence in the South and his ability to become a slaveholder while remaining aloof from other aspects of southern culture and society offer us a window into generalized notions of southern distinctiveness prior to the Civil War.
Though raised in Federalist New Hampshire, his Scots-Irish heritage makes it likely that his father, who served his community in several prominent local positions, was a Jeffersonian Republican. Dinsmore’s writings at Dartmouth offer an ambiguous political picture. He favored manufacturing because it would make the country economically independent in time of war, but he was no friend of Great Britain, suspicious of its economic power and disapproving of its fraught path toward industrialization. War with Great Britain had just commenced, and Dinsmore was not alone among Jeffersonians in contemplating the necessity of a country’s economic and political independence.²

Few American politicians of the antebellum era were as outspoken of their desire to promote American economic independence as Henry Clay. As early as 1814, Dinsmore had no kind words for the leader of a faction of Jeffersonian Democrats that would become the National Republican, or Whig, Party in 1834. When traveling through Kentucky and meeting the Clay family tutor, Amos Kendall, a Massachusetts native, Dinsmore referred to Clay in his journal as “that brawling Kentuckian who has made so much noise on the floor of Congress, the stumper of K[entuck]y & divers other places.” As a well-educated young man, Dinsmore likely took a dim view of stumpers, whom he saw as pandering to ordinary voters. In time, he would come to see Clay’s American System, which supported a national bank, internal improvements at government expense, and a protective tariff, as more appealing than the Kentuckian’s questionable personal and political behavior.”³

Frontier Mississippi was a more politically contentious place than either New Hampshire or Kentucky in the early 1800s. During its late territorial period, the region
had not entirely overcome several decades of political anarchy. Historians generally agree on the raucous state of Mississippi territorial politics. Until the territory was split in two (with Alabama continuing as a territory for two more years), the language of party served only as a front for petty squabbling over patronage appointments. The labels of “Federalist” and “Republican” were thrown around with little concern for their meanings in national politics. Although contending forces disagreed over what to do about competing land claims and planter debts, power held in the territorial and state government determined the outcome of these issues, and thus became an end in itself.4

In 1797 the Spanish were to turn over present-day Mississippi and Alabama (less West Florida) to the United States. The U.S. commission er charged with surveying the new acquisition, Andrew Ellicott, soon found that compelling the Spanish to do what was expected of them was the least of his problems. In recommending to the secretary of state, Timothy Pickering, the qualities necessary for a military officer, he noted that the government should “send officers to this country who are not mad,” in addition to the more obvious qualities of being sober, talented, and prudent. As soon as Ellicott formed a provisional committee, disgruntled planters not given a seat formed a rival committee, setting the tone for Mississippi’s fractious territorial history.5

Winthrop Sargent, whom John Adams appointed as governor, did not please those Democratic Republicans who would come to support Clay’s national economic policies. An exasperated William C. C. Claiborne, Sargent’s successor and an appointee of Thomas Jefferson, wrote that party divisions in that territory were “infinitely more rancorous than any I have ever witnessed in our Mother States.” The behavior of these settlers reflected the natural passions of men who were motivated to move to the frontier
to better their condition. While any position in local affairs brought some power with it, those positions associated with the land office or the county courts had a greater potential to enrich the appointee. Most men realized the importance of land to future personal success and power.  

In antebellum Mississippi politics, face-to-face relationships and family mattered more than political ideology and party loyalty. This rejection of party bureaucracy was a result of the fierce nature of social ascendance on the southwestern frontier, but also the insistence on personal relationships, the culture of honor, and the values of masculinity. Leading planters and merchants, connected by family and business concerns, generally cooperated with each other. In more settled areas of the country, political loyalty followed kin networks, but more from the similarity of interests owing to a similar economic and social background rather than because of an interest in creating a power base for an extended network of relatives. Presidential elections sorely tested the bonds of the planter elite. Members of the Green family who moved into nearby Jefferson County worked as an extended unit to co-opt power not just from Federalists, but from fellow Republicans in Adams County.  

Not having shown an interest in political office above the local level, Dinsmore haltingly entered the political arena when he read law with one of the more active political judges of the area, Edward Turner. Turner had served as a chancellor and chief justice of the territory, and was likely one of the men that historian D. Clayton James described as being part of the “Natchez Junto.” Comprised of Natchez’s “leading attorneys with political ambitions,” it was “the nearest thing to a political machine” in the new state. The junta soon enough received a shock. The growing population of the
eastern part of the state decided that no one town, particularly one as wealthy as Natchez, should exert such influence over the state. In 1821, the state’s voters moved the capital from Natchez. Adams County’s legislative complement (and power) soon fell off as a reflection of the changing demographics of the growing state.8

Although Dinsmore chose not to follow the example of many Natchez lawyers in joining the political fray, by the mid-1820s his background, cultural influences, and family loyalties made him an “anti-Jackson” man. During Silas Dinsmoor’s term as agent to the Choctaw, one of the agency houses was at the Mississippi terminus of the Natchez Trace, allowing him to develop friendly relations with local planters like William Dunbar and Stephen Minor. An 1811 clash between the elder Dinsmoor and Andrew Jackson was exploited by the local Natchez paper, Ariel, in 1828 hoping to sway local voters into voting for John Quincy Adams as president. After being solicited by the territorial governor and local Adams County planters to deter slave escapes, Dinsmoor had begun strict enforcement of a little-used regulation requiring a passport by anyone traveling along the Trace with bondpeople. Jackson was one of those stopped without documentation. The insulted planter refused to show papers and threatened to burn down the agency house, believing that a gentleman’s word was his bond. Later, Jackson lobbied the secretary of war to remove Dinsmoor from his position, and Dinsmoor’s supporters attributed his subsequent dismissal to this personal vendetta. During the political replay of the event in the papers of the Ariel in 1828, the editor focused particularly on Jackson’s use of the threat of arson against a government building, his threat to arm “himself, his slaves, and his hireling, halfbreed Indians” before marching on the agency house, and his inability to write “a commonly decent letter.” How could an
educated slaveowner vote for him to be the leader of the country? Having just recently purchased half of a plantation in Louisiana, James Dinsmore had several reasons to dislike Jackson, but the legacy of this personal family squabble undoubtedly loomed large.9

While he might not have been politically active during this time period, Dinsmore had both an interest and stake in political matters. Relatives on his mother’s side of the family were active in New Hampshire politics. From 1823 through 1835 his uncle, Samuel Bell, served in the U. S. Senate as a supporter of Henry Clay’s American System and then as an early Whig man. During the battle over the “Tariff of Abominations” Bell occasionally kept Dinsmore informed. The tariff, he argued, was essential to the continued growth of the nation’s economy. In 1831 he wrote that he was confident that a majority in Congress were “in favor of the protecting system in all its important branches.” Southerners, especially planters, generally scoffed at that notion, but Dinsmore, who had invested in a cotton manufacturing plant in New Hampshire and had attempted to start one up in Cincinnati, agreed with the importance of a tariff in undermining the prices of foreign imports.10

Prior to the 1828 presidential election, Natchez newspapers busily supplied voters with reasons why they should or should not vote for Jackson. Some dissatisfaction stemmed from his military background and his violent past, but more arose from his antipathy toward the American System, popular with planters along the Mississippi River and in Lower Louisiana. Routinely in need of loans, they recognized the need for dependable credit and currency systems. Pro-Jackson men in the region argued only against banks favoring the wealthiest. In an 1828 letter to the Mississippi Statesman &
"Gazette," a “Pine Woods Planter” argued in favor of a branch of the National Bank that would end the monopoly of the State Bank of Mississippi located in Natchez, and would produce competition while ensuring a reliable currency. Identifying himself with the state’s yeomanry in opposition to the wealthy, established planters of the Natchez area, this Jackson supporter favored the expansion of the national bank, which he viewed as being more responsive to the economic needs of average citizens.¹¹

White Mississippian near the Mississippi River generally agreed upon the necessity of internal improvements as instrumental to the state’s growth, but actuating such sentiment proved politically difficult. One writer to the anti-Jackson Ariel, claimed that planters generally liked the “idea” of improving the state’s infrastructure, including extending the National Road southward through Mississippi and terminating at Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Getting crops to market was made difficult in both Louisiana and Mississippi by swamps and bayous that were flooded almost half the year, making improvements (meaning roads, bridges, and canals) necessary for a healthy growing economy. What they balked at were increased taxes to pay for such projects. Later, Dinsmore played a leading role in trying to improve transportation in and through Terrebonne Parish through the construction of canals, indicating his belief that such improvements were necessary to business and would help to improve the value of all local property.¹²

By the time of the 1828 election, white Mississippian, and particularly residents of Adams County, identified themselves clearly as southerners. Indeed, in decrying the partisan nature of pro-Jackson men in the 1828 campaign, men of the county appealed to voters by portraying themselves as disinterested southerners: “We speak to you in the
language of slave-holders, planters, and citizens holding some stake in the community” who have “an honest zeal for the prosperity of the South.” For these men, as for those in the Vicksburg area (just north of Natchez), the South was a geographic term that also implied connection to the cash crop, slave-based economy and a rejection of the market-driven democratization that was altering northern society. Any white man with a “stake in the community” that slaveholders led, whether planters or non-slaveholding yeoman farmers, were southerners. Whether or not he still thought of himself as a New Englander or as a southerner, as Dinsmore prepared for his move to Terrebonne Parish, he had such a stake as the partner in a large plantation and enough slaves to farm it.13

More than internal improvements and partisan politics, the tariff was the most significant issue for many white residents in the new states of the Old Southwest. By the time that issue heated up nationally, Dinsmore was a beneficiary of the tariff as a full time sugar and cotton planter, keeping his sugar cheaper than that coming from Cuba, despite the latter’s higher quality. Producing principally for domestic consumption, planters in Louisiana’s southern parishes supported the tariff. Politically, it was advantageous for even cotton planters in the lower Louisiana parishes to support the tariff, a position that was not typical in other parts of the Deep South. Slave prices figured deeply into pro-tariff arguments in Louisiana; any decline in demand for sugar would drive planters to cotton, causing a drop in the price of cotton and slaves. Tariff supporters argued that because sugar planters purchased their goods from other parts of the country, Americans there should reciprocate by paying higher prices for sugar. Yet because southern cotton planters had a virtual monopoly on the British market, the tariff
stood only to cause problems for them by retaliatory foreign tariffs. However, few vocal supporters of the “tariff of abominations” were found in the Cotton South.\textsuperscript{14}

Tariff opposition did not translate automatically into support for John C. Calhoun’s doctrine of nullification. Outside South Carolina, white southerners were largely unwilling to go that far. Many who considered states’ rights an important issue judged nullification as unconstitutional. North Carolinian John P. Stewart, a new migrant to Covington County, Mississippi, found that his neighbors supported Jackson in the run-up to the 1832 election largely because they did not agree with Calhoun’s extreme view of states’ rights, not because of the tariff. “Should any prominent character of the Union and State rights party come forward whose chance of election would be considered pretty good I think he would get the vote of the state,” he argued, adding, “paradoxical as it may seem there are a great many in favour of the Tariff.” But such men did not automatically rally to the side of Jackson. As historian Arthur C. Cole points out, even those who could not stomach the nullification argument argued against the extremity of the president’s statement of unchallenged federal power and would not rally to his party or politics.\textsuperscript{15}

Similarly, the anti-Jackson group received very little boost from the issue of the national bank in that election. Although Jackson vilified the National Bank as a powerful anti-democratic institution, the “Bank War” surrounding the removal of funds from the U.S. Bank after 1832 did not galvanize planters in the Old Southwest. More than yeoman farmers, planters depended on banks and a solid currency. They often had factors in New Orleans and other parts of the country, making the dependability of bank notes throughout the nation an important issue. Josiah S. Johnston wrote to Thomas Butler of Louisiana in 1832, lamenting the financial situation: “We have nothing to protect us
against spurious and excessive issues – nothing to equalize exchange [and] presume a sound currency but the Bank of the U. States.” For those who already disliked Jackson, this was clear confirmation of his despotic and unconstitutional behavior, and in Natchez, several wealthy Democrats did abandon Jackson when he removed $500,000 from the Planters’ Bank located there. Even in Louisiana, Edward D. White’s support for the national bank despite efforts to tie him to a “landed aristocracy” won him the office of governor in 1836. Dinsmore similarly supported the Bank. Employing the language of a nationalist Whig, a relative of his wife wrote him from Philadelphia in 1834 reemphasizing the need of the country for some institution that would ensure currency stability. Such an institution would “mak[e] the money paid for the sugar and cotton of the [S]outh by the people of the [N]orth worth the same amount to them when they receive it.”

Planters, merchants, and lawyers in the small towns and cities that dotted the southern countryside, including Warren County, Mississippi, soon coalesced into a southern anti-Jackson “Whig” opposition consisting of those who “gazed outward beyond their neighborhood or town, beyond their county, even beyond their region.” Pro-Jackson Democrats included cotton planters, artisans, and small farmers. In 1828, John Quincy Adams received two-thirds of southern Louisiana’s votes but lost to Jackson in the rest of the state. Again, in 1832, Henry Clay only won in the southern sugar parishes. While this voting pattern was the result of the bank issue, internal improvements, and the nature of ethnic politics in Louisiana, a relationship between slaveowning and voting patterns has also been found. In the five presidential elections between 1832 and 1856 the returns for the Louisiana counties with the highest percentage of slaves voted for
thirty-two Whigs and seventeen Democrats, while the counties with the lowest percentage of slaves voted just ten Whigs and just thirty-two Democrats. The results were similar in Mississippi.\textsuperscript{17}

Dinsmore’s support for Clay’s American System marked him as a Whig man. In moving to Terrebonne Parish, he had chosen to live in a location that was not typically southern, at least by antebellum standards. A South Carolinian who visited the state in 1848, noted its peculiarities and predicted that “Louisiana will be the last if at all to strike for the defense of the South.” He recognized visible cultural markers of what he, a self-styled southerner, considered decidedly un-southern: a predominantly French and Catholic population, a large immigrant population, and a visible presence of northern businessmen in New Orleans. Sacher’s study of antebellum politics in Louisiana suggests that though the state may have appeared un-southern, it shared much with its southern neighbors, including a reliance on a cash crop and a commitment to slavery. Although a portion of the population of New Orleans might have questioned whether or not they were “southern,” planters of the lower parishes in Louisiana defined their southernness by the visible terms of slave ownership and cash-crop production.\textsuperscript{18}

Terrebonne Parish was not only an area that was strongly anti-Jackson, it was also part of a region whose most economically active residents would benefit from Clay’s American System. Historians disagree on the extent to which the political party men like Dinsmore turned to in the late 1830s, the Whig Party, was a party of policies or simply a loose union of men who disliked Jackson and his policies, but sugar planters were self-interested supporters of the Whig agenda. A popular Baltimore business journal, the \textit{Niles Weekly Register} is quoted in support: “No state is, really, so interested in the
principles of the American System as Louisiana.” Utilizing his press to highlight the interdependency of the nation economically, J. D. B. DeBow, a Whig journalist from New Orleans, reprinted a letter from Judge P. A. Rost, a Red River planter who described the origins of everything on local plantations: iron kettles from Tennessee, mules from Kentucky, vacuum pans from New York and Pennsylvania, and shipping to the eastern coast. Rost concluded his letter with the observation that “under the operation of the tariff of 1842, the price of [sugar and cotton] has gradually improved.” In 1854 De Bow gave his unequivocal support for the tariff again through another correspondent: “Take the duty off sugar, and you bankrupt–nay, utterly ruin four-fifths of the sugar planters of the State.” Daniel Walker Howe offers the Whigs their strongest voice, arguing that the ideology behind the party lasted much longer than the party itself, which disintegrated in the sectional controversies of the 1850s. His interpretation of Whig culture, as exhibited through a series of biographies, is consistent with Dinsmore’s beliefs. These men were dedicated to self-improvement, discipline, and productivity, and saw education, efficiency, and rationality as social ends in themselves. Through these means all members of society would experience material improvement. Some Whigs preferred to redeem American society through moral regeneration, while others, like Dinsmore, preferred secular regeneration. Individualist white southerners would not have been much receptive to Whig arguments about collective values, whether moral or economic.19

Indian removal as a political issue illustrates the moral component of the anti-Jackson mentality among some planters in Dinsmore’s region. Although some Natchez and Adams County residents criticized it, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which forced Native Americans west of the Mississippi, was popular in most of the South. As more
land in Mississippi was purchased or taken from the Native Americans, white men with
the franchise filled it in and this resulted in a continuing dilution of the power of the
wealthy planters in Adams County. Some, especially Whigs, evinced moral distaste for a
law that took advantage of a minority group largely voiceless in American society and
refused to accept Jackson’s paternalistic argument on its face. William J. Minor
expressed disgust at “the measure for pushing the Indians into the sea.” With little
personal memory of frontier conflict with Native Americans, Dinsmore would certainly
have been aware of the progress of groups like the Cherokees toward white social
markers of “civilization,” supporting moral arguments in favor of a people who were
taking advantage of education to get ahead. In 1826, as Georgia was preparing to move
against the Cherokee, their well-educated chief, John Ross, lamented to Dinsmore’s uncle
that the goal of the government seemed to be “to get the Indians lands [and] to colonize
them to the barren deserts of the Rocky Mountains [and] there to be stripped of
independence, liberty, & of self-government.” Ironically, this was being done by a
people supposedly dedicated to “Independence, Liberty, and Republicanism [and] whose
professed principle is ‘All men are created equal.’” Though Whigs were as racist as the
Democrats, they practiced what he termed “soft” racial policies in contrast to the “hard”
racial policies adopted by the Jacksonian Democrats, especially individualist white
southerners who saw Indians as obstructions to white economic opportunities.  

Historians of Louisiana politics during this time period generally agree that the
uniqueness of the state’s political environment was attributable to its ethnic and historical
background. The Whiggish Creole French who settled the area during the French
colonial period were loyal to their own ethnic group and viewed the Anglo-Americans as
interlopers. They also had very different reasons than most for disliking Andrew Jackson. In 1814 and 1815, as Jackson prepared for the British invasion near New Orleans, he managed to anger most of the Creoles in the area by insinuating they were traitors, instituting martial law, and insulting their governor. Anglo-Americans who were yeoman farmers or cotton planters, on the other hand, saw Jackson as a military hero with a special connection to their state and voted largely for the Democratic Party. The sugar-planting Anglo-Americans opposed Jackson. Acadians tended to vote Democratic, but less because of Jackson the man than because the “elitist” Creoles disliked him. The last significant group of Louisiana voters, the foreign French (those born in France or only one generation removed), like other immigrant groups, were more likely to vote Democratic.\textsuperscript{21}

In parishes with large populations of Acadians like Terrebonne, National Republicans, and later Whigs, like Dinsmore were able to hold on to their political majority through the machinations of the Creole-written state constitution of 1812. This constitution, which was not altered until 1845, gave more representation to areas where the Creoles dominated their populations, along the southern banks of the Mississippi River and south of the Red River. The constitution limited the political power of the populous city of New Orleans, with its growing Anglo-American and foreign influence. Property requirements for holding office ensured that political leaders would be drawn from the wealthier classes. To become a state representative required a minimum of five hundred dollars in real property, one thousand dollars to become a state senator, and five thousand dollars to become governor. Owing to tax requirements for suffrage, one historian has estimated that in 1820 fewer than one-half of adult males in the entire state
could vote, as compared with south of the Red River, where plantations were larger. There almost sixty percent of adult males could vote. The 1845 constitution, enacted after Dinsmore had left the region, would allow for universal white male suffrage. Only then could Acadians in Terrebonne Parish, many of whom owned little or no land, turn the parish into a “bitterly disputed” political battleground.²²

Though different than residents of other slaveholding states, white Louisianans could not avoid being caught up in the political fever over abolitionism. Louisiana’s enslaved population remained steady between 45 and 48 percent throughout the antebellum era. During the election of 1838, the charge of abolitionism tainted the race for Louisiana’s governor when the Democratic candidate accused his Whig opponent of supporting abolition in his defense of the National Bank. In this case, the Whigs won, illustrating the party’s strength even when it did relatively poorly in national elections.²³

Despite early tensions over slavery, Whigs were able to stay united until the 1850s by focusing on the commonalities between northerners and southerners. In the South and North, economic questions were often able to override sectional tendencies, much to the chagrin of states’ rights Democrats whose occasional attempts to unify southerners met with Whig resistance. After 1830, those who responded to the tariff debate with states’ rights rhetoric then began to insist that the South was distinctive, even though there was little basis for such a claim outside the institution of slavery. Whigs, and particularly those in Louisiana, successfully resisted efforts to be separate from their political partners in the North supporting the notion that southernness was a designation that did not necessarily apply to all the people or regions of the southern states. But Democratic politicians attempted to convince white southerners to adopt a set of common
values so they could stand together against northern attempts to undermine the plantation system. Among those “southern” beliefs was opposition to a national bank, internal improvements, and protective tariffs, all planks in the Whig platform.24

Religion was yet another cultural and social aspect of Dinsmore’s abiding nonconformity, even within his household. Nothing in Dinsmore’s correspondence leads to the conclusion that he was a convert to any emotional evangelicalism. On the contrary, although likely raised in a Presbyterian household, he was drawn to Unitarianism, while his wife, Martha, who was also more responsive to rational theology than to public displays of emotion, was rigidly sectarian, preferring the Episcopalian faith, the post-revolutionary vestige of the Church of England. She had been close to her pastor at St. Mary’s in Burlington, New Jersey and owned many prayer books for daily reading, surely a comfort to her in Louisiana with no Episcopalian congregations nearby. Upon discovering Dinsmore was “in love” with a religious woman, his cousin, John Bell, found it rather amusing: “So you told her that you were a little inclined to Unitarianism. Well done Simon Pure!!! A little inclined!! ha! ha! ha!” Not a popular sect in the antebellum South, historian John Allen Macaulay argues that southern Unitarians were open-minded and Scottish Realism philosophy allowed them to adjust to their sometimes hostile surroundings more easily than would have been necessary for northern Unitarians. Dinsmore purchased The Works of William E. Channing, D.D., a northern Unitarian leader who believed that slavery was an insult to God and antithetical to the moral agency of all humans. Northern Unitarianism as it originated in New England was the vehicle that would usher in a new capitalist order through a benign and distant God, and this side
of it was likely more appealing to Dinsmore than some of Channing’s views on equality.\textsuperscript{25}

Although Dinsmore’s letters rarely included more than a “God bless thee,” Martha’s letters often invoked religious themes: “The painfulness of your absence & the loneliness of my spirit has induced many deep & solemn feelings & reflections upon that final & eternal separation which must take place between those who love & serve & fear God here & those who follow their own imaginations [sic].” Apparently she was worried that she and her husband might not be reunited after death. There are no indications that he was worried about whether or not his soul would burn in hell; his curiosity was more fully absorbed by man’s experiences while on earth. Indeed Dinsmore’s letters do not reflect a belief that God was involved in worldly matters; he believed he could affect his own economic well-being. Southern men were unlikely to react positively to evangelical preaching owing to its emphasis on material wealth coming from God and not man’s efforts.\textsuperscript{26}

Dinsmore’s moral curiosity and the religious practices of Terrebonne Parish were both at variance to what was becoming the southern way. Religiously, Louisiana was a distinctly separate world from the rest of the South, particularly its southernmost parishes. Unlike other parts of the South, Catholicism was a major force there, limiting the influence of evangelical Protestantism while it flourished in other parts of the South. Consequently, Dinsmore’s eschewing of evangelicalism would not have made him an oddity. In fact, his good friend Tobias Gibson was himself never a member of an evangelical congregation. Although he admired Christianity, “denominations and sects
troubled” him. The embracing of evangelical religion was not a unifying cultural feature of the Old South Dinsmore inhabited.  

Although Dinsmore was rather unique in that he had a college diploma behind him, the value he put on education was not unlike that of other planters he knew in the Adams County and the lower Louisiana region. Some if not many of the planters in the area, a number of them good friends to Dinsmore, who had not themselves attended much less graduated from college, frequently sent their sons to schools in the North. The Slack family, who owned a sugar cane plantation below New Orleans sent their young men to preparatory schools in upstate New York, and Stephen Duncan, owner of several plantations in both Mississippi and Louisiana sent his son, John, to Yale in the late 1820s. Similarly, during the 1850s, Tobias Gibson had several sons who graduated from Yale and one who went on to study in Germany. In 1855, when sectional tensions were growing more acute, Gibson’s son, Hart, attended two lectures, one by noted proslavery polemicist George Fitzhugh presenting “the south side” and the other by Wendell Philips, the controversial Massachusetts abolitionist, of whom he declared, “a more elegant polished, scholarly gentleman you will not often find in the South.” William Minor’s eldest son earned a degree from Princeton during those same years.

Young women in Louisiana who aspired to higher education generally had fewer opportunities than their brothers but several choices were open to them. They could attend local private schools, board at a convent, or learn at home under the instruction of a northern tutor, depending on how much of an investment their families were willing to make on their behalf. These were not all simply finishing schools. Historian Catherine Clinton notes that what young ladies were learning was changing even if where they were
being educated was still the same as in the previous century. Natural and moral philosophy, chemistry, arithmetic, and the French language were some of the subjects that were now being introduced to young women. There was a debate about the need for young ladies to be more educated but most continued to marry young without the benefit of an extended education. Only rarely would southern daughters be sent north for their education unless the family was from there and had relatives living there. Daughters of yeoman farmers had little chance of attending public schools in part because planters disliked being taxed for public education, although some towns, like Natchez, did develop a public school for young men that taught basic skills.29

A few planter families did send their sisters and daughters away for their education. Tobias Gibson had no qualms about enrolling his daughter, Sarah, in a reputable school in Philadelphia with a French teacher, Mr. Picot, and she was joined there by a small number of other young ladies from Terrebonne Parish. But Robert Brashear, whose family moved from Kentucky to lower Louisiana, was reflecting what he considered to be the contemporary view of women’s education when he cautioned his sister Frances, attending school in Kentucky, not to waste her time but to attend to her studies: “Your age will not permit you to devote much more of your time to your school,” he wrote her, “as the thousand and one instances which must have come under your own observation will prove to you, of young ladies being ‘too old to learn’ or ‘too old to go to school’.” While he wished his sister to be a woman of “solid acquirements,” he acknowledged that his father would be most pleased with her becoming a “polished lady.” Dinsmore and his wife greatly valued education. Raised in an upper-class network of families in New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Martha possessed far
more than a rudimentary education. When Dinsmore sent his young daughters to Lexington, Kentucky to attend school for the first time, Martha accompanied them. Even there, though, the school was small and the lessons did not always meet entirely with her approval, she clearly valued a thorough education for young ladies. After her daughters’ examinations she complained that they were “mere recitations from the Books” and was looking into a new teacher “who brings great reputation for scholarship & other qualities.”

The lower region of Louisiana that Dinsmore inhabited was far from the antebellum South imagined by historians. Whether it was due to the eclipsing of the Enlightenment by Romanticism or to the emphasis of southerners on gentility, sociability, and manliness, “there was a strong ant-intellectual streak in Southern society.” Spouting details of the latest scientific discoveries or quotes from recent works of literature (outside of Sir Walter Scott and other Romantic authors) would not likely have impressed mixed company. Too much education in the younger generation was also seen as threatening a father’s position as patriarch and might in fact lead their sons away. Yet evidence suggests that learning was not unappreciated along the lower Mississippi River. Dinsmore subscribed to the Niles Register, a Whig paper unpopular with southern readers because of its pro-tariff nationalist position. Among the other journals he ordered were the Westminster Review, London Quarterly Review, Littell’s Museum [of Foreign Literature and Science], and the Journal of the Franklin Institute. His friend, Lewis Cruger, occasionally sent him papers, journals, and books when he was traveling, among them the Albion, or the British and Colonial Foreign Gazette and the Edinburgh Quarterly. Outside Dinsmore’s circle existed an appreciation for adult learning. A
young lady visiting Adams County, Mississippi, was impressed with her summer residence near Natchez, but particularly its library, which she thought “the best library and largest I ever saw.” From Covington County, Mississippi, Allen Stewart ordered the National Intelligencer and asked an acquaintance to send him copies of papers from North Carolina to keep him abreast of national events and those occurring in his home state. Being close to New Orleans was certainly advantageous for those living near the river, like Thomas Butler, who lived in Terrebonne Parish, allowing him to order the latest science and cultural books in the city, including Arnott’s Elements of Physics and the Waverly works.  

Historians of the American South contend that honor, masculinity, and mastery were interrelated and integral to antebellum white distinctiveness because of the continued presence of slavery and a predominantly rural society. Following the lead of Wyatt-Brown, several historians distinguish between honor in the South that was externally evaluated and honor in the North that was validated internally. Where they disagree is on who took part in this culture of honor and mastery and how open these concepts were to a man’s “self-fabrication”, making an honest evaluation by the community difficult. Most of these cultural historians, though, would agree with Lorri Glover that the masculine qualities exhibited by southern planters played a “critical role in the formation of regional identities” in antebellum America. 

The southern household, as the basis of southern society, was where Dinsmore’s mastery counted most. The household was the central sphere for family and business. In an era when northern men were leaving their homes to work in industrializing cities and towns and northern women created domestic spaces in the home, southern women
remained under the control of powerful males whose mastery over their own households was the basis of their power in society. The institution of marriage was central to the stability of society. Were women to undermine the power structure of the household, it would ultimately undermine the social structure of the South. The interdependence of slavery and marriage “helped to keep white women in their place.” According to historian Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, southern slaveholding women accepted their subordinate role in society and in the household because they did have power over the slaves that labored there, but their influence vanished once they were outside the home. Having left New Hampshire at the onset of the market revolution, Dinsmore would have been the product of an early Republic household and his mother likely would have been under the influence of Republican Motherhood ideas, mixing the requirements of domesticity with intellectual development, but also being restricted to the home. However, since her home was a tavern, she would have been intimately involved in the business with her husband. Thus, Dinsmore was familiar with a household that was both a business and a family, but the mastery that was so integral to southern households was not typical of New England homes.33

The household fashioned by James and Martha Dinsmore, a well-educated, northern-born couple, was certainly not typical of those elite southern families and would have stretched the boundaries of what was acceptable for women even in a northern household. In the North marriage was an agreement willingly made by unequal partners. The letters Dinsmore and his wife exchanged during the short period of separation when his wife began taking the three children to Lexington in 1838 and when he left Louisiana in 1842, suggest a relationship in which the couple themselves and not society defined
gender roles. While Dinsmore was on the Bayou Black plantation and Martha with the children in Kentucky, he appears to have adopted the typical role of the female in admonishing his wife to write to him: “Let me hear from you often at least once a week.” And when he doesn’t hear from her enough: “It is now more than a month since I have heard a word from dear Wife and the little ones. I am miserably lonely and anxious for a letter.” Martha also insisted on prompt letters and her nagging on this point can be seen in his replies to her letters: “You complain of not hearing from me, of neglect &c…. You complain, that my letters remain at my ‘desk day after day before they are mailed”’

Certainly during a time when disease could carry one off within hours, letters were important, but the relationship these exchanges define is not one of male dominance and female submissiveness, nor, obviously of the “oppressively patriarchal” society described by Catherine Clinton.  

Moreover, Martha appears to have entered into the reputed “men’s sphere” by giving her husband opinions on business and financial decisions. One of her goals was to free Dinsmore up so he did not have to stay in Louisiana during the grinding season. In 1841 as he was seriously searching for a buyer for the plantation, she wrote: “Let me entreat you to try this year with a good Overseer and I am well convinced you will think with me that it is infinitely more to your & [the slaves’] advantage.” Using the word “entreat” has the tendency to lessen the impact of her advice, but the fact that she felt quite comfortable giving the advice is striking. In dealing with the slaves, she was unafraid to tell him what he “must” do: “You must try & impress them as smugly as you can with the policy as well as the kindness of your system” and she instructed him to be sure to give them blankets and coats and advise them to get along with any new slaves.
that would be placed on the plantation. Martha goes so far as to question the value of her husband’s estimations of his business outlook: “Your opinion about the future prospects of sugar being so dull differs from all the wise heads here.” These are the words of a woman who expected her husband to value her opinion even if he did not follow it. On the conditions of his proposed sale of the plantation, she wrote: “both Mr. Gibson [and] myself think it very fair [and] advisable.” The implication is that her opinion on business matters was equal to that of a male and fellow planter. What she was willing to write in a letter she was also willing to say in person, creating a household that would turn Fox-Genovese’s southern household on its end and completely undermine Wyatt-Brown’s notion of southern men fearful of women’s agency. That a wife would question a husband’s decision concerning business or give him advice about how to manage the bondpeople does not conform to nineteenth-century marriage as historians have described it. That a husband would allow such behavior is a sign of self-confidence in the face of a well-educated wife. He allowed her to have her say but he did not necessarily heed her advice.35

In their role as parents, James and Martha conformed to the model of northern middle-class parents more than that of southern parents. Although some southern parents were influenced by northern publications, like Godey’s Ladies Book, their lives had little in common with the lives of urban middle-class northerners. Historians who look to describe the roles of parents in planter families find a more patriarchal household where the relationship of the father to his children was an important aspect of a man’s view of himself and society’s view of him. Mastery in the South began at home and radiated outwards. Without authority at home a man could not consider himself a man and could
not expect anyone else to do so. Exhibiting mastery in the household, not simply internalizing it, was key to southern patriarchy. For James and Martha, two older and more mature parents (he was forty-five and she was thirty-eight when their third child was born), parenting was considered to be a shared duty and even for James it was often fraught with emotion. When he was told by his neighbor that two of his young daughters cried to come back to Louisiana from Kentucky, he wrote Martha, “it almost made me shed tears to think that I was so long & so far from them.” He wrote of being “miserably lonely” and “depressed and unhappy” without his family near him. Martha, too, was depressed by their separation because he had “left dear Mother a most responsible charge in the dear children. The care & instruction of which he ought to share & that every moment not absolutely & imperatively demanded for business should be given to dear wife & the pets.” She was not the “inert, uncritical” wife that Wyatt-Brown describes in his discussion of gender relations in the South. Neither did Dinsmore play the “indirect” fatherly role assigned to him by Catherine Clinton. These two adults created a companionate marriage where both parents played important roles in their child-centered household, rejecting patriarchy and mastery.36

In an increasingly fluid and mobile society, as master of his household a man’s honor also distinguished a gentleman from an imposter. Wyatt-Brown delineates certain markers used by southerners to separate the real from the false: sociability, learning, and piety. Although the markers were the same in the North, their order was reversed, with less emphasis on sociability and more on piety. Insisting that honor was utilized more to separate southern white men from slaves rather than from northern white men, Kenneth Greenberg characterizes honorable men as those who refused to be called liars, those who
gave gifts, and those who did not fear death. Dinsmore exhibited all but the last of these
traits, but fit neatly into neither of the descriptions. He valued learning, sociability, and
piety and believed in gift-giving, sending oranges from his grove to Lexington for his
wife to distribute to acquaintances. While he detested being labeled as dishonest (as he
was by Abijah Fisk in the dispute over the sale of his sugar), when his integrity was
challenged he sought recourse in arbitration, not in duels or nose-tweaking. It is very
unlikely that someone who placed such a high value on his family and providing for them
would have resorted to a duel for the settling of verbal insults.37

Dinsmore does not seem to have had trouble earning the respect and esteem of his
peers in and around Terrebonne Parish and that is indicative of some level of community
approbation. Not everyone was treated so well. R. R. Barrow, a planter along Bayou
Black was the owner of numerous plantations in the area, but was not esteemed by all his
peers. After noting that he “occupies the whole Terre Bonne,” Tobias Gibson wrote that
the man had “but few real friends & many bitter enemies. I would hate to take his place
for his apparent wealth.” Other neighbors, particularly the Witherspoons and the Cages
were heavy drinkers and consorted with “drunken beastly company” and slave women,
clearly crossing the boundaries of acceptable behavior.38

A sign that Dinsmore was accepted as a gentleman in his southern world was his
ability to borrow money from local and regional banks. The managers of a bank had only
a man’s word and his reputation when they decided to lend. In 1832, he and his wife
applied for and received a four-thousand-dollar mortgage on their plantation and slaves
from a bank in New Orleans, then received a loan from a bank in Donaldsonville,
Louisiana, and in 1839 he managed to get a $3,500 loan from the local bank in
Thibodauxville. William J. Minor also trusted Dinsmore enough to carry several years’ worth of plantation debts with complete faith that eventually the debts would be paid; and without recourse to the courts. More, Dinsmore maintained friendships with other planters over several years. For a decade and a half after leaving Louisiana, he continued his correspondence with Gibson and Cruger and his more businesslike and newsy correspondence with Minor. Acquaintances from Louisiana occasionally visited him in Kentucky and he continued to make visits there, mixing business with pleasure. The honor and respect southerners accorded Dinsmore was commensurate with that he cultivated and maintained in his northern circle of friends.39

By 1837, Dinsmore was looking to extract himself from planting. He received a letter from his uncle in Boone County, Kentucky, on the Ohio River where Silas Dinsmoor had settled seven years earlier. Nearby, he wrote, lay “Arcadian land . . . just fit for shepherds,” a tract of about fifty acres with access to another three hundred if he wanted. Dinsmore went upriver the following year and made a down-payment, but several more years elapsed before he was able to sell his property in Louisiana. Why did he want to extricate himself from the sugar plantation business? His letters provide us with several reasons, but perhaps foremost in his mind was the state of moral decay he felt surrounded him. “I cannot reconcile my mind to the idea of remaining here,” he wrote his wife, “to bring up our dear children in such a moral waste. I would rather labour with my hands for a support in another country than to do so.” Likely he had no intention of actually laboring with his hands anywhere however genuine his conviction. The moral waste he was referring to may have referred to his planter peers, the Cajun underclass, or his own position as a large slaveowner.40
Evidence pointing to some feeling of guilt toward the slaves is substantiated by a letter written just a month later, when he declares his intention to his wife, “to do them justice & more than justice if God spares my life.” After selling his half of Bayou Black, he and his wife began to discuss the arrangements they would make with the slaves he owned. Although he did eventually take eleven bondmen to Kentucky and hired the remainder to the new owner, he insisted he was being generous and following their wishes in doing so. “I have given Sally her choice to go or remain here. She seems inclined to go.” Sally Taylor and her children made up most of the slaves who accompanied Dinsmore to Kentucky. Nancy Mcgruder also opted to leave Louisiana even though her husband was there—the prospect of having to work in the fields being one of the reasons he gave for her choice. The only enslaved person Dinsmore was certain would make the trip was Coah, whose wife was owned by Silas Dinsmoor and was already in Kentucky. Because Minor owned him Dinsmore had to trade him for another slave. After selling about fifteen slaves, he left the rest of his force on the plantation to be hired by Winder and Minor, “satisfied they could not be happy but in this country.” In the discussion of their arrangements of the bondpeople, Dinsmore and his wife displayed their paternalistic attitude toward slavery but they also illustrated an ambivalent attitude toward the institution that provided them with the funds to purchase land in Kentucky. They were initially willing to leave Louisiana with only one slave and that a man of over fifty years of age.41

If personal or “moral” objections to slavery in Louisiana pushed him to sell out, then why move to Kentucky, another slave state? Dinsmore had visited Boone County already and had followed his uncle’s progress there for almost a decade. As far back as
1832, he voiced his objection to sending his uncle’s bondman, George, north to Boone County because “the wages he receives [being hired out in Mobile] will hire two [white] men in your vicinity.” By 1842 he concluded that hiring his slaves to Winder and Minor would be more to his economic benefit than taking them north. Moreover, Kentucky had a decided pull for Dinsmore and that was the promise it held for “an orchard[,] a vineyard [and] a cabbage patch.” Six years prior to purchasing his land in Boone County he was reading about the Ohio River Valley as being excellent for raising Catawba grapes. His vineyard was well along by the time he moved his family into their new home.42

His debts were also weighing him down and he believed that selling out would give him the funds to pay his debts and begin anew. The financial troubles of the late 1830s made it difficult for Dinsmore to find a purchaser for his half of the plantation, so he was relieved when an acquaintance, Van P. Winder, agreed to pay thirty-six thousand dollars for one thousand acres and all of the improvements. Expressing satisfaction with his sale, he thought Winder, “the very man I could have wished to leave the negros.” He expected that the first payment of six thousand dollars would pay off nearly all of his debts leaving a small amount for his immediate future. “With proper economy and industry we will have enough to enable us to live comfortably and to educate our children well,” he wrote Martha. Using the words “comfortably” and “well” do not indicate great wealth, but Dinsmore was no longer concerned with great wealth, if he ever had been; he was now content to make do with less.43

In choosing to leave the Deep South, Dinsmore was rejecting the world of large plantations, cash crops, and rising evangelicalism, if not necessarily the world of mastery, honor, and anti-intellectualism. To some men of his generation such a world presented
opportunities for great wealth and prestige; for him it presented enormous capital expenditures and scores of forced black laborers. Granted it was a world he had experienced only on the edges, but as a friend remembered it, he had earlier extolled Terrebonne Parish as “the Paradise spoken of in Holy Writ!” before castigating it as “a Paradise of Fools & Vermin.” The Deep South of his experience was not the Cotton South that historians often write about; it was a different world in substantial ways. And Kentucky, too, would be on the edges of the South, but for different reasons.44
Endnotes


3 James Dinsmore Journal, 1813-14, file 1959.DFP.


5 Haynes, *The Mississippi Territory and the Southwest Frontier*, 16-17.

6 Ibid, 54-57.


9 *Ariel*, 10 May, 1828; 24 May 1828, Mississippi Department of Archives & History (MDAH), Jackson, MS.


11 *Mississippi Statesman & Gazette*, 8 August 1829, MDAH.

12 *Ariel*, 13 December and 10 January 1828, MDAH.


21 Tregle, Jr., *Louisiana in the Age of Jackson*, 55-57, 64; Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics*, 12.


Christine Heyrman, in *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), argues that that evangelical preachers in the early 1800s modified their message to appeal to men who were particularly concerned about issues of masculinity. Prior to 1800 preachers had emphasized the equality of sexes and races, undermining southern patriarchal families; over time they learned to appeal more to men through modified rules of discipline and by dropping references to slave manumissions. By making evangelical religion more masculine, Heyrman argues, preachers upheld the more important pillars of southern life—honor and patriarchy (149, 160, 215, 249).

Stephanie McCurry, in *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), disagrees, she found that there was no real change from the 1700s into the 1800s “spiritual equality coexisted with a faith in the divine status of worldly inequalities.” (141-2).


Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 194-195; John Ellis Duncan to Stephen Duncan, 31 October 1828, Thomas Butler and Family Papers, LLMVC; Charles Slack to Hall Slack, 10 November 1848, in the Slack Family Papers, #3599, Southern Historical Collection (SHC), The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; Tobias Gibson to Jas. Dinsmore, 6 September 1852, DFP; Hart Gibson to Tobias Gibson, 26 March 1855, MSS 922, Gibson-Humphreys Family Papers, SHC; Tobias Gibson to Jas. Dinsmore, 6 September 1852, DFP.


Book of Mortgages, 7 June 1832, Terrebonne Parish Courthouse, Houma, Louisiana; Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, ___ March 1839, Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 17 December 1841; Isabella Dinsmore to Isabella Hill, 16 December 1851, DFP.

Silas Dinsmoor to Jas. Dinsmore, 24 October 1837, DFP; Jas Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 20 February 1839, Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, ___ March 1839, DFP.

Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, ___ March 1839, Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 17 December 1841, Van P. Winder to Jas. Dinsmore, 29 December 1845, quote on Lindor in C. Armitage to Jas. Dinsmore, 28 December 1846, Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 28 December 1841, on Nancy and Coah, Jas. Dinsmore to Martha Dinsmore, 8 February 1842, Purchase of Coah, Dinsmore Business Accounts, 6 December 1841, DFP.

Lewis Cruger to Jas. Dinsmore, 17 December 1852, DFP; Jas. Dinsmore to Silas Dinsmoor, 13 April 1832, Silas Dinsmoor Papers, MS 40 (2), Dartmouth College, Microfilm, Dinsmore Homestead, Burlington, Kentucky.

Jas. Dinsmore to Martha Dinsmore, 17 December 1841 and 28 December 1841, DFP.

Tobias Gibson to Jas. Dinsmore, 30 March 1849 and 6 March 1846, DFP.
Chapter Four

A “Happy Home amid the Deep Green Forests of the Glorious West”: Society on Slavery’s Border

James Dinsmore’s reasons for moving his family and eleven of his bondpeople from the Deep South to the Border South were many. Among them was his belief that in Kentucky he could achieve economic independence in a new social environment. Although he was probably no less a failure as a sugar planter than many of his neighbors, he was more uncomfortable than they were, especially at being constantly in debt. As he had written years before when a student at Dartmouth College, “those who are independent in circumstances and have the wisdom and firmness to keep within the paths of virtue, and set bounds to their passions, may enjoy more happiness.” Was this move north a reassertion of his New England culture? Perhaps, but Dinsmore did not move back to New England because he felt that in the West, in Kentucky, he could enact his dream of creating a better life for his family and realize the ideal of human contentment. To his friend, William J. Minor, he wrote, “I shall be perfectly satisfied if I can obtain a very moderate support for my family.” At this stage in his life, he had tempered his dreams of great wealth with a dose of caution, satisfying himself with what he considered
a more modest lifestyle. Like other Americans of the mid-nineteenth century, he chose his own future within the swirling social, economic, political, and cultural changes brought about by the expanding market economy.¹

In 1842 James Dinsmore moved with his family and eleven enslaved people to his homestead in Boone County, Kentucky. Nestled in a stand of black walnuts and tulip poplars, the partially completed clapboard house stood at the end of a half-mile drive from Mud Road, the aptly named thoroughfare that connected the small settlement of Middle Creek Mills to the equally small Ohio River communities of McVille and Bellevue Bottoms. Back of the house, the river bluff quickly rose over six hundred feet and then flattened out as it ran eastward several miles to the county seat of Burlington. A propitious location for a farmer with approximately seven hundred acres, Dinsmore’s farm was only one mile from the river and encompassed fertile river bottoms and sandy hillsides. The growing city of Cincinnati was only a three- or four-hour trip upstream.

Having traveled to Boone County several times prior to his permanent move there and with an uncle who had lived there for twelve years, Dinsmore was aware he was entering a society that was very different from the one he had left in the Deep South. He was also a different man from the one who in 1816 had moved to Natchez, Mississippi. Although at fifty-two years old he willingly inserted himself into an environment where he had few close connections to come to his aid financially, Dinsmore was looking for a less stressful life in an occupation that would allow him to control his economic destiny.

At Walnut Ridge, the homestead he designed for his family reflected the new social landscape of his life in northern Kentucky. Yet it was also influenced by his past. The main house’s facade was typical of Kentucky farms: a five-bay front adorned with a
decorative Greek Revival portico. But the back of the house was unique. Its wide attached gallery was more typical of a southern Louisiana Creole home, with each of the three rear rooms entering directly onto the gallery. A central hall split the house in half, and ran from the front to the rear with no obstructions such as a fancy staircase. This large space was designed for the family’s use in warm weather when a cross breeze would ventilate the passage. The frame house was not ostentatious but was spacious.

The approach to the house held almost as much meaning as the house’s facade. In his study of plantation architecture, historian Dell Upton found that planters often designed not just their homes but also the landscapes of their plantation for those who lived there and those who visited. Comparative to his or her own status, a neighbor had already formed opinions about the status of the person living there by the time he or she had traversed the half-mile drive from Mud Road to the front or back of Dinsmore’s house. Initially, the property was mostly wooded and would have opened up dramatically as one reached the gate to the yard and the final stage of the approach. As the woods were slowly cleared for fields and meadows, they were bordered with thick osage orange trees, that Dinsmore considered “valuable for a hedge.” The purpose of these hedges was to deter animal and human predators, but they also created a “processional landscape” that guided visitors to the house. At the front of the house, the latched gate and the grand entrance to the front hall, where visitors waited for admittance, served as indications of a visitor’s status vis-à-vis the family. The landscape and house he designed reinforced his understanding of hierarchy.²

The first impressions visitors received of the family upon entering the front door were molded by Dinsmore’s library and St. Leger horseracing chromolithographs that
decorated the hall. The large front rooms, enhanced by papered walls, carpeted floors, and paintings, photographs and silhouettes, were warmed by fireplaces while the small back rooms were unadorned, colorless, and cold, designed primarily as work spaces. Dinsmore’s office was there, and on the opposite side of the hall was the storeroom and pantry, each with its own door off the gallery segregating those entering the house by race and class. The workers on the farm would have entered the office confronted with doors blocking their entry into the family’s personal spaces. The female slaves would have entered the house through the pantry door, having access to the private spaces of the house to clean the rooms, build the fires, and do numerous other jobs for the family. This spatial segregation of farmhouses by gender, race, and class was typical of the time period and reinforced Dinsmore’s belief that farming was a business rather than a family enterprise.3

Although the interior of the house was plain with little decorative molding or fancy mantlework, the house was more spacious and architecturally pleasing to the eye than many of the rural structures in the county. Log buildings were still being constructed in Boone County, and Dinsmore’s brother, John, who arrived in the fall of 1841 to oversee the building of the house, worried that the man hired for the work, John Brady, would be unable to carry out James’s plans. “I suspect Mr. Brady never built a frame house in his life,” he wrote, “he may build a good log house but think that is the end of his knowledge. [I]f he knows anything more he takes care to keep it to himself.” The small number of brick and stone houses in Boone County existed mostly along the Lexington-Covington Turnpike, in the towns of Burlington and Petersburg, and along the Ohio River. Dinsmore designed a home that would compare favorably with those in his
neighborhood. He filled the home with objects that he felt reflected his status more than his house.\textsuperscript{4}

The popularity of Gothic Revival architecture soon overwhelmed the Greek Revival forms Dinsmore chose for his home. Romanticism’s emphasis on the picturesque and its acceptance of individual privacy, made these new houses the antithesis of the spaces Dinsmore created for his family. Andrew Jackson Downing pointedly created a hierarchy of space, stressing in particular the parlor and the master bedroom. Dinsmore’s spacious corner bedroom was identical to the opposite corner bedroom and his parlor was of equal size to his dining room. In contrast to Downing’s relegation of work spaces to a far corner or ell of the structure, Dinsmore chose to integrate his work space more closely to his family space. He might have ascribed to the lifestyle Downing was promoting, but his Boone County house was constructed too early to reflect this new style of design.\textsuperscript{5}

Constructed of clapboard and placed at the end of a long drive, the main house’s centrality to the farmstead is clear. The family privy, ice house, carriage house, and wine house were of clapboard construction and located directly in the rear of the house. The outbuildings relating to the workers on the farm were of log construction, including their houses, the smokehouse, and the kitchen, and likely other buildings such as the wash house and blacksmith shop. Of the log structures located in the back of the main house and off to the side, all but the kitchen were out of sight to visitors. The farmstead’s unity, today clearly noticeable by aerial view, belied the segregation of the buildings at ground level. Dinsmore was master to tenants, day laborers, and slaves, all of whom inhabited his built environment. Tenants and day laborers had their own barriers to cross, such as
the family gallery in the back of the house, the door into Dinsmore’s office, and the
workstand or table behind which he sat while attending to business. While bondpeople
would have access to the entire house when they were cleaning it or fixing fires, theirs
was limited and managed access, reinforcing their position as servants, inferior
extensions of family members who ordered them from room to room and task to task.
Slaves, who inhabited at once a linked and separate world to the family, were not the
intended audience of Dinsmore’s domestic designs. The slaves, Sally Taylor and her
children, Nancy McGruder, John, and Coah would have gradually created their own
spaces. But they would have been as different to those in Louisiana as were the social
conditions in Boone County.⁶

In northern Kentucky, Dinsmore began anew creating a place for himself in a
society that historians describe as the border region of the Upper South. Kentucky was a
slave state, but its long border with the Ohio River gave its population a distinctive
color when compared to more southern states that historian Harry Laver argues never
fit “comfortably into either the North or the South.” Primarily agricultural, white
Kentuckians were more likely to be interested in manufacturing than the inhabitants of
the Deep South. Through trade along the Mississippi River, the state had close ties with
the South and West. Yet as the Northwest Territory was settled, Kentucky’s residents
developed strong economic and social ties to those areas, cementing its social and
economic position as a border state. For mid-nineteenth century Boone County with the
growing city of Cincinnati just a few hours upstream, the river might have been a border
but it was no barrier.⁷

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Led by backcountry long hunters like Daniel Boone and Simon Kenton, Kentucky was settled principally by farmers from the western regions of Pennsylvania, Virginia, and North Carolina. Native American groups, such as the Shawnee, considered it their hunting ground and contested the Anglo-American settlers for its rich habitat. The frontier years of Kentucky’s history were violent, and few wealthy planters and slaveowners were willing to risk their property until the danger had passed. The short-lived belief that Kentucky would be a true home to Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman republic ended in about 1790, when the immediate danger from Native Americans had passed and immigration to Kentucky increased. Even then, few large planters of the kind who peopled Mississippi and Louisiana migrated to Kentucky. Not until well after 1800 did the economic elite, what Craig Thompson Friend has referred to as “portable planters” from the Tidewater and Piedmont of Virginia, decide to cross into the rich Bluegrass region.⁸

Frontier Kentucky’s story is one of lost opportunities. What some hoped would be the embodiment of Jefferson’s yeoman republic was overtaken by speculators and wealthy planters from the seaboard states. Land titles became a mass of confusion because several groups participated in giving land away in the area, often leaving those who had survived the hardships of the pioneer stage with nothing to show for it, although they admittedly contributed to the confusion. Once larger landholders had consolidated their claims to the land through court battles that favored those with money and time, they consolidated their power politically and culturally. According to one observer, no area in the United States had changed so rapidly from “uncultivated waste to the elegances of civilization” as Kentucky.⁹
Written in 1792 when settlements were in a fluid state, Kentucky’s first constitution recognized slavery, but it did not offer any guarantees for the institution. Acknowledging the right to own black and Indian men, women, and children, it defined citizenship and the right of suffrage vaguely enough that free blacks and women might have considered themselves included. This constitution had a short life. Within seven years, Kentuckians were meeting in convention to correct its weaknesses. Primary among these was the definition of citizenship, which was now clearly limited to white men. The new document also expressly protected slavery and made it very difficult to abrogate the rights of slaveowners. Friend notes that it became the first state in the nation to explicitly create a white man’s democracy in a biracial environment.\textsuperscript{10}

Perched in the northernmost section of the new state, with the Ohio River as its northern and western border, Boone County is a part of the Outer Bluegrass region, not the most fertile region of Kentucky. Early settlements in the county tended to be along the river, more advantageous for travel and trade—except in drought and mid-winter—than from the interior of the county. The largest of these settlements, Petersburg (originally called Tanner’s Station), was located near the river’s big bend to the southwest. Dinsmore moved to an area downriver that had several small settlements vying with each other for local supremacy—Bellevue Bottoms and McVille. A local ferry ran across the Ohio River to Rising Sun, Indiana, and boats traveling up and down the river regularly stopped to take on and drop off passengers, mail, and cargo. Both settlements, at one time or another, participated in the construction of steamboats.\textsuperscript{11}

Slavery was not as central to the economy of Kentucky as it was to either Atlantic seaboard or southwestern plantation states. In 1850 Kentucky slaveholders held an
average of 5.5 slaves; in Boone County the figure was 4.4, far lower than in the previous slaveholding communities Dinsmore had lived. In Adams County, Mississippi, in 1818 the average was 14.5 slaves per slaveholder, and in Terrebonne Parish in 1840 the average was 25 slaves per slaveholder. In 1850, Kentucky had the lowest average slaveholdings of any slave state with the exception of Missouri, but it had a relatively high number of slaveholders: 28 percent. Considered a democratic institution by white Kentuckians, only Virginia and Georgia had a higher percentage of slaveowners within their populations by 1860. Major crops raised in Kentucky did not require labor forces as large as did sugar and rice in Louisiana and South Carolina. In the Bluegrass region, tobacco and hemp were the dominant cash crops and both benefited from seasonal labor more than year-round labor.¹²

Tobacco culture might have overspread much of Kentucky’s Bluegrass, but in Boone County during the mid-nineteenth century it was never adopted by a majority of farmers. In 1850 only 12 percent of farmers raised the cash crop; this increased to 28 percent in 1860 but fell again to 12 percent by 1870. Only twelve farmers in the county raised hemp in 1850; ten years later that figure was reduced to 1 percent. Farmers were making annual decision about what to raise to maximize profits, and as they did their farms’ labor needs often changed. Livestock, grains, and market produce were more popular than tobacco because of their county’s proximity to the Cincinnati market. Almost half of all farmers in 1850 produced wool, with almost one-fourth of them clearly intending the product for the market; 10 percent of the county’s farmers raised enough orchard produce to market.¹³
Because slaveholdings were relatively small in Kentucky, the social and labor landscape in Dinsmore’s new home differed from Louisiana. His past experiences as much as this new society shaped the place he created in this distinct environment. Escaping the “moral waste” of southern Louisiana, he must have been pleased with Boone County, where slaves were never more than 22 percent of the population and were on the decrease from the 1840s to the Civil War. By comparison, in Terrebonne Parish, slaves constituted over 50 percent of the population in 1840. This is not to imply that slaves were incidental to the history of Boone County. Husbandry required constant care of animals, fences, and watergaps, and as Lorena Walsh argues in the Chesapeake, tobacco farms required a diversified and year-round farming regimen, allowing bondpeople to take on varied tasks and gain control over their work pace. Farmers relied on slave labor for planting and harvesting, but they were not the backbone of the county’s economy. Labor needs were met by slaveowners’ families or by the numerous poor white non-landholding men in the county, as well as by owned and hired slaves. Kentucky slaveholder, Robert Henry of Christian County viewed his slaves as domestics who were more help to his wife than to him, a marked contrast to Louisiana, where field slaves provided the main labor force in plantations and could never have been replaced by the slaveholding family and non-landholding whites. That Boone County’s slave force was more domestic in nature can be seen in the statistics: in 1850, 43 percent of slaveowning households had no adult males in the 16 to 49 age range; by 1860, this number had increased to 54 percent. The largest increase in slave demographics was in the number of households of only children under the age of sixteen, which increased from
9 percent in 1850 to 21 percent ten years later. Simultaneously, the number of slaves counted as mulattoes in the census increased during the same decade.\textsuperscript{14}

The peripheral nature of slavery to the economic life of the county can best be seen in the statistics for slaveholders. In 1840 only 25 percent of Boone County taxable adults owned slaves and 15 percent of taxable adults owned one to four slaves. The numbers only declined in the two decades preceding the Civil War, so that by the time the war broke out almost 80 percent of Boone County taxable adults owned no slaves. Indeed the most significant change for slaveholders was that more of them were opting to own fewer slaves. In 1840, 30 percent of slaveholders owned five to nine slaves; twenty years later that figure was 23 percent. Likewise, 10 percent of slaveholders owned ten to nineteen bondpeople in 1840, but twenty years later that number had been halved. Slaveholding adults and heads of household with one to four slaves grew from 60 percent in 1840 to 72 percent in 1860.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite slave labor’s relative unimportance to the economy of Boone County, those who lived there embedded slavery into institutional hierarchies. Just across the Ohio River, in the free states of southern Indiana and Ohio, similar crops were raised and families from the Upper South had created culturally similar communities. Some families crossed and re-crossed the river in their search for economic opportunity, but they moved to Boone County fully aware of the presence of unfree labor.\textsuperscript{16} Those who owned slaves there took a more active role in the county’s early political and economic life and tended to monopolize the better land. Of the first thirteen county magistrates, only one did not own slaves. Most of the men establishing ferries early in the county history were slaveowners because they often owned the most advantageous sites.
According to the 1810 tax list which rated the class of land each tithe owned, 93 percent of the first-rate land was owned by men who were slaveowners and 72 percent of the second-rate land was likewise owned by slaveowners. The third-rate land was left for non-slaveholders, with only 30 percent of slaveowners holding that land. This does not mean that large landowners were necessarily disadvantaged by not owning slaves; a yeoman farmer like Pryor B. Cloud who owned 370 acres relied on the labor of a male relative and two young laborers who lived in his household. For smaller farmers who had less land and little cash, the advantages of slave labor would have been more obvious.\(^{17}\)

The society Dinsmore entered in Kentucky was whiter and more homogenous than Louisiana’s. German and Irish immigrants coming to America in the 1840s began to move into northern Kentucky largely in Covington and Newport in nearby Kenton and Campbell counties. By 1850 slightly more than 2 percent of Boone County’s population was foreign born, compared with almost 20 percent in Kenton County and 26 percent in Campbell County. Beyond a close-knit German (“Germanna”) community, most of the inhabitants were Anglo-Americans.\(^{18}\)

In Kentucky and in Boone County, land ownership formed the greatest division within white society. Based on the 1840 county tax records, only 3 percent of taxable adults owned more than five hundred acres yet 57 percent of all adult males and female heads of household owned no farmland at all. Some of these males may have been waiting for an inheritance from their father’s death, but even this would not have made them entirely independent of the need to labor for others. By 1860, a full 59 percent owned no land. More significantly, a smaller number of people were accumulating larger farms, leaving more farmers with smaller landholdings. In 1840, 13 percent of taxable
adult males and heads of households owned a farm that was less than one hundred acres; by 1860 20 percent did. Seen another way, the number of farms dropped by 24 percent in the decade preceding the Civil War, from 1152 farms to 879 farms. Additionally, because of a few very large farms, the average farm size grew from 140 acres to 168 acres, making it more difficult to purchase land. In 1860, thirteen thousand fewer acres were farmed than ten years earlier. Partible inheritances made it difficult for the average family to hang on to mid-sized farms, resulting in emigration from Boone County to areas further west, like Missouri or Indiana. For families who stayed where they were, sons and grandsons faced the prospect of becoming tenant farmers or wage laborers.19

Having moved to Kentucky from Louisiana, the Dinsmores would have quickly noticed the compactness of settlement, including numerous villages and towns that had sprung up wherever several houses were built close to each other. People lived much closer together than they did in the plantation society of the Deep South, and with hopeful men eager to create new market places, a general store was usually within walking distance. Few of these crossroads, such as Bullittsburg, Hamilton, Carlton, Francisville, and Towseytown, survived the nineteenth century, but Walton, Burlington, Florence, Petersburg, and Verona, by chance, perseverance, or propitious location, became towns and cities.

With his farm just one mile from the Ohio River, Dinsmore ensured that he would be able to travel easily to the large market of Cincinnati. Unlike Louisiana’s Bayou Black, the Ohio River was navigable most of the year. Within a reasonably comfortable four-hour trip upstream, they now had access to warehouses selling household goods, foodstuffs, cultural amenities, and a vibrant market for the sale of produce. The river was
certainly viewed by Dinsmore and his neighbors as a conduit for trade, but they were also aware of the Ohio River as a border for the slave states.\textsuperscript{20}

How did the Dinsmore family view their new world? Compared to Lexington, where Martha and the three children—Isabella, Julia, and Susan—had been living in a boarding house since the late fall of 1841, rural Boone County felt isolated. Their farm was “too lonely” and “far in the woods.” Dinsmore described himself as living “in the woods [and] amongst the hills.” Interestingly, although the family never bothered to name their Louisiana plantation other than to refer to it as Bayou Black, they thrice named their farm in Kentucky—Walnut Ridge, Somerset (as Martha and the children mostly referred to it), and later, simply Boone.\textsuperscript{21}

Like the majority of residents of the Ohio Valley, the Dinsmores considered their new home to be located in the West. In an essay likely written for school and dated either 1845 or 1846, Dinsmore’s eldest daughter, Isabella compared her home in Louisiana to her new home in Kentucky by claiming she had moved from a “pleasant home beneath a southern sky” to a “happy home amid the deep green forests of the glorious West.” Dinsmore also saw himself as living in a different region of the United States, specifically he no longer resided in the South. In writing a letter to his alma mater in 1854, he recounted his life experiences. In his own words, he “was compelled to leave the South, by ill health, and have been in Kentucky thirteen years.”\textsuperscript{22}

When settled, the Ohio River Valley was a distinct frontier from the rest of the nation. With only Tennessee to the south, it was bounded on the east by the Appalachian Mountains, on the north by unfriendly Native Americans and British, and on the west by the Mississippi River and the French and Spanish. This physical separation led to a
cultural separation and allowed the area to develop a “distinct regional identity as America’s ‘western country.’” Similar to a backcountry culture, it was culturally conservative yet more egalitarian, composed of a variety of peoples melded together in the face of their violent frontier experience, leading them to discard most practices of deference to social ‘superiors’ who had little or no military experience.  

Contemporaries often viewed white Kentuckians as different as well. James Hall, used descriptions like “rough,” “familiar with fatigue,” “reared among dangers,” “unconquerable,” “disdain[ful] of control,” [sic] and possessing an “absence of constraint.” Kentuckians’ collective air of “habitual independence of action” produced awe. The impression early Kentuckians made on the adult Dinsmore were quite different. When he was in Natchez with his cousin, John Bell, they amused themselves with writing stories and an occasional essay, perhaps for the local newspaper. One of these stories comprised colorful characters that were obvious stereotypes of Americans from the several regions of the young country. One character, Major Dick Swanton, was a typical frontier Kentuckian from the perspective of a Natchez resident. He was a “gambler, cockfighter [and] horseracer, ‘hell on the backtrack,’ swears like a pirate” and “will sock his gaff into any man who denies that he’s a gentleman.” His “man Friday,” “born on the north fork of the big greasy creek,” was described as a “bully and rascal, half horse, half alligator[,] best gun [and] handsomest sister.” Westerners, and particularly Kentuckians, were open to ridicule by young men who had earned a college degree because they were seen as proudly unrefined in manners and language. Such stereotypes allowed middle-class easterners to culturally erase those whose values they
disagreed with while promoting their own, de-legitimizing brawling frontiersmen in the process.  

Dinsmore’s caricature also emphasized the view of westerners as ready to fight over personal slights, whether misunderstood or not. Popular perception of westerners’ masculinity required that men defend their reputation. Such violence was also a part of the real Southwest, as Dinsmore and Bell had too often witnessed. Unless it involved threats to themselves, the violence of the West made them chuckle. When composing his own history for Dartmouth College, Dinsmore reflected on his past in what would have been understood as humor in New England: “Altho I have lived so long in the back woods,” he wrote, “I have never fought a duel, never received a challenge—never was shot at.” While early nineteenth-century white Americans admired the frontier of Kentucky, they regarded the residents as violent and unprincipled. “They fight for the most trifling provocations, or even sometimes without any,” wrote an English traveler in the West, “but merely to try each others prowess, which they are fond of vaunting of.”

Similarly, white southerners had a reputation for violence in defense of their manhood, which Kenneth S. Greenberg interprets as an attribute of a slaveowning society. White men were valued according to the way they projected themselves in public, while black men were denied that right through the courts and the auction block. At a time when northerners were internalizing the concept of honor, southerners continued to believe that reputation mattered most, a cultural distinction that separated the two sections of the country in antebellum America. Elliot Gorn’s study of violence on the southern backcountry contends that migrating Tidewater planters turned to more gentlemanly modes of combat as they moved westward, leaving the eye-gouging and
nose-severing to the lesser sorts. These backwoods farmers were the same men who moved over the mountains into Kentucky and from there even further west, laying the foundation for the reputation they had attained by the time Dinsmore confronted them on the Mississippi River in the second decade of the nineteenth century.26

Complicated by circumstance and historical interpretation, this transference of culture is central to the essence of westernness and to how Dinsmore experienced his relocation to Kentucky. As men and women moved west or south they naturally carried their culture with them, but as Frederick Jackson Turner contends, the frontier was where “the restraints of custom were broken, and new activities, new lines of growth, new institutions were produced.”27 While he emphasizes man’s potential to remake himself in this new environment, others insist on the continued influence of the culture, government, judicial systems, and laws emanating from the East, and the constant remaking of culture on the frontier as settlers adjusted to their new environment. Kentucky beckoned migrants who wanted to improve their economic situation and they all arrived with different expectations and backgrounds. Although Dinsmore moved to Kentucky after the pioneer stage of development had faded, like those first migrants he would have viewed the West as a place where he could re-make himself as a successful farmer based upon the advantages he had received from his New England upbringing and education. How would Kentucky change him?28

Slavery ensured that Kentucky would not become a truly unique region of the West, transforming it from an egalitarian frontier to a slaveholding region that deferred to elites in its political, economical, and religious life. When Dinsmore arrived in Kentucky, it was no longer a paradise of yeoman egalitarianism. All adult white males
did have the franchise, but their opportunities to exercise it were limited because most local offices were made by appointment. Conversely, though Kentuckians did make use of enslaved labor, a large minority viewed slavery as a necessary evil and publicly discussed emancipation and colonization while governments in the Deep South were limiting such discussion and upholding slavery as a positive good. Kentucky was visibly Southern because of slavery, but socially and economically its interests diverged from that region, placing it firmly within the nation’s West.²⁹

By the mid-1830s the American frontier and the restless energy that accompanied it had moved on from Kentucky and the state was becoming quite respectable in the eyes of others. Certainly there were still vestiges of the brawling lower-class white, but more mainstream middle-class, capitalist values were replacing this sometimes violent, undisciplined world. The fact that Dinsmore considered this region distinct from the South is a sign that contemporary white Americans continued to view the state as part of a distinct region of the country, with interests and an environment unlike the Northeast or the South. Prior to his move there, Dinsmore knew people who lived in the state and enjoyed its fertile soil and its culture. Silas Dinsmoor had moved to Boone County and influenced his nephew to think of Kentucky as a land of promise and beauty. The people, too, had become more attractive. According to Martha Dinsmore’s refined aunt from the East, “As to the Kentuckians I have never met with any but polished and agreeable persons, and my Ideas of them have ever been that they were excellent.” In Louisiana, having become good friends with Tobias Gibson whose wife was related to Kentucky’s elite Breckinridge and Preston families, Dinsmore looked more favorably on the people of Kentucky also and this made the move easier.³⁰
Into this new social world, Dinsmore carried his accumulated cultural experiences and expectations. From New England he retained his desire to advance financially without incurring too much debt. His belief in the Union was still solid and he strongly supported the notion that all sections benefit from and are benefited by their relationship with each other. From Mississippi and Louisiana Dinsmore brought his vision of farming as a business rather than a family enterprise and his view of society as comprised of unequal individuals. The Deep South had also turned him personally against a plantation society that relied on the labor of slaves, which created an immoral society, plagued by rampant violence, racial mixing, and drunkenness. A small farm would be different, even if supported in part by slave labor. His own experience had taught him that a man could rise in society with the help of education and good connections. Without these assets, their chances of success were limited. In Louisiana he had identified more with the anti-Jackson politicians, supporting the Whig Party and the American System. Believing that farming was an important part of the national economy, he recognized that it could not single-handedly strengthen the nation. A successful and strong national economy required a vibrant agricultural and industrial base and he viewed himself as supporting other sectors of society.\(^{31}\)

Families were an important part of social life in Boone County. Moving to any frontier, whether northern, southern, or western required physical and emotional support that relatives and acquaintances could provide. By the time Dinsmore moved to Kentucky, several extended families—among them the Tousey, Graves, Watts, Craig, and Johnson families—comprised the leadership of the county and were intermarrying to solidify these positions of social and, when they wished it, political advantage. Serving
the county as magistrates, recorders, sheriffs, road surveyors, and in other capacities confirmed their status in the county through the mid-century as did their large landholdings.32

Although a newcomer, Dinsmore’s large farm, few family connections, and access to Cincinnati businessmen allowed him to ease himself more quickly into the Boone County social and economic scene. Unlike his move to Natchez in 1816, Dinsmore was now moving to an area where he knew people. His uncle had lived in Boone County for twelve years already, and his cousin, Silas G. Dinsmoor lived with his wife in Cincinnati. She was a relative of Jacob Burnet, one of the leading citizens of early Cincinnati, and the daughter of William Resor, one of that city’s leading manufacturers. Dinsmore and his family were also drawn more closely to their northern family relationships that they had let lapse while living in the Deep South. John Dinsmore came south from upstate New York to oversee the construction of his older brother’s house and his sister Susannah Goodrich visited Kentucky with her children (the youngest of whom was Benjamin Franklin Goodrich). Cousin William Dinsmore insisted on entertaining James and his family in Staatsburg, New York where he had established a large farm. Martha Dinsmore, too, was able to renew ties to relatives and friends in New York City, New Jersey, and Philadelphia. In 1853, Dinsmore took advantage of new railroads to attend his fortieth reunion at Dartmouth and struck up a correspondence with relatives and friends he met in Boston and New Hampshire. All of these relationships served to reinforce the family’s northern roots after their sojourn in the Deep South.33

The social advantages in Kentucky as compared with Louisiana were attributable in part to slavery’s relative absence. Dinsmore’s eldest daughter, Isabella was
particularly attuned. Although she missed the “smooth green banks” of the bayou where the “long grey moss hung gracefully,” she was aware of the “multitudes of oppressed human beings” who were a “stain upon [Louisiana’s] fame.” In Boone County, the eleven bondpeople with whom she shared a farm as well as those she met in her daily life were not so oppressed, suggestive of white Kentuckians’ collective belief that slavery in their state was more moderate than in the Deep South. Dinsmore moved to Kentucky to remove himself from the “moral waste” of the Deep South’s plantations, assuming in his own mind that fewer slaves made for a better environment overall.  

As in Louisiana Dinsmore formed personal relationships with his neighbors in Boone County that often encompassed business arrangements. In 1855 he invested with two men of the neighboring Grant family in a farm in Saline County, Missouri, where hemp was the main product. Because Dinsmore was not able to make good use of all his slaves in Kentucky and Louisiana, he took advantage of this opportunity to send at least six of his remaining slaves in Louisiana to work on the Missouri farm.

While dispensing of his slave labor, Dinsmore was motivated to get involved in the preparations for writing a new state constitution in 1849. A number of Boone County slaveholders were interested in pushing for a constitution that called for the gradual emancipation of the state’s slaves. In calling for a county-wide meeting to choose delegates to a May emancipation convention in Frankfort, “many emancipationists” in Boone deplored “the injuries which the institution of slavery has already inflicted upon the prosperity of our commonwealth.” On April 13, when the meeting was held, Dinsmore was selected as a vice president and was chosen to be a delegate to the
Frankfort convention. The gradual emancipation effort was unsuccessful, but the episode clearly places Dinsmore in the midst of like-minded men who held him in esteem.\textsuperscript{36}

The 1850 constitution silenced the discussions that had existed until that time concerning emancipation by strengthening slavery. The position of free blacks became less secure; they were now required to register with the county and prove their freedom and the General Assembly was given the power to evict them from the state at any time in the future. Manumissions were only allowed if the freedpeople left the state. The impact of the convention in Boone County is best reflected by the change of direction in local emancipations. In the decade prior to the convention, three wills emancipated slaves out of twenty-eight mentioning slave property dispensations. Beginning in the summer of 1848, when talk of the convention began, and lasting until the summer of 1849, after the emancipationists were seen to be clearly outnumbered, four of six wills that mentioned slave property included emancipation provisions. In the decade following the new constitution when the institution was strengthened, the number dropped again—three emancipations occurred in the thirty-four wills that mentioned slave property. Clearly, as some slaveowners in Boone County saw a possibility that slavery might eventually end even if gradually, more of them chose to emancipate their own bondpeople but when they perceived a strong opposition to emancipation they reverted to their former behavior. Those who did emancipate their slaves after the new constitution now had to make arrangements for them. Joshua Zimmerman gave William and Sarah and their families land he owned in Clermont County and Allen received fifty dollars and a horse. Another slaveowner, Cornelius Carpenter freed Lucy and her two children after the death of his wife “if they will leave this state” but he made no financial provision for
them. More often, though, post-constitution wills insisted on keeping slaves within the family or required them to be sold at private auction among family and close friends. A number of the wills allowed for the slaves to choose their owners. In seeing themselves as paternalistic masters, these men and women were passing on their values and their human property to their offspring.37

In Boone County, the relationship between slaveowners and their bondpeople was a product of their regional environment where slavery was not based on cash crop production and where slaves lived, whether on a large or small farm and with a few or a dozen other slaves. Just as pertinent to this relationship were the particular characters and mindsets of the individuals involved. According to historian Harold D. Tallant, slaveholders like Dinsmore who supported gradual emancipation in 1849 were anything but radicals. They were racial conservatives who perceived slavery as a form of race control and who feared the deleterious social effects of slavery’s growth nearly as much as abolition. This conforms neatly to Dinsmore’s actions in Louisiana with regard to Allec who was able to live as a free man only after purchasing his freedom for about five hundred dollars. In Dinsmore’s mind, this was Allec’s way of illustrating his ability to support himself in a respectable manner when he was free. His Whiggish paternalism also allowed him to appreciate the humanity and abilities of African Americans, another facet of the conservative character Tallant describes. Several of the men and women who were enslaved by Dinsmore learned to read and write quite well. Where Dinsmore differed from most paternalists was in his ambivalence toward master and control—mastery certainly enhanced his status but he was reluctant to expend much energy in controlling the personal lives of those he enslaved. That race control was important to
other Boone County slaveholders can be seen in the will of Joshua Stephens who split his slaves between his children, urging them to “manage them with humanity allowing them as much liberty as may be consistent with keeping them in proper subjection.”

In such a society, Dinsmore’s relationship with his slaves had been transformed. Rather than managing more than eighty bondpeople and laborers in their daily tasks and suffering no small amount of worry and stress over the pace of grinding sugar cane day and night, he now had two adult males and perhaps one or two young males to oversee. Additionally, he had occasional access to the labor of tenants and day laborers when necessary. Although the tasks they were set to do each day could be physically grueling, the pace was more relaxed. His wife, Martha, was able to count on the labor of at least two adult women if not a few of the children also. On his farm, relations were also more personal because they all lived in closer quarters than in the Deep South. As Diane Mutti Burke argues, this more personal relationship often meant the slaveowner had more control over all aspects of an enslaved person’s life. This situation might lead to better treatment because the white family and their bondpeople were more intimate with each others’ needs, but that same intimacy could result in regular emotional and physical abuse. On Dinsmore’s Bayou Black plantation, the slaves all lived in a small cluster of houses near the fields away from the main house. In Boone County, the two slave cabins were less than forty yards from the main house, ensuring that the slaves were at the beck and call of the family. According to the 1860 slave census many slaveholders in Boone County had only one slave cabin while numerous farmers who owned only one or two slaves had no cabins at all, indicating that the slaves slept in the main house with the white family or in the outdoor kitchen.
Small slaveholdings like those in Boone County and Kentucky also meant that married slave couples would most likely be separated, challenging family stability. Dinsmore’s aunt, Mary Dinsmoor wrote to a friend about the death of her “favorite servant,” Winny, noting that James allowed the woman’s husband, Coah, whom he owned, “to be constantly with her during her sickness,” indicating a special favor being shown. Occasionally a Boone County testator also exhibited some concern for the welfare of families. D. B. Crisenberry willed that his slave Betsy should not be sold far away from her husband. Likewise, Squire Vest ordered that “Lucy may be sold in the neighborhood of her husband.” Such cases were rarely spelled out though, leaving most enslaved couples with only the weekly visit of Saturday night until Sunday night or Monday morning. As historian Marion B. Lucas argues, despite Kentucky slave families facing forced separation, the “slave family was a viable institution.”

Because of the face-to-face nature of slavery in Boone County and Kentucky, it was more likely that white slaveowning families would develop a positive relationship with those who labored with them. On plantations, the large number of slaves made such relationships difficult with all but the slaves working in the house. Occasional letters indicate that the Dinsmore women formed positive relationships with a few slave women, but it is impossible to know if the bondwomen reciprocated the feelings. If one could judge inter-racial relationships by the actions taken when making that last disposal of one’s assets, then there were a few other slaveowning farmers in Boone County who fostered close relationships with their bondpeople, at least when on the brink of death and no longer in need of their labor.
That Dinsmore and his wife recognized the humanity of the bondpeople who helped to create their wealth is clear in their actions. Some of them did learn to read and write, including Sally Taylor’s son Adam who wrote to Julia Dinsmore years later from Missouri. Nancy McGruder, also literate, was buried in the family graveyard when she died in 1906. Before moving to Kentucky, Dinsmore purchased Coah from Minor so he could accompany Winny to Boone County, even though they would be living in separate households. As Martha Dinsmore wrote of Coah, he was “decidedly the finest Negro on the place [and] a real Christian” and Winny was “very much respected by all as nurse, physician, [and] oracle.” When Coah died in 1862, Dinsmore purchased a shroud for him, likely out of cultural preference, and marked his grave in the family graveyard with a flat stone, perhaps a tradition from his homeland. Indeed Dinsmore wrote an epitaph for both Coah and Winny, suggesting their close relationship, if paternalistic.42

Such closeness did not automatically translate into slave emancipations. Characteristic of border states like Kentucky, freeing bondpeople became far more difficult by the 1850s. In 1840, Boone County’s tax assessor found only twenty-seven free blacks, with only one family living independent of a white family. Many were older; twelve of the twenty-seven were over fifty-six years of age. Clearly these men and women were emancipated because they were no longer of use to the owner. They were allowed to live with their enslaved relatives on the farm, indicating that either the masters were acting on paternalist impulses or they were acceding to the demands of their non-slaveholding neighbors who did not wish to see free blacks as independent people. Most of these freed slaves were emancipated on the death of the owner or their manumissions were delayed even longer. In 1841 Rachel Porter freed her bondpeople at her death, but
Virginia Vawter willed Aggy to her brother in 1839 and left it to his approval whether or not she should be freed. Reuben Clarkson emancipated five older slaves in 1848, but he insisted that the other nineteen (the oldest of whom was twenty-two) wait until they were thirty-five. Jeffrey, who was owned by Elijah Hogan, earned his freedom, twenty acres “during his natural life,” and a roan mare upon the death of his master. Lewis Conner did not manumit his slaves even at his death, requesting that his executor appraise his slaves and allow them to choose whom they would live with in the future. As slavery became less important economically for white Boone Countians, slaveholding was less important as a socially defining feature of the county’s farmers and businessmen.43

Kentucky’s small population of free blacks survived and occasionally prospered under difficult conditions, as historian Marion B. Lucas argues. A good reputation was crucial to their acceptance by the white community and such acceptance was required if they intended to stay in Kentucky. On or near Dinsmore’s farm, a free black preacher known as John lived and conducted weddings and funerals for African Americans in the neighborhood. The constitution of 1850 attempted to limit the growth of this group, but in the state and in Boone County, the number of free blacks continued to increase slowly in the decades preceding the war. In 1840 there were twenty-seven free blacks in the county; by 1860 that had almost doubled to forty-eight. Local court cases give hints as to how whites and free blacks related to each other in this rural setting on slavery’s border prior to the Civil War. Stephen Bristow and his family were given their freedom by John Bristow’s will in 1835. The executor was also to buy $1,800 worth of land for his family and another free black family to support themselves on, with each family receiving a cow and a wagon. John Bristow’s eventual wish was that they would sell their land and use
the proceeds to settle in Liberia. Stephen purchased land in Boone County and lived among white neighbors until his death in 1852. His will, in which he identified himself proudly as a yeoman, named as his executor W. A. Moxley, one of Bristow’s white neighbors whom he must have respected and trusted.\textsuperscript{44}

Some interactions between blacks and whites, however, were of a more destructive nature. Most white Kentuckians viewed blacks with an anxious foreboding, as if expecting any minute that those who had been maltreated for years would eventually rise up against their oppressors. Even unfounded rumors of an insurrectionary plot confirmed such fears and led to violent reprisals. By the 1840s and 1850s northern abolitionists had become the foremost targets of Kentucky whites during these periodic insurrectionary scares. In northern Kentucky scares occurred in 1838 and 1849, tightening community controls on the local black population. Records from Baptist congregations in Boone County illustrate the use of religion in regulating African Americans in their midst. Citations against stealing pointed to a covert cross-river traffic in goods, but more dangerous was the citation by Robert Huey against the slave Sealy for trying to poison Samuel Huey and his family. Several years later Isabella Dinsmore wrote about “that poor Negro Gabe who was in jail for murder [and] was hung last week.” In 1854 Joel Corbin was prosecuted for having shot a young slave Milton who died from his wound. The cruel nature of the crime was noted in the case file by stating that Corbin “held [Milton] close while he shot.” The disapprobation of his peers led to his being found guilty of murder.\textsuperscript{45}

The most celebrated case of a destructive relationship between a slaveowner and his property is that of the Boone County slave, Margaret Garner. Taking advantage of a
frigid winter that froze the nearby Ohio River solid, in December 1856 Margaret Garner, with her four children, husband, and his parents took a sleigh from the Richwood area of Boone County to Covington, where they crossed the ice to Cincinnati. Heading immediately to her cousin’s house in the Mill Creek area, they stayed too long and were caught by a posse including U.S. marshals. Under the threat of being returned to her owner in Kentucky, Archibald Gaines, Margaret murdered one of her children and was in the process of killing another when she was stopped by an armed posse that included her owner and Cincinnati officials. The drama caught the attention of friends and foes of slavery across the nation as newspapers published accounts of the trial. The light-skinned tones of the three youngest children was noted by observers, suggesting (as did others at the time) that Archibald Gaines was likely their father. The case highlights the fraught relationships between whites and blacks in a county that saw the percentage of mulattoes increase to 28 percent by 1860.46

In such border counties, slaves often lived apart from their spouses, heightening the dangers of sexual abuse against females. The isolation of the women from their menfolk helped to encourage such abuse by white men, but the racial mastery of small slaveholders over their household also contributed. The Margaret Garner story is one that highlights the particularly vulnerable condition of female slaves who were at the mercy of their masters. Dealing primarily with the plantation South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown does not think small slaveholders were any guiltier than planters of using their positions of power to force female slaves into sexual relationships. But in a community like Boone County where small slaveholders had no competition from planters, they likely felt an
exaggerated sense of power, particularly in the West where independence and mastery easily translated violence into acceptable behavior.\(^\text{47}\)

Layers of differences existed between the social environment of Kentucky and the social environment of the Deep South. Lacking the ability to create a community of bondpeople as in Louisiana, Kentucky slaves were drawn into a more intimate connection to their masters and other whites with the potential for positive or negative results. White laborers, able to retain some social independence from their employers, had less independence of action than the free people who worked for Dinsmore on Bayou Black. However, they were taking advantage of the opportunity to save money and work their way up in society. What linked these disparate social groups together was the market economy that was difficult for anyone in Boone County to ignore as they might have done before 1840. With his slave laborers, tenants, and day laborers, Dinsmore was able to cultivate an economic “garden” that flourished, enriching himself while passing along benefits to Cincinnati merchants, local merchants and tradesmen, and most of the laborers themselves, with the obvious exception of the enslaved men and women.
Endnotes

1 Jas. Dinsmore Journal, ca. 1813-14, file 1959, Microfilm, Dinsmore Family Papers (DFP), MS 1016, Dinsmore Homestead Foundation, Burlington, Kentucky; Jas. Dinsmore to William J. Minor, 20 September 1842, DFP.


4 John B. Dinsmore to Jas. Dinsmore, 19 December 1841, DFP; Boone County Historic Preservation Review Board, Historic Structures of Boone County, Kentucky (Burlington, Kentucky: Boone County Fiscal Court, 2002), for log structures see 35, 44, 75, and 82; for brick structures along transportation routes and in towns, see 31, 42, 52, and 97.


6 Upton, 364.


13 Lorena Walsh, “Slave Life, Slave Society and Tobacco Production in the Tidewater Chesapeake, 1620-1820,” in *Cultivation and Culture: Labor and the Shaping of Slave Life in the Americas*, edited by Ira Berlin and Philip D. Morgan (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 193; 1850 and 1860 U.S. census, Boone County, Kentucky, non-population census, agriculture census, Microfilm, Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County (PLCHC), Cincinnati, Ohio. When deciding what was a marketable amount, I felt that fifty pounds of wool and $40 of orchard produce signified the farmer meant to raise enough to sell.


15 Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1840, 1850, and 1860, BCAB.

16 On the settlement of southern Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois by settlers from the Upper South, see the Introduction and first chapter of Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). Examples of this movement can be seen in the Charles Dewey family that lived in Petersburg, Kentucky in 1860. He and his wife were born in Ohio; his eight-year-old son was born in Kentucky; his five-year-old son was born in Ohio; his one-year-old daughter was born in Indiana, and in 1860 he was back in Kentucky. James Riggs lived with his family near Burlington in the same year. He was from Kentucky and his wife was born in Ohio. They had five older children born in Indiana and five younger children born in Kentucky. Both examples are from the 1860 U.S. census, Boone County, Kentucky, population census, PLCHC.

17 21 April 1800, 16 June 1806, 18 May 1807, Boone County Order Book One, Microfilm, Boone County Public Library (BCPL), Burlington, Kentucky; Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1810, Microfilm, BCPL.
The “Germanna Colony of 1717” which established the Hebron Evangelical Lutheran Church of Madison County, Virginia and Some Ancestors of Owen J. Carpenter, Covington, Kentucky, compiled by W. C. Barrickman (Austin, Texas: n.p., 1932), 16-18; (2004); University of Virginia, “Historical Census Browser,” University of Virginia Library, http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/collections/ (22 May 2012); 1850 U.S. census, Boone County, Kentucky, population schedule, Microfilm, Kenton County Public Library (KCPL), Covington, Kentucky.

Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1840, 1850, and 1860, Microfilm, BCPL; 1850 and 1860 U.S. census, Boone County, Kentucky, non-population census, agriculture census, PLCHC.


Susan Dinsmore to Dr. Bartlett, 24 January 1843, Tobias Gibson to Jas. Dinsmore 14 May 1843, and Lydia Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 2 October 1843, DFP.

Isabella Dinsmore, “My Two Homes” (ca. 1845), MS 1018, Flandrau Family Papers (FFP), Microfilm, Dinsmore Homestead Foundation, Burlington, Kentucky; Jas. Dinsmore to ____ , 6 March 1854, DFP.


Isabella Bloomfield to Jas. Dinsmore, 8 August 1842, DFP.


John B. Dinsmore to Jas. Dinsmore, 8 June 1844 and 18 April 1847, DFP; William B. Dinsmore to Jas Dinsmore, 22 July 1854 and 15 January 1855, DFP, Silas Dinsmoor to Peabody, 12 March 1838, Silas Dinsmore Correspondence, MS 40 (2), Dartmouth College (DC); John B. Dinsmore to Jas. Dinsmore, 9 March 1846, DFP; Elizabeth Ramsay to James and Martha M. Dinsmore, 18 May 1844, Isabella Wetherill and Sarah Macomb DePeyster to Martha M. Dinsmore, 17 March 1846, and Isabella Bloomfield to Martha M. Dinsmore, 18 July 1850, DFP.


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the Border West, Missouri Biography Series, ed. William E. Foley (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 43; Diane Mutti Burke, On Slavery’s Border: Missouri’s Small-Slaveholding Households, 1815-1865 (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2010), 107, 118; Phillips, Missouri’s Confederate, 42.

36 Covington Journal, 23 March 1849 and 13 April 1849, Microfilm, KCPL.


38 Tallant, Evil Necessity, 13, 75-76; William Dinsmore to James Dinsmore, 7 July 1850, DFP; Adam Taylor to Julia Dinsmore, 10 September 1892, DFP; Boone County Will Book G, 16, Microfilm, BCPL.

39 Mutti Burke, On Slavery’s Border, 144, 160, 197; Marion B. Lucas, A History of Blacks in Kentucky: From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891 (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992, 2003), 57; 1860 U.S. census, Boone County, Kentucky, slave schedule, PLCHC.

40 Mary Gordon Dinsmoor to Cousin, 11 July 1850, Silas Dinsmoor Papers, MS 40 (2), DC; Boone County Wills, Book E, Microfilm, BCPL; Lucas, A History of Blacks in Kentucky, 51-53.

41 Tallant, Evil Necessity, 4; Mutti Burke, On Slavery’s Border, 197; Isabella Dinsmore to Isabella Hill, ca. 1851, Roll One, DFP.

42 Adam Taylor to Julia Dinsmore, 10 September 1892, DFP; Isabella Dinsmore to Isabella Hill, 29 March 1850 and Isabella Dinsmore to Isabella Hill, 2 January 1852, DFP; Nancy McGruder to Julia Dinsmore, 22 August, 1877, DFP; Sarah G. Flandrau to Patty Selmes, January 1890, Jas. Dinsmore Business Accounts, file 1967, DFP; Mary G. Dinsmoo to “My dear cousin,” 20 October 1851, Silas Dinsmoor Correspondence, MS 40(2), DC; Martha M. Dinsmore to Mary G. Dinsmoo, 20 October 1831, Jas. Dinsmore epitaph for Coah and Winny, file 9, MS 1018, FFP.

43 Christopher Phillips, Freedom’s Port: The African American Community of Baltimore, 1790-1860 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 34-35; Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1840, BCAB; Will Book D 1839-1846, 204 and 15-16, Will Book E 1846-1852, 223-4 and 78, BCAB; Conner vs. Conner, April 1862, Box 37, Boone County Circuit Court Records (BCCC), Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives (KDLA), Frankfort, Kentucky; Lucas, A History of Blacks in Kentucky, 51-53.


Chapter Five

“To Be Once More Free & Enjoy A Quiet Mind”: The Social Economy of Slavery and Freedom

In moving to the most northern section of Kentucky in 1842, James Dinsmore was partly motivated by the “moral waste” of the sugar country of southern Louisiana. But this was not simply a move away from a social environment he found distasteful. It was also a move to an economic environment in which he saw promise. Having endured over a decade of debt brought on by the nature of his sugar planting business and exacerbated by the Panic of 1837, he had become risk-averse, a characteristic that would have been more descriptive of the stereotypically tight-fisted, penny-pinching New Englander than a southern planter. In Boone County, Kentucky, Dinsmore sought the economic independence and life of leisure that had eluded him in the Deep South. Defined by crop diversity and a mixed labor force, this new world was tottering between a social economy of community self-sufficiency and a market economy of plenty.

Dinsmore was not the “rugged individualist” or “the most admired of men” that Harnett T. Kane believed the sugar planter to be. Sugar and cotton planting was not for men who relied on their own resources; they all suffered from the same dependency on
Dinsmore believed he understood the difference between planting and farming and by 1842 he was convinced that farming was preferable. While planting was understood to mean raising cash crops on a large scale, farming in the mid-nineteenth century was often more diversified and was on a smaller scale. Writing to a friend considering a move from Louisiana to Tennessee, Dinsmore advised him to investigate Kentucky because “Tennessee is too far north for planting & too far south for farming.” Sugar planting was stressful and risky, and required huge outlays of capital and large numbers of enslaved laborers. By contrast, farming was less capital- and labor-intensive, and allowed for more direct decision-making by the farmer. According to *The Practical Farmer*, a book Dinsmore purchased, “There is no class who place more entire reliance on their own skill than farmers.” Agricultural magazines of the day promoted the idea that farming gave a man economic independence: cities might depend on farmers, but farmers depended on no one. An overstatement in a time when the market revolution pressured local, regional, and even national markets, it fed into a Jeffersonian narrative that American agriculturists, North and South, wanted to believe: real freedom, and with it virtue, was to be found in the countryside.
The move to northern Kentucky brought with it several advantages that were likely uppermost in Dinsmore’s mind. His wife’s relatives in New York suggested the family move somewhere in their locality but he chose not to take their advice. He might also have moved to a frontier area farther west, taking advantage of cheaper land and more fertile soil, but he chose otherwise. In moving to northern Kentucky, he would be settling in an area where the soil was perhaps not as used up as in New York, but the farm would not require the physical labor of the southwestern frontier. He would escape the cash crop nexus of the Deep South and have some freedom in choosing the crops and livestock he wanted on his diversified farm, while still retaining the use of slave labor. The type of farming he would take up would not require the labor of large numbers of slaves as in Louisiana, freeing him of the heavy reliance on bonded labor and allowing him instead to create a mixed and more versatile labor force of slaves, tenants, and day laborers. Although Dinsmore was surrendering the potential for great riches in the sugar fields, the sale of his half of Bayou Black plantation and the hiring of the remainder of his slaves enabled him to move to Kentucky as a gentleman farmer, with enough acreage and bondpeople to manipulate the labor of those who worked on the farm to ensure a comfortable lifestyle for himself and his family. Having described sugar planting as “hard work and little profit,” Dinsmore now concentrated his efforts on scientific agriculture and eking out a measure of pleasure from his farming.3

When Dinsmore moved to Kentucky, he exchanged half of a two-thousand-acre plantation for a seven hundred acre farm and replaced a labor force of eighty bondmen with that of eleven bondmen, seven of whom were under the age of sixteen. Nevertheless, he was able to create a diversified farm in Kentucky whose structure was a
function of his personal interests and the influence of local and regional markets. His Boone County farm reflected his location in a hybrid society that had the characteristics of both a social economy, with its community ties and obligations, and a market economy for those who looked outward for their own personal advantage. It was a society where farmers might still choose how involved they wanted to be in the regional market, although everyone was involved to some degree.

With plenty of ambitious planters seeking opportunities in the emerging Southwest, Dinsmore was able to dispose advantageously of his half of the plantation and start up his new operations in Kentucky. In 1842 he had found a buyer for his portion of the Bayou Black plantation. Van P. Winder agreed to pay thirty-six thousand dollars for the place, accepting Dinsmore’s mortgage at the bank for almost four thousand dollars and paying him $2,250 in cash on purchase. The remaining $30,000 was to be paid in six annual installments. Three of those installments, totaling sixteen thousand dollars, were to be paid to William J. Minor to dispose of Dinsmore’s debts to him, and Dinsmore would receive the balance over the course of the next few years. He sold approximately twenty of his slaves and hired out another twenty to Minor to continue working on the plantation under Winder’s management. Minor would pay Dinsmore about one thousand dollars per year for their use. This arrangement guaranteed that he would start out in Boone County society near the top of its slaveowners and landowners. Before Winder’s notes came due Dinsmore relied on Minor’s payments for the hired slaves to keep his family furnished with the material goods he believed they required. Several years into the arrangement, Winder sold his interest in the plantation to Minor who then owned two thousand acres, and he took up Winder’s notes to Dinsmore. He, in turn used the money
to increase his Kentucky holdings to over eight hundred acres, complete the construction of his house, and purchase a farm in Carroll County. Dinsmore was acting out his plans for “arcadian” farm life.4

Dinsmore’s designs for Walnut Ridge had been fermenting in his mind for some time. Mentioning his desire to move to Kentucky in 1834, he wrote his uncle that his own plans for a farm there “has taken a strange hold on my imagination.” But it was not only the crops he would raise that enticed him. Two years later he complained, “I feel mightily cramped [and] hedged up in this low country and want to get on a hill where I can see out.” Frank Owsley contends that farming migrants tended to seek out similar landscape, climate, and soil for their new settlement. Dinsmore had not been a farmer in his New England youth, but he enjoyed the landscape and considered the knobs of Boone County a worthy successor to the hilly terrain of Londonderry, New Hampshire. By 1837 he had “become…enamoured of Arcadian scenes and sheep farming.” Before moving his family onto the farm in June 1842 Dinsmore had been directing his cousin, Thomas, on his plans for planting. As early as 1840, his wife wrote of his impatience at delays in moving to Kentucky: “Dear Husband seems to feel the disappointment more than any of us. He had set his affections so much upon carrying out his beautiful theorems of farming on his new place that he appears disgusted with the labor, toil and strife necessary in southern planting.” He was more optimistic about his chances to make a living at farming than were some of his peers. A friend from Terrebonne Parish also considered a move to a farm in Kentucky, but lacked Dinsmore’s optimism, “I do not expect to make money by the operation (sic) but only to keep what I have got,” he wrote.5
Walking the growing sectional line, Dinsmore considered himself a learned, or “scientific” farmer, both of which figured prominently into seeing himself as a gentleman farmer. He viewed Kentucky as a propitious location for such an undertaking. Many southerners viewed the scientific agriculture movement in the North as incompatible with slave society and potentially subversive. In the debates leading up to the creation of a Department of Agriculture, northern congressmen conflated ideas of free labor and scientific agriculture, to the distaste of their southern counterparts who feared the weakening of slavery anywhere in the South. But one of Dinsmore’s favorite journals, *Country Gentleman*, read widely by farmers in the North and the Upper South, found that Kentucky farms relying on slave labor compared favorably with those in Ohio and Indiana. The journal’s correspondent described farmers in southern Indiana as “miserably indolent . . . they seem to raise almost nothing, and what they do raise they don’t take care of.” He found it surprising that farming in Ohio and Indiana was so “slovenly and unprofitable” when cultivation in Kentucky, by contrast, was “better in everything than in Ohio.” This he ascribed to the presence of slaves.6

“Scientific” farming appealed particularly to Dinsmore even before he moved to Kentucky. His books and journals were filled with testimonies of other farmers and their successes and failures. In Louisiana he was interested in testing new products and crops. He ordered olive trees to be planted on his Bayou Black plantation so he could extract the oil and sell it. With its leisure time for reading and discussion, Dinsmore accumulated a good deal of such information during steamboat travel. In 1829 he wrote of one such trip: “Pass the time in reading the *American Farmer* – Mem. Remember to call on Wm. Partridge No. 45 Fulton Street N.Y. [and] get some seeds of the woad, weld madder &c.
–read his book on dyeing[,] the cultivation of those plants &c.” A few days later: “Find on board the boat a Mr. Flanagan who lives 30 miles west of Cincinnati . . . . He has an oil mill which he informs me makes 2 barrels pr. day of 25 gallons each worth 62 ½ cents pr. gallon. Of this he calculates that 1 barrel is clear profit or about $22 pr. day!!” Dinsmore viewed his move to Kentucky as one large scientific endeavor that would allow him the freedom to plant what he chose. In a letter to his uncle as he was contemplating his move north, he explained, “I wish to make a fair experiment with [the grape] vine [and] in the raising of sheep.” Conducting an “experiment” was an intellectual endeavor and was therefore more appealing than actually planting the vines and shearing the sheep.  

Agricultural journals were one source of information for scientific farmers like Dinsmore who were concerned about the continued fertility of their land and the improvement of their vineyards, orchards, and livestock, something he believed set him apart from his neighbors. Writing to Henry Ward Beecher for a subscription to the Western Farmer & Gardener, Dinsmore lamented that “unfortunately too many of our farmers believe in the moon and do not believe in Book Farming.” The journals discussed the latest machinery for ploughing and threshing, and recipes for a variety of animal and plant cures. He attempted raising mulberry bushes and silk after moving to Kentucky and he also experimented in madder for making dyes. The agricultural journals he subscribed to satisfied his curiosity on these topics. But journals were not the only sources he consulted. Numerous books in his library cover specific topics relating to the crops and animals he raised, including A. J. Downing’s, The Fruits and Fruit Trees of America, Andrew S. Fuller’s, The Grape Culturist, and Henry W. Elsowrth’s, American
Swine Breeder. He also occasionally purchased annual reports from the Commissioner of Agriculture, and subscribed to The Dollar Farmer, The American Farmer, and The Country Gentleman. The purpose of these journals was to improve the view of farmers by other segments of American society, but Dinsmore did not read them for that reason. Naturally curious, he viewed farming as an open-ended enterprise, one that could be altered each year depending on the crops that were needed by emerging markets or those currently fed by foreign goods. Journals and books provided him with the current information such an endeavor required and they reinforced his perception of himself as a successful, progressive farmer.  

Scientific agriculture also called for strict cost and time accounting, both of which Dinsmore practiced. The editor of The Practical Farmer, Edward James Hooper, suggested farmers use regular accounts to track their daily transactions: “The advantages of clear accounts are obvious in every pursuit of life.” Dinsmore did not keep a regular account of his livestock or the weather, but he did keep double-column accounts of all cash and barter transactions by day, transferring these to individual accounts for the various people involved. He also closely monitored the hours and days worked by his hired hands. He had kept such business records on his Louisiana plantation, and while not the standard for Boone County landowners he continued the practice. He surely supported Hooper’s call for the founding of schools to teach the skills of farming, “where the students of agriculture may practically acquire a knowledge of the art and science of farming combined, is a most desirable object, and cannot fail to prove highly useful to the community.” Finally realized during the Civil War in the passage of the Morrill Land
Grants for higher education, Dinsmore’s support for such schools put him and other Kentucky scientific farmers at odds with southern planters.9

There were other Boone Countians who shared Dinsmore’s interest in the latest farming equipment and husbandry techniques. Reforms in agriculture were usually led by the large landowners because they were the ones who had the resources to experiment with breeding animals, to acquire and test new equipment, and subscribe to the latest journals on farming topics. A court case in 1864 illustrates that a few men believed that most Boone County farmers with money eagerly took advantage of state-of-the-art farming equipment. The case was to settle a patent for a seed-sowing machine that was bought by two young non-farmers to sell in a five-county radius that included Boone County. In the deposition of a local farmer he referred to the machine as “an old fogee humbug.” He thought the two men were deceived into purchasing the patent because as a farmer he knew that newer seed drills did a much better job, and doubted their seed sowers could be sold in the county. When asked whether even out-dated machinery could still be valuable to some men, he gave the example of plows having advanced so much in recent years that it would be folly to “undertake to manufacture even the old Peacock plow for Boone Co[untiy].”10

The value farmers in Boone County placed on new farm equipment is substantiated by the amount of capital they were willing to invest in machinery. Though Kentucky ranked sixth among slaveholding states for the value of farm equipment in 1860, Boone Countians invested over one hundred thousand dollars, the highest in northern Kentucky. Kenton and Campbell County were significantly lower and even the predominantly farming counties of Grant and Gallatin spent less than half of what Boone
County farmers spent. Purchases of new equipment had the potential to create great interest in the community. In Petersburg, Lewis A. Loder noted in his journal in 1859 that “men went out to look at” the new mowing machine that J. C. Jenkins purchased. Four years later he wrote that “two men [were working] in Berkshires field baling hay with a Portable press.” Dinsmore, like Jenkins, was interested in the newest farming improvements, and in 1860 his agricultural implements were valued at six hundred eighty dollars, more than all but seven of his fellow farmers in the county. He bought a Seymour Grain Drill in 1857 for seventy-five dollars, and two years later he purchased a Buckeye Mower from Canton, Ohio, for one hundred and twenty-five dollars. Not all Boone Countians believed it was necessary to invest in expensive farming equipment and the lack of interest in machine power was not limited to the county’s poorer farmers. Whereas Nicholas Rouse, who raised seven thousand pounds of tobacco in 1860 (a considerable amount for the county), valued his equipment at two hundred dollars and Lewis Webb, who owned five hundred eighty acres, valued his farm equipment at a mere fifty dollars, Simeon Tanner owned farm equipment worth five hundred dollars for his much smaller ninety-acre farm.11

Northern Kentucky lies too far north for cash crops like sugar, rice, and cotton, but it is far enough south to enjoy long growing seasons advantageous for a variety of crops. Most farms in Kentucky were a mixture of grains, tobacco, and livestock, diversity that historian Todd H. Barnett links to the Chesapeake migration to the Bluegrass at the turn of the nineteenth century. The crops these Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina farmers brought with them—namely, tobacco and hemp—were a reflection of their culture, and they transferred the crops and techniques for their
cultivation intact as they moved farther west to Kentucky and Missouri. Some of them also traveled to the new country with a reliance on slave labor they viewed as the “marrow of freedom.” These white men considered themselves westerners and bore the insecurities of their future in the expanding market economy that melded them with settlers from other parts of the country. With a diverse selection of crops that included typically southern ones (tobacco and hemp) but also northern ones (wheat, oats, and fruit), the slave state of Kentucky was not firmly tied to the states of the South.¹²

Agricultural diversification as a facet of westernness, was magnified by economic isolation during Kentucky’s early years of development. Moving crops eastward over the Appalachians was not a realistic option for most settlers in the new region. Instead, they relied on the western waterways to transport their crops, taking them down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to Natchez and New Orleans. Until steamboats came into service in the second decade of the 1800s even this trade was difficult and time consuming but it served the needs of those farmers who had crops to sell. Jay’s Treaty temporarily put an end to the trade, but this isolation had a somewhat salutary effect on the development of the state. Ulrich B. Phillips notes the importance of this isolation in distinguishing the Bluegrass State from its parent state, Virginia. Kentucky was forced to diversify not only its foodstuffs but also its early manufactories. Unlike many of the eastern states in their earliest development, Kentucky quickly became its own marketplace, with industries, commerce, and agriculture. The trade that people sent both north and south after the frontier stage reinforced a national identity as opposed to a more restricted southern or western identity. And Kentuckians’ own awareness of how they differed economically
and socially from the plantation South certainly buttressed their view of themselves as westerners.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite its middle location, Kentucky shared characteristics with upcountry regions of the South that also had few slaves and less reliance on cash crop production. Steven Hahn found that yeoman farmers there created a distinct culture based on their interactions with the market. Creating a more communal society than their low-country brethren, they retained an independent yet egalitarian mindset in their relations with each other. Similarly, in his study of two western counties in Virginia, John T. Schlotterbeck has found they exhibited characteristics that placed them between the cash crop economy of the South and the free labor farms of the North that were rapidly becoming a part of the market economy. Orange and Greene Counties, as a result of the dislocations of the Revolutionary War, turned inward and began producing, not just for their own households or distant markets, but for the communities. These “social economies” were networks of trade and exchange of agricultural produce, services, and manufactured goods that girded small self-sufficient communities within each county. Thomas D. Clark discovered just such a communal nature of farming in the rural areas of the Outer Bluegrass, despite farmers’ boastings of independence and individualism. These Kentuckians strongly emphasized self-reliance and the maintenance of positive social relationships, characteristics of a diverse agricultural base and of a social economy that emphasized community self-sufficiency, without completely shutting itself off from external markets.\textsuperscript{14}

Its maturing manufacturing sector perhaps most distinguished the economy of northern Kentucky from states in the plantation South. Covington, located in Kenton
County across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, was the home to tobacco warehouses, rope walks, as well as mills for lumber and grains. Over the years, tailors, cabinetmakers, bakers, brewers, and masons, among other skilled artisans, filled out its manufacturing subsectors. By 1860, there were several rolling mills for pig iron, confectioners, furniture makers, cigar factories, and a wheat fan manufacturer adding to its industry. Not only were trades becoming more diverse, they were drawing in more laborers. In 1860, 954 laborers were employed in the more than one hundred manufactories in Covington. The largest were Philips & Son’s rolling mill, employing 220 men, and W. B. Woodler & Company, which employed seventy-five workers to process chewing tobacco.\textsuperscript{15}

Manufacturing in Boone County increased during the antebellum years though not on the same scale as neighboring Kenton County. The amount of investment men were willing to expend on a business that supported—and was supported by—an agricultural community, illustrates the belief of some in the county that their community needed their services. In terms of value produced, the largest business in the county was the distillery at Petersburg, a few miles upriver from Dinsmore’s farm. Originally owned by William Snyder before the Civil War, this outward-looking business was one of the few that was powered by steam. Employing sixteen men in the mill and distillery, Snyder produced flour and whiskey worth about eighty thousand dollars in 1850. A decade later, this had increased to over two hundred thousand dollars. Financial troubles and the Civil War led to the sale of his company but this did not diminish its success. Appleton & Company owned the business in 1870 and it remained the most productive concern in the county.\textsuperscript{16}

The growing investment in Boone County’s manufacturing sector and the diverse but agricultural nature of those establishments reflects the strength of the social
economies present, even while some individuals, like Snyder, were looking beyond the county to wider markets. In 1850, sixty-four thousand dollars were invested in various enterprises; this grew to ninety-two thousand dollars by 1860 and to over $130,000 in 1870. However, most businesses remained typically rural businesses, like blacksmithing, wagonmaking, and saw and grist mills. By 1870 there were tailors using sewing machines, a cigar manufacturer, and two carriage-making companies, businesses that were still compatible with a social economy. Comparatively, Kenton and Campbell counties invested much more in manufacturing and had a wider array of factories and businesses. But farther south and east, Crittenden, Grant, and Bracken counties were more agricultural than even Boone. The county had developed the “distinct local artisan class and service sector with a low level of specialization,” that characterized Schlotterbeck’s social economy and differentiated it from self-sufficient households.17

In the Virginia backcountry, a three-tier economy existed, consisting of mutually supportive farmers, agriculturally-based artisans, and home-manufacturing establishments. These self-sufficient social economies, so named because of the way they tied the society together, strengthened small communities on the periphery of the plantation South. In such an economy people were bound together by the services they provided for others and the payment they made for services rendered to them. Boone County exhibited some of these features, with farmers taking their tobacco to the local manufactories, and grains to the local mills or distillery, and purchasing most, if not all, of their household goods and even some wagons and carriages locally. Most people in Boone County had no need to travel to Cincinnati.18
The work routines of the individual farms, if based on Dinsmore’s experience and documents, were often long-term cash-valued transactions, creating dependence between the farmers, laborers, tenants, merchants, and manufacturers in Boone County similar to the social economies of western Virginia. While Dinsmore assigned every transaction a cash value, cash was rarely exchanged. Even as he charged Samuel Gibbs thirty-seven cents for half a peck of corn and Mr. Grenat one dollar for using his team to mow, these transactions were used to offset the labor these men performed on his farm. Once or twice annually, when Dinsmore settled his accounts with his laborers, he deducted all such charges and if he still owed his laborers money, he wrote them a note on the local store for that value. Similarly, when the blacksmith, Spencer, sharpened his plows, Dinsmore sold him meat or fruit of identical value or sent him to the store to purchase goods. In August 1855, in an account that had not been settled for over a year, Daniel Koons owed Dinsmore for several items, including corn that Dinsmore had purchased for him from a neighbor, John Walton, and for the work of a “Dutchman,” another Dinsmore tenant. In return Dinsmore owed Koons for his work—building a stone wall, mowing oats, and repairing fences were some of the tasks he performed. For Walton’s part, he too benefited from the many workers his neighbor employed. His account with Dinsmore for 1855 included a debt owed to him by Peter Deck and thirty pounds of beef bought by August Bohen. Dinsmore accepted both debts on behalf of these two tenants and charged them against the labor these men performed. Walton owed Dinsmore for cash that Dinsmore had paid on behalf of Walton to a tenant, Baltzen. Thus Dinsmore was at the center of a cash-based barter economy that drew in not only his tenants and day laborers, but also his neighbors.19
Not content with the constraints of this inward-looking economy, Dinsmore and other large landowners used access to the river to integrate more fully into the regional market economy than farmers further inland. Moreover, this river county had the advantage of being located close to the regional hub of Cincinnati, where luxury items could be purchased with the proceeds of crop sales. This gave choices to more productive farmers of Boone County and tied them more closely to Ohio than to much of their own state. The letters of Jonas Crisler, a Boone County farmer, to his children during the two decades before the Civil War suggest how focused his energies were on the regional market. He consistently made note of the Cincinnati prices of various goods that affected his farming decisions, including corn, wheat, and bacon, indicating the growing importance of local news to farming. In 1837 he was worried about his twenty-five fattening hogs because “we have no market it appears at this time for anything.” Several years later, the prices picked up, though “money is scarce.” In the early 1850s, Crisler was feeding 65 hogs for the Cincinnati market. Cincinnati was not the only market Boone County farmers used to their advantage. Lewis A. Loder observed that the Petersburg mill sent flour to Memphis and Loder himself bought bourbon from a St. Louis boat that was steaming upriver.20

This integration with larger markets in Cincinnati and elsewhere buffered those farmers from downturns in the local economy more than in plantation states, including New Orleans and surrounding parishes in Louisiana. Dinsmore and his neighbors had sent their crops to the Crescent City exclusively. There, his product was weighed, stored, and sold by factors, who took orders for finished products to furnish his plantation home and pork and corn to sustain the labor force. By working through agents in New Orleans,
planters dissuaded local artisans and yeoman farmers in Terrebonne Parish from supplying the needs of their planter neighbors. Large plantations in turn inhibited the growth of skilled trades and merchants because the large number of slaves could not fill the role of consumers like yeoman farmers could.21

Dinsmore tied himself more closely to Cincinnati and other river markets than his tenants and the small landowners in the county, but probably no more so than other large landowners, particularly those who lived in close proximity to the river or the Lexington Turnpike, which ran through the eastern edge of the county on its way to Covington and Cincinnati. He relied on the large city to sell corn, wheat, rye, and oats, and to replenish his orchard and vineyard with new varieties of fruit trees and new Catawba grapevine cuttings, the produce of which he sold in Cincinnati or Indiana. No records exist for Dinsmore’s profit from the apples but he sold them in barrels, made hard cider from them (some of which was used to pay the tenants), and produced vinegar. In 1862 he received $105 from the produce of his one hundred peach trees and he also raised pear, plum, quince, and cherry trees. Dinsmore’s interest in livestock mostly involved sheep and hogs.22

Boone County farmers generally shared Dinsmore’s appreciation for diversification and his reliance on local and urban markets. Besides a variety of grains, they also marketed their orchard produce and wool. Boone County ranked second in the state in the value of its orchard production in 1850. The profitability of this sector and the desire of farmers to react to the market is clear in the increase of farmers raising orchard produce: in 1850, 33 percent of county farmers sold orchard produce and a decade later 47 percent did. According to historian, Paul W. Gates, producing fruit was
most profitable when there was a middle-class market within close proximity like Cincinnati. In 1848, the *Daily Times* in Cincinnati reinforced Gates’s emphasis on a local urban market: “Apples, grapes and plums are not scarce nor poor, and yet the price keeps at nearly famine pitch.” Dinsmore shipped apples, which had a longer life than most fruits, from Cincinnati to New Orleans, and by 1880 the farm would have a thousand apple trees, most of them planted years earlier. Additionally, a number of farmers raised flax, hemp, bees, and grapes. Wool was also popular in Boone County but the percentage of farmers raising sheep dropped prior to the Civil War: in 1850 a remarkable 61 percent of landowners raised enough wool to sell, but ten years later that figure had dropped to 47 percent and in 1870 and 1880 the figure remained below 30 percent. Even though “brought a better price in relation to bulk than any other commodity the northern farmer raised,” farmers were often dissatisfied with their marketing options and the amount of land required for raising sheep might have convinced many to put it to better use.²³

Yeoman farmers were more likely to isolate themselves from the market than large slaveholders. In 1860 Kentucky had the second-highest value of home manufactures. Only Tennessee had a higher value, and North Carolina was a close third. Within Kentucky, though, the picture is a little different. Even though Boone County had a higher percentage of bondpeople than most of its neighbors, it also produced more home manufactures (over thirteen thousand dollars’ worth) than those counties. These small-slaveowning yeoman farmers were able to use their bondmen to produce much of what the household needed. So, as the slave population decreased, the value of home manufactures followed. The value of such manufactures dropped significantly from 1850 when it was valued at more than twenty-two thousand dollars to 1870 when it fell just
short of two thousand dollars. The yeoman farmers of Boone County were definitely replacing their home manufactures with those of county and urban artisans and merchants, and they were simultaneously divesting themselves of their slave property.24

Unlike in the central Bluegrass, tobacco was not a major crop for large landowners in late antebellum Boone County. Those who tended to raise it were small landowners or tenants, who would then sell it to local tobacconists. Sixteen percent of landowners chose to raise tobacco in 1850 and though this increased to 28 percent in 1860, it dropped back to 12 percent in 1870. The increase prior to the Civil War was likely a reflection of the increase in the domestic consumption of the product during those decades and the growing presence of local processing of tobacco in the county and in Covington. That large landowners chose not to devote their time to the crop may have been a result of the falling price of that crop in the 1830s and 1840s. A “poor man’s standby,” it did not require much up-front investment and could be profitable on a small piece of land. This moniker accurately reflects the case in Boone County prior to the Civil War. In the 1850 agricultural census, mostly small landowners and tenant farmers raised tobacco. With no land and no slaves, Simon Bondurant raised a thousand pounds of the crop (approximately a hogshead); Jackson Kearns raised two thousand pounds with only forty-one acres, and Ezekiel Eddings, the owner of fifty acres, raised three thousand pounds. Henry Wake did own slaves (a mother and her two small children), and he raised over a thousand pounds of tobacco on rented land. These and other results of the census indicate that land ownership did not necessarily lead to cash crop production and the ownership of slaves did not necessarily dictate cash crop production.25
Always on the lookout for marketable goods, by the mid-1850s Dinsmore had several of his neighbors raising osier willows on their bottom lands along Middle Creek. Soon after moving to Boone County, he had found a market for willows in Cincinnati and had begun raising them and selling them in the city. By 1853 the men he had working for him were mostly Germans, reflecting the cultural nature of basket-making in the region. These men moved onto the Dinsmore farm and into the neighborhood, likely coming from the Over-the-Rhine area in Cincinnati. They built a basket shop on Dinsmore’s property where they turned the finished willows into large clothes and market baskets that were sold to markets along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. The harvesting of the willows in the winter was not as labor intensive as peeling them, so Dinsmore paid men, women, children, and slaves to peel the willows in the spring and summer. When it came time to craft the baskets, men from Cincinnati boarded a boat for Boone County and Dinsmore paid their passage, rent, and board at the various tenant cabins while the market and clothes baskets were constructed. In 1853, Dinsmore adjusted Frederick Naegle’s account for seven weeks of boarding for Andrew (perhaps a son), eight weeks board for John Bletz, and nine weeks board for Christopher Smidt. Collecting half of the profits from the sales of these baskets in addition to his other crops, Dinsmore was able to furnish his house with appropriate furniture, books, china, and a piano, an expensive and rare item in antebellum Boone County.26

Like his affluent neighbors, most of the furnishings in the Dinsmore home came from Cincinnati and though they were not always of the finest craftsmanship, they were quality items for an upper middle-class family. The county probate inventories tell the story of the relationship between some landowners and nearby cities like Cincinnati.
While china and mirrors were becoming more common, paintings and books were also appearing more often. Specialty items such as “venetian blinds,” an “8 day clock,” and a “patent silver server” were also noted; items only to be had in a city the size of Cincinnati. Also, it was these landowning men who possessed, on their death, assets in the form of notes of credit on their family and neighbors. In a time of scarce specie and uninsured banking, lending money to others at ten percent interest was a welcome investment if you could afford it. Fellow Boone County farmer Daniel James had notes worth over three thousand dollars on his death, mostly belonging to family members. Smaller landowners and the landless were less likely to own much furniture and less likely to have loaned out money to their neighbors. Johnson Story owned no land in 1840, the year before he died, and had most of his wealth in livestock and crops of tobacco, corn, and rye. He held one twenty-dollar note, but owned little furniture and nothing that might be considered a luxury item. Thomas Moxley had even fewer assets than Story, though he could sign his name while Story used an “X”. With no stock animals and no crops, Moxley did have a mirror, picture, and candle stand.27

On his diversified and outward-looking farm, Dinsmore relied on a mixed labor force that included bondmen, semi-skilled, and unskilled tenants and day laborers. It was a smaller and whiter labor force than what he had utilized in Louisiana, and though they could be just as contentious and independent as the laborers in Louisiana, they did little to challenge his status as a wealthy landowner and they helped him to fulfill his role in the social economy of the community. The world he created on his farm was one of interdependence between and among the various groups that lived there while there was simultaneously an uneasy dependence of all groups on him. For the white workers, there
was the promise of future independence for motivation. Dinsmore was not unique in his mixed labor force—free and unfree, black and white—but the meticulous records he kept indicate that on his farm the chasm between the groups was not so wide.

The profitability of a farm was not a function of the kind of labor force a farmer utilized. James Corbin owned a five-hundred-acre farm in 1850 worth ten thousand dollars that he worked with his twenty-two-year-old son, Benjamin, and ten slaves. Two of the slaves were males over the age of ten and five were females of the same age bracket. These laborers would have made life easier for Corbin who was sixty years old, but were they necessary? His neighbor, Pryor B. Cloud, was twenty years younger and had a somewhat smaller farm than Corbin, three hundred seventy acres, though worth more at eleven thousand dollars. He worked his farm with no bondpeople. His children were too young to provide any labor yet but his household consisted of a twenty-four-year-old male relative who was perhaps a brother, and two Irish laborers. Both Corbin and Cloud were able to send their children to school, but Cloud’s children would have had less interaction and experience with slave labor.28

Distinguishing themselves from large slaveholders in the Deep South, many slaveholders in Boone County worked side-by-side with their slaves and tenants. Laban Lodge, listing six persons engaged in agriculture, had only two slaves, one male and one female, both between the ages of ten and twenty-four. He also had six white males in his household, four over the age of ten. Those four young men, plus the bondman and himself likely worked side-by-side in the fields. William Kirtley listed twelve people engaged in farming, but he could count on the labor of at least four enslaved males, and three young white men. He may have included himself in the number and he may have

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included some of the five young slaves who were under the age of ten. Again, though, even with a total of fourteen bondpeople, he and members of his family were doing some of the labor alongside the slaves. In some cases women were expected to help in the fields although this does not seem to be the case in most households (at least the heads of household were unlikely to publicly claim their wife’s or daughters’ labor in the fields). John Jones owned no slaves but was fortunate enough to have six males in his household and three females, excluding himself and his wife. He counted five people engaged in agriculture, one in trade, and one at sea. Since he was over fifty years old, Jones likely relied on the labor of one or more of his daughters as the season required. The family was indeed an important part of farming in Boone County even with a slave presence.29

Paying wages of twelve dollars per month in the summer and less in the winter, Dinsmore benefited from the large numbers of landless whites in Boone County and they occasionally benefited from their labor on his farm. When the German immigrants were not working on the baskets or tending to their own crops they helped perform the work necessary to keep the farm going; tasks that included repairing fences, fixing water gaps, cleaning barns, rinsing and shearing the hundred or more sheep and goats, filling the ice house, slaughtering the hogs, and working in the garden. Over time, as Dinsmore became less mobile because of rheumatism, the tenants took over work in the orchard and the vineyard. Some of the men who at one time lived on Dinsmore’s farm eventually came to be small landowners themselves or they purchased town lots in Belleview Bottoms nearby. In this way Dinsmore helped to sustain a rather vibrant social economy. Daniel Koons claimed one hundred dollars in personal property in 1860. The basket makers moved on also, some to local towns in the county and others further away. They would
have, like Koons, enjoyed a new independent status and would no longer have to wait for Dinsmore to pay them twice each year. They might have even employed others to work under them. August Bohen in 1860, listed as a farmhand in the census, claimed four hundred dollars in real property and two hundred fifty dollars in personal property. Ten years later, John Deck, another basket maker had twelve hundred dollars in real property and one thousand dollars in personal property. Others were similarly taking advantage of the labor market to increase their economic status.  

For Dinsmore, who did not work in the fields, the tenants formed the backbone of his labor force and the arrangements he made with them exhibit all the variety possible in such agreements. Some of the arrangements incorporated more independence and mastery than others; all arrangements were written up and enforced by Dinsmore, reinforcing his position at the center of the social economy he created. Historians note the independence such agreements gave the landless, even as it signaled their visual dependence on the landowners. The agreements Dinsmore made with his tenants were likely similar to those made by other Boone County landowners. In 1842 Charles Simmons leased a cabin and land from Dinsmore, who would provide Simmons the seed, horses, oxen, and even a young male slave to help him raise a crop. Simmons was to work “industriously” and hire “a good [and] efficient man” to help him. His payment to Dinsmore was to be made with half the crop and he further agreed to make himself available to Dinsmore at the going rate (twelve dollars a month in the summer) when he was not working for himself. Dinsmore was drawing Simmons into the community of equal whites and enabling him to perhaps someday establish himself as a landowner, provided he work “industriously.” Another type of tenant agreement Dinsmore made
also allowed for some independence. David Hickman and Andrew Ricketts rented land on the farm for two years beginning in 1846 with garden plots provided. In return they were expected to log the nearby timber and have it ready for passing steamboats. They were paid as the wood was cut and also received a fraction of what the boats paid. Dinsmore would have occasional contact with these men but they primarily worked on their own. Like Simmons though, he provided them with the opportunity to succeed.\textsuperscript{31}

Dinsmore also hired day laborers for specific tasks or during harvest. Some of the tasks he paid non-tenants to complete included semi-skilled and unskilled labor. John R. Spencer, a carpenter by trade, was hired by Dinsmore to construct or repair buildings. He hired John Schofield, a weaver, to make coverlets, floor coverings, and jeans. Blacksmiths were, of course, in constant need. Other local men filled in roles that required little skill other than a knowledge of farming. Samuel Gibbs cut fence rails and built fencing, for which he was paid with potatoes, corn, wheat, pork, and salt. Additionally Dinsmore paid Gibbs’s blacksmith bill for which Gibbs reimbursed him with work. In the end, after three years of running an account, Dinsmore settled with Gibbs and owed him $32.98 in cash. And even though Dinsmore and his family relied on the Cincinnati market for their silver eating utensils and their damask cloth, Dinsmore purchased a good deal of the everyday items his family required from local merchants, at times running up his credit to well over one hundred dollars. Portions of his payments to his hired laborers and tenants also included credit at the local store, which benefited the local store when he finally paid his account.\textsuperscript{32}

By the 1850s, the basket makers were an important segment of Dinsmore’s labor force but their position on the farm was ambiguous. In one sense, the men were tenants
just like the illiterate poor farmers that had been born in the United States. They worked side-by-side with the bondmen and they lived in primitive log cabins. Additionally, similar to other tenants, the German immigrants always had access to slave labor as is indicated in the business records: “Coah working in the garden[,] Isaac with the Dutchmen.” That is where the similarities end. Presumably coming from Cincinnati, these men had more access to the outside world and traveled back and forth. The accounts Dinsmore kept with them often ran into the hundreds of dollars and he occasionally borrowed money from them, both signs that these relationships were a departure from the typical farmer-farm laborer relationship. For example, the credits to Frederick Naegle’s account over a year and a half amounted to over five hundred dollars and included providing board for laborers who worked in the basket shop, purchasing a coat for the slave, Isaac, and payments made to him for the willows. Dinsmore debited his account with wine made on the property, meat, pork, apples, and notes on a Cincinnati establishment. The historian, T. Stephen Whitman found that in Baltimore, Maryland free white labor was not demeaned by working closely with black labor as long as whites were paid more or treated better than African Americans. Because Dinsmore did not keep accounts for the slaves as he had in Louisiana or compensate them on a regular basis for their labor the inequality between the two groups was reinforced by the contours of the arrangements. The use of the term “Dutchmen” also highlights the fact that Dinsmore obviously separated himself from these men even as he individually referred to some of them by using the formal “Mr.” rather than simply their last names which was the common address reserved for other tenants. Respected for their skills as craftsmen, Dinsmore clearly was not prepared to treat them as equals.33
The particular social economy of Walnut Ridge was one where slave hiring and tenant hiring were transactions made not with the intent to make money but with the goal of crop production. In deducting the labor of a “Dutchman” from the account of Daniel Koons, he and Koons (who was not a “Dutchman”) were acknowledging that the labor of the German immigrants was Dinsmore’s to dispose of as he wished. While landowning white men chose whether or not to help their neighbors and friends, Dinsmore was the referee for all those he employed. If the act of a slaveowner providing a bondman to help a tenant with general farming tasks can be interpreted as a part of the social economy that existed in parts of the South prior to the Civil War, then certainly the act of a landowner providing his tenants with the help of other tenants can be seen in the same light. But the lending of slave labor added another dimension to the transaction. It allowed the tenants to share directly in white supremacy. In doing this, Dinsmore fostered a dependence of the tenants on himself not just as a landowner but also as a slaveowner. Tenants who might never have owned a slave themselves could now, through the benevolence of a slaveholder, experience the mastery that race brought with it. This type of slave-hiring was substantially different from that practiced in Bourbon County, Kentucky, where it was a profit-based transaction. Bourbon County had a much larger proportion of slaves than did Boone County and farmers there, like Brutus J. Clay, had far more slaves than they could judiciously make use of on their diversified farms. When they hired them out, they did not do so for short periods of time, like Dinsmore, they hired them out on yearly contracts, substantiating for Barton, the impersonal market relationship. Had Clay been fulfilling a social role in the community of farmers, he might have only hired them to his neighbors for harvesting. For Dinsmore, the arrangement was not a market transaction.
Though he did assign a labor value to the time his slaves and tenants worked for other tenants, that is, an equal number of days, the end product of their labor—the crops they helped to raise—was to his benefit. Rather this was a manipulation of labor within the local economy of his farm that benefited several people in social and economic ways.\(^\text{34}\)

In the micro-economy that encompassed Walnut Ridge, the tenants, day laborers, and the enslaved all worked together and while they might measure their relationships with each other in economic terms, they looked to Dinsmore to define the value of their daily transactions. Though the slaves were at the bottom of these relationships, they were not powerless and documents demonstrate they occasionally managed to get a hat, clothing, or food items and even cash from various tenants who would then look to Dinsmore for reimbursement. Like the tenants, the slaves also shopped at the local merchant’s, and though they had to take a note from Martha Dinsmore stating what it was they needed, the tenants also required an accompanying note from James. When their labor was used by tenants, the slaves could board with those men, as John did in 1854 when working for Mr. Grenat. He boarded with him for sixteen days, which Dinsmore credited to Grenat in the amount of four dollars. Grenat owed Dinsmore $2.80 for four days of John’s labor. Dinsmore also owed Grenat for giving another slave, Coah, five dollars worth of grapes. In 1853 Dinsmore credited Frederick Naegle’s account for $3.50 for buying Isaac, a bondman, a coat. The benefit of these relationships goes beyond allowing white non-slaveholders to experience mastery and the benefits of racial subordination; it also reinforces the interdependent community Dinsmore created that situated him unmistakably at the center of the myriad relationships that took place with every laborer’s account he reconstructed.\(^\text{35}\)
For the bondpeople who had been brought up from Louisiana with the Dinsmore family, many changes were noticeable. In Louisiana Dinsmore had kept separate accounts for the individual slaves and their families, allotting them money for their Sunday work and for their work during the sugar harvest, allowing them to accumulate money to spend on what would have been luxuries for slaves. He kept no such accounts for the engineers and ditchers because they were paid with bank notes. On the Bayou Black plantation the slaves lived together in the quarters. In Kentucky, by contrast, lacking any crops that required the frenetic pace of sugar, there was no need to compensate the slaves during any particular season leaving them less chance to make money. While there were fewer slaves to deal with than in Louisiana, the fact that Dinsmore continued to keep minute details of his economic transactions with tenants and neighbors suggests that he might still have kept accounts for the bondpeople had he felt compelled to do so. He did pay church dues, purchased material, shoes, and hats for them, but these amounts were deducted from their room and board. In Kentucky, the pattern of their social lives and their work routines placed them on a more equal plain with the tenants than was ever the case in Louisiana. Their housing was similar, their meals were similar, and the tasks they performed were identical. And while the slaves did not have accounts, by granting them their chits at the general store in the same manner as the tenants, Dinsmore was fulfilling his view of himself as a paternalistic slaveholder.\textsuperscript{36}

The promising location of Boone County on the edge of the fertile Bluegrass and with the Ohio River forming a long northern border, provided farmers and merchants of the county with an outlet for their products. But it did not erase the social economies
within small communities that centered on local stores and grist mills. For Dinsmore, the focus in 1842 was Middle Creek Mills where he collected his mail but also took his grain and purchased stamps, thread, low quality shoes, coarse material, eggs, and other high-use but inexpensive household items. The local blacksmith and weaver came to his farm and he provided the fire and loom. Dinsmore also shopped occasionally at a store in Belleview Bottoms where he went to ship his produce to Cincinnati and embark on his bi-monthly trip to the city to make larger purchases. Although the blacksmith and the weaver may have taken an occasional trip to Cincinnati, they likely relied on the local store and their neighbors to meet their limited needs. The blacksmith might have chosen to move to a larger market and a potential increase in income, but he would have faced more competition. In the neighborhood of Middle Creek Mills, the local blacksmith was assured of produce or an exchange of labor by working for the local farmers and eventually, he might purchase land of his own and improve the social and economic standing of his family. Although slavery was embedded in the social economy of Boone County, other characteristics of the economy differed little from a rural county in Ohio or Indiana, but differed substantially from much of the South.

Economically, Dinsmore was pleased with how he had adapted to the new conditions he met in Kentucky. However, just as Louisiana’s plantation society had given him some discomfort and prevented him from feeling fully at home there, so he found the culture of Boone County to be rigid and backward. Fortunately, his home was just a mile from the river that connected him to the growing city of Cincinnati. There and with his immediate family, he expected to enjoy cultural fulfillment, not with his community.
Endnotes


3 Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 17 Dec 1841, DFP; Jas. Dinsmore Journal, 1839-1842, 14 April 1842, file 1959, DFP.

4 Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 17 December 1841; Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1850, Microfilm, Boone County Administration Building (BCAB), Burlington, Kentucky; Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 6 Dec 1841, DFP; Thos. Dinsmoor to Jas. Dinsmore, 29 Oct 1840, DFP; Jas. Dinsmore to Martha M. Dinsmore, 29 Oct 1841, DFP; Silas Dinsmoor to Jas. Dinsmore, 24 October 1837, DFP.

5 Jas. Dinsmore to Silas Dinsmoor, 23 June 1834, 22 November 1836, and 26 July 1837. Jas. Dinsmore to Thomas Dinsmoor, all MS 40(2), Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College (DC), Hanover, New Hampshire; Frank L. Owseley, “The Pattern of Migration and Settlement on the Southern Frontier,” *The Journal of Southern History* 11 (1945): 165-166; Martha M. Dinsmore to Mary Dinsmoor, 22 April 1840, MS 40(2), DC; C. Armitage to Jas. Dinsmore, 28 December 1846, DFP.


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35 Jas. Dinsmore Business Account with Grenat, 1854-5, and Naegle, 1853, Roll
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Chapter Six

At Home in Northern Kentucky: Finding Cultural Fulfillment across the River

Early in their development Kentuckians considered themselves Westerners. They occupied the first state that was located beyond the Appalachians, linking them only tenuously to the original states of the Union. In turn, this resulted in the development of a streak of independence from—indeed indifference to—federal authority, as illustrated in their brief flirtation with Spain in the late 1700s. Conversely, in the antebellum years, Kentucky’s favorite son, Henry Clay, navigated the nation through several tense sectional standoffs by creating compromises that papered over differences and emphasized the Union over the individual states. Side-by-side with these western and union legacies was a culture that on its face looked more southern. Culturally, James Dinsmore was markedly different than many of his neighbors, making his attempt to create an intellectual space for himself in Boone County challenging.

Americans of the time period recognized that cultural changes took place when southerners and northerners lived together for a period of time, as they did in the West and Middle West, resulting in the diminution of sectional traits over time. One contemporary observer found that “the utilitarian, scrutinizing, and frugal Yankee lost his
“rugged asperities and sharp angles,” while the “hospitable, generous[, and] liberal” Virginian corrected “unnecessary habits.”¹ People who lived and traveled there in the early to mid-1800s also commented on the meeting of the two sections in the West. John Stillman Wright, a New Englander who traveled West in 1818 and 1819 wrote biased letters about the sights and people he saw there. In his view, the northern emigrants to Indiana and Illinois “who remove to this country and settle as farmers, among the people from the southern states, do degenerate.” Whether by intermarriage or “a deteriorating principle, in the very climate, which enfeebles the mental, as it actually does, the bodily powers,” the result was that the New Englander became less of a Yankee.²

In the settling of Boone County, some families did make the journey together as a group, primarily the Germanna colony who purchased land near what came to be Florence. For most arrivals, though, the fertility of the soil determined settlement patterns. Along the Ohio River, except at Petersburg, farms were rather spread out and the few settlements that did exist were often focused on a mill or ferry and only a handful of those survived the century. As the river banks filled with wealthy farmers, the latecomers made do with land on the plains above the knobs. Some of the first churches were located in these areas, such as Bullittsburg and Sand Creek Baptist, leading one to conclude that the earliest settlers along the river were more concerned with matters other than religion in the late 1700s.³

Because tobacco was not the dominant crop in the mid-nineteenth century as it would become a century later, tobacco culture did not develop there. Farming was important to many families—even those that did not actually farm, so the barter system was a critical component of the local economy and culture. Doctors and other
professionals were paid in pigs, sheep, wheat, wool, and other farm products. Whether a farming family’s produce went to feed only the family, to be exchanged in a local market, or to Cincinnati and beyond, most residents considered farming to be a more virtuous and healthy occupation than could be plied in an urban area. John Brown, who owned a large farm in the North Bend region, directed in his will that his son should have a classical education “but my desire is he sh[oul]d be a farmer (agriculturist), and labour with his own hands.” J. W. Piatt, also at North Bend, insisted that his children reside at his farm, Federal Hall, “free from the contaminating influences of Towns [and] cities.” Though born in New York City, Martha Dinsmore implicitly praised rural life in a letter to her friend: “Oh how I feel for babes raised in a city!”

Of course not all people in Boone County valued country living for the same reason. Those who owned land had good reason to cherish an agrarian way of life and they had the assets to give their sons and sons-in-law a solid foundation. Many whites owned no land and saw hired or tenant agriculture as the best way to acquire their own land. African Americans, the overwhelming majority of whom were slaves, may have had access to garden plots and the ability to raise their own produce. This would have given them some connection to their agrarian ancestry, but it did not necessarily lead them to value the work they performed for their masters and mistresses, although the pattern of their lives, too, was determined by nature.

Each of these three groups contributed in some measure to the culture of Boone County, endowing it with various characteristics that melded into a western identity comprised of fierce personal independence and racial domination within a society with slaves rather than a slave society. This independence of spirit did not preclude working
together as neighbors or a community or even working as a tenant farmer or day laborer, but it was evidenced in the right to a person’s self and the rights of a free citizen. Slaveholding was among these rights. Not to have these rights was seen, in fact, as slavery. Thus whites in “societies with slaves” believed fervently that by supporting slavery and slaveowners they were supporting their own enjoyment of the rights of free men.\(^6\)

By their reckoning, not all men were supposed to be free. Alongside their fierce defense of independence was a commitment to white supremacy. Together, these were the chief traits that would have stood out to observers, but other shared cultural markers existed on this white man’s landscape. Though the Baptist faith dominated the religious lives of many Boone County families, a majority of residents chose not to become members of any church. Many of these non-members attended services and participated in camp meetings, though for a variety of reasons—some of which may have been spiritual in nature—chose not to take the necessary steps to become members. Many of the county’s common whites valued family and community over wealth, independence over the threat of violence, and they looked to the community to enforce what they viewed as proper behavior. Yet a growing number of citizens put their faith in the judicial system, emphasizing the ideals of gentility that were akin to the northern middle class and were open to the new ideas of the marketplace amid various reform movements popular in the North and West.\(^7\)

Boone Countians were ever mindful of the dangers of a strong and invasive government, which only deepened their strong sense of personal independence. The violent battles against Native Americans forced early settlers to earn recognition from
their peers. They could not assume leadership merely through economic status or name.
The community-based defense network of stations encouraged individuals to showcase
their skills in attempts to become leaders which easily translated to politics. John D.
Barnhart, in arguing that Kentucky was a mix of western and southern influences,
contends that the state’s constitution, though protecting slavery and an unequal
distribution of land as was the case in southern states, did not threaten democracy but
rather strengthened it by insisting that all citizens’ voices were significant, not simply
wealthier men’s. The entrance of the market into the lives of men and women fostered an
emphasis on each farmer’s ability to support his family in a comfortable lifestyle. The
state constitution further promoted local independence by creating counties based on an
unofficial rule of thumb that a county seat should be within one day’s walking distance
for everyone in the state. Indeed, by 1850 the counties in Kentucky were almost
autonomous areas within the states.8

Social forces within Boone County privileged the community in some areas, but
the stress on independence was palpable. Thus Allen James could successfully sue two
of his friend’s neighbors when they came on to his friend’s property and dragged James
off to the courthouse to be charged with theft. The crime was trespass of his person. As
an independent white male employed by a lumber yard in New Orleans and constantly
traveling up and down the Mississippi River for timber, James understood the meaning of
un-freedom and was willing to test his personal freedom in court. This was a kind of
transgression that white males understood and generally did not force unless there was a
land dispute, and in that case the trespass served to identify one white male’s claims as
opposed to those of another.9
This personal desire for independence, however, was always kept within bounds by the accepted mores of the community and what the leaders of the county deemed to be the common good. Abraham Piatt, B. F. Bedinger, and Letha Jane Hume, all prominent landowners, ran afoul of the law when they decided to build fences across public roads crossing over their property. In each case, they were ordered to remove the fences from roads whose purpose was to allow local residents to get to the river, a mill, or the closest settlement. While all those living where proposed roads were built were given a voice in the decision-making process, when county leaders decided against their claims to individual land rights, some chose to protest openly, though they surely knew such a protest was in vain.¹⁰

A sizable number of Boone Countians subjected their personal independence to the scrutiny of their religious community. Men of faith, in particular, were asked to choose between their Baptist brethren and their ideals of masculinity and independence. Members of the Baptist faith convened outside of religious meetings to ensure that all members were leading lives in accordance with congregational beliefs. In some neighborhoods, like the Sand Run and Big Bone Baptist communities, these meetings ran smoothly for years. In other areas, particularly in the Middle Creek Baptist community, close to where the Dinsmore family settled, relations were not so harmonious. At one point in its early history, several churches met to attempt to resolve problems within that congregation. These early issues centered around one man, Washington Watts, whose desire to see everyone conform to his views of man’s humility to God (or perhaps his personal jealousy) occasionally antagonized their sense of independent manhood. In one instance, Watts, who ran a general store, had a personal conflict with John Hall, who was
running for a seat in the legislature. After publicly denouncing Hall, he wrote in his ledger, “John Hall Candidate for the Assembly. Cr[edit] 2 in[ches] of Muslin.” Refusing to humble himself in front of other males, he was excluded and dismissed and was then refused admission to another congregation.11 Several years later, Robert Garnett, a successful miller, was concerned that people were privately accusing him of charging too much. He was found guilty and did not initially give satisfaction to the other men of the church. Eventually he relented and lowered his prices. As religion became more contested in the 1840s, Mr. and Mrs. Merrick were forced to answer for having music and dancing in their home. Asserting his masculinity and his independence, Mr. Merrick declared that he “would answer for Himself and wife” and that Scripture said nothing against dancing. In asserting his independence, he lost his position in the Baptist community, but did so on his own terms.12

Because white male independence was constricted by community needs and the desires of the market, white supremacy was often not absolute. Blacks sought opportunities to extend their freedom and claim their own vision of independence within a system that allowed for very little either. Boone County whites were not economically reliant on the labor of slaves, but depended on the presence of bondmen to define their social and political standing. Because some whites persisted in doing business with enslaved people, the state and the county closely defined the parameters of their unfreedom. Selling liquor to slaves without permission from the master was one offense that occurred somewhat frequently in Boone County. More problematic was when slaves were transported across the Ohio River without written permission. Magistrates also brought white men in line when they attempted to allow their bondmen to hire their own
time. Sydney Sandford allowed Sam, his slave, “to go at large [and] trade as a freeman” for wages “to the great encouragement . . . of thefts or other evil practices.”\textsuperscript{13} Charles Harrison also hired his slaves and Michael Rouse allowed his slave to hire himself. Fears of African Americans potentially stealing from their masters to sell to others in the community combined with a radical challenge to the white male’s understanding of mastery made these potentially volatile situations.\textsuperscript{14}

White supremacy formed a significant aspect of the Baptist congregations in Boone County. White men used the church meeting to discipline themselves and women, but primarily to discipline the slaves in their community and preserve what they believed was the natural order. Thefts, fighting, infidelity, dancing, and running away were common complaints lodged by white men against slave congregants. Free and enslaved blacks pushed the boundaries of their condition, but the white majority in Boone County was often quick to enforce their racial dominance. When the black members of the Bullittsburg Baptist Church requested permission to hold their own meetings (through the intercession of a white male member), their request was denied. In 1821, the Sand Run Baptist Church, after two years of apparently amicable relations, decided to set aside the “northeast end and the adjoining front of the gallery” for the “Black members and friends.” The resulting discontent among the African Americans prompted the white men to re-approve of their decision the following month, but still “Sister Mariah refused to comply.” She and another black woman were excluded.\textsuperscript{15} Alternately, in 1823 the Bullittsburg congregation “liberated” Billy and Asa to preach, though prohibited them from taking a “text to advance doctrine therefrom.”\textsuperscript{16}
Because Boone County was not a part of the plantation South, the heritage of many of its people combined with its location along the borderland of the North allowed for the weakening, but not breaking, of the cultural bonds of common whites with southerners of similar status. Historians emphasize the importance of the extended family and religion to the common white household. While those were still valued by many Boone County families, an increasing number of households were being drawn into the market economy and were finding it difficult to maximize profits while maintaining good relations in the family and community. The allure of the market also drew males away from the acceptance of violence as a means of earning one’s place in society and protecting one’s independence and reputation. Instead, the local court proved to be a better forum for receiving justice. The lives of these market-oriented farmers more closely resembled the lives of other middle-class Americans, particularly those in the North and Old Northwest. Contrasted with them were their “common white” neighbors, some of whom were slowly divesting themselves of the facets of their culture that conflicted with the values of the market.\(^{17}\)

The use of violence and braggadocio on the part of males as a way to earn respect within the community was among the more visible markers of common white culture present in Boone County and that tied these people to the South. “Affrays” were common occurrences, particularly in August near election time when the community of white men gathered to celebrate their status as free men. Only occasionally did the fights turn serious, and even then there was room for toleration. When Thomas Finnell shot and wounded James McManama it was determined that he did it “in sudden heat and passion, without malice.”\(^{18}\) In September of 1818 William Roberts appeared before the county
court to have it recorded that he was “so unfortunate as to loose [sic] the greater part of his right ear” in a fight. If he did this proudly then he must have come out of the fight in better shape than his competitor.\(^{19}\) The slightest of insults, even when not personal, could set someone off, as happened in Verona the night after Christmas in 1865 when Joseph Sleet shot and wounded Lawrence Dwyer after the latter said he was as good as any man. According to Elliot J. Gorn, “Aggressive self-assertion and manly pride were the real marks of status” in the southern backcountry, and that translated easily to Kentucky and outlasted the frontier era when imminent danger and primitive living conditions were said to foster this belligerent form of masculinity. Members of Baptist congregations, however, were expected to abide by more civilized rules of behavior, even in the early days of settlement, so when William Dollans claimed that he “could out run, out jump, throw down or whip any man on the ground,” he was made to publicly confess to his fellow male Baptists.\(^{20}\)

For common whites, insults were a challenge to fight; for those who were looking to rise above that level, an insult had the potential to ruin one’s business prospects in the county but a backcountry brawl was not the way to earn respect from the better folk. For that reason libel became the method of fighting back for those who were trying to distance themselves from the common white culture. James Carter, in July of 1840, complained that though “he had acquired the esteem of all who know him,” when Mac Waters accused him of picking up a three dollar bank note and keeping it, he was “maliciously designing to deprive him” of that hard-earned reputation. Perhaps Carter knew he would come out on the bad end of a public affray, but he also believed the justice system was a better place to prove one’s veracity and he might even collect
damages. Money was probably on the mind of William McManama when he sued Joseph Holsclaw five years later for two thousand dollars. Though the charge was a trespass of words, the effect was the same. McManama understood that being accused of stealing a hog had “greatly injured . . . his good name fame [and] credit [and] brought [him] into public scandal infamy [and] disgrace among the good and worthy citizens of the commonwealth to whom he is known.” To someone who might depend on occasional loans from his neighbors or who traded work with them, such an accusation could make him a pariah in the neighborhood and fighting someone over it was not going to determine the falseness of the claim, which is what he believed was necessary.  

Preserving community balance was important to common white culture. The “sense of ‘we-ness’” that resulted, not from shared self-interest, but from real cultural and emotional ties was an important part of the sense of place these people felt and the reason common whites supported their slaveholding neighbors. Men helped each other at harvest time and women visited neighbors who were ill and relieved the burden on a grieving family by washing and dressing the deceased. People depended on their family and neighbors to protect their property when they were absent or dead and to support them in their daily endeavors. Picnics, community churches, and general stores all fostered the sense of shared values. It was difficult for an outsider to become a part of this community without espousing their values. While Silas Dinsmoor often attended meetings at the Owl Creek and Burlington Baptist churches, he never became a member and his attempt to create and lead a Sunday School was rebuffed. The importance of religion to the people of Boone County can be seen in the growth of congregations prior to the Civil War. These congregations were small and, with the general store, were often
the central physical emblem of a community. The county’s Baptist congregations grew from nine in 1850 to twelve ten years later. One Methodist congregation became five and one Reformist (Christian) congregation increased to four. Also, by 1860 there was a Universalist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and two Presbyterian congregations.22

For those who did become church members, religion was an important part of their lives and they interpreted events according to their religious beliefs. Polly Bristow, who attended a church at the small settlement of Sardis near Union, kept a short journal in the years before and during the Civil War. Her writings attest to her belief that her God could be a punishing God but usually for a higher purpose. In 1858 she wrote: “The Lord in his Providence is throwing a part of his people (in the South) in the furnace. Oh that they may come forth pure gold.” Most of the Baptists of Boone County believed in predestination, though disagreements were surfacing by the early 1830s. Two men were excluded from the Middle Creek congregation in 1827; one because he accused the church of believing in conditional salvation and the other because he rejected the idea that God “fore ordained all things.” It seems as though the church was having trouble pleasing its members.23 In 1831 the Florence Christian Church was organized by followers of Thomas Campbell who had lived for a short time in the county. He espoused no specific creed but believed in the unity of all Christians and the rite of baptism. Preaching to slaves with no other whites present led him to leave the county but a small group of followers, calling themselves “Campbellites” organized a “reformist” church in his wake. This new development, along with the founding of a Universalist church in Middle Creek, forced the Baptists to be vigilant against what they considered to be heresy. Jonas Crisler, a devout Baptist, wrote to his daughter, “I think [Campbellism]
short lived in any intelligent neighbour (sic) where the Divine word is our guide.” He also worried that the growing number of churches of varying sects created “contention [and] confusion” among the people of the neighborhood. Attempts by the Baptists to please its more liberally-minded members often led to a backlash by conservative followers. In 1855 Brother Anderson left his congregation because “it was destitute of religion.”

While emerging sects threatened to break up communities, it was a sign of new ideas finding acceptance among a segment of residents.

The concern men and women felt for their community could lead to violence and that occurred on occasion in Boone County. As Washington Watts and others were chasing a horse thief from Kentucky into the Indiana Territory in 1809, they shot and killed him. The concern over slaves who were running away, drinking without proper supervision, and stealing from whites to sell to other whites was also seen as a danger to the community by threatening to undermine the solidarity of whites. Those who were making a profit from these transactions had to be punished for the good of the whole. Whites took it upon themselves to police their communities when the law or church could not do so. In January 1858, various unnamed citizens of Petersburg forcibly “moved the Donhew family to Aurora.” The cause was apparently the drunkenness of the father on New Year’s Eve.

When compared to plantation society, this common white society appeared to be rather egalitarian, but there were winners and losers. In Boone County the biggest winners were those who moved into the county with their wealth—men like B. F. Bedinger and families like the Piatts and the Gaines. Those who did not consider themselves to be common whites distinguished themselves from others and remained
aloof from the community the common whites valued. This self-styled gentility viewed the market and the maximization of profit as an opportunity to provide comfort and enjoyment for their families and they emphasized their own refinement and education, taking their cues from both the growing influence of the northern middle class and the planters of the South. They self-consciously drew physical comparisons between themselves and the planters to the South, however unrealistic such comparisons might be. For example, both Abner Gaines and Thomas Jones, when disposing of their worldly goods, referred to their “plantations.” Gaines owned two hundred thirty-six acres and two slaves while Jones owned a mere fifty-two acres and five slaves – neither of which would constitute a plantation in the Deep South. A plantation to them was a place for agricultural production for the market rather than a measured number of acres or a quantity of slaves.26

African Americans, slave and free, were the third group to be affected by and in turn affect Boone County’s culture. In regions where slaves were spread among owners in small groups, they tended to adopt more from the dominant culture and often interacted with whites more frequently. This closeness could be helpful for blacks as they negotiated the boundaries of their lives or it could be harmful and even life-threatening. For many enslaved people, it appears that they were able to create a somewhat stable life for themselves in the face of tremendous odds, considering the increased number of slaves being sold south in the years before the Civil War. The success of some is evident in their willingness to join the local Baptist, Methodist, and Christian congregations even though they were fully aware of white male dominance within these groups. The small number of blacks who had earned their freedom and
accumulated property trusted the court system and their white neighbors to oversee the
distribution of that property. The free man Charles Clarkson owned land and had six
hundred dollars out in notes to white neighbors. He left the money to his several children
in a will that was witnessed by whites. When James Gilmore of the Sand Run
congregation accused the slave, Isaac of drinking and fighting with a black man, he was
acknowledging that some blacks in the county were adopting the cultural values of their
common white neighbors. There were various instances of fighting among black males
just as there were among white males. While the notion of honor was likely a part of the
violence among black men, honor also played a role in their decision, on occasion, to turn
to the congregation of white males to find them innocent of some of the many
accusations made against them. Ben and Sam were both accused of stealing by white
men and when they denied it, the charges were dismissed because there was not enough
evidence to convict them. They also occasionally came forward to lodge complaints
against themselves.\textsuperscript{27}

A visible part of the community, African Americans, though enslaved, were keen
to establish their own sense of independence within the parameters of their condition.
They exerted their independence in the numerous escapes and attempts at escape they
made over the years. They did attend religious services and participated by proxy in the
monthly meetings, however, they also carved out their own religious sphere away from
the church elders. Dinsmore’s nephew wrote about a free black preacher who lived on
the farm, Uncle John, and he “had married and baptized all the negroes in the
neighborhood for many, many years.”\textsuperscript{28} They also had their own social gatherings.
Sally, a Dinsmore bondwoman, had a quilting bee followed by a dance for the
neighboring blacks, both activities valued by common white society as a way to bond with neighbors. There were very few slaves in Boone County that would have remembered Africa from childhood, but one of those, Coah, enslaved by Dinsmore, had spent his youth in Africa. Though he did join the Middle Creek Baptist Church he also maintained his connection to his heritage. Upon his death, Dinsmore purchased a shroud (but no coffin) for Coah and it is likely that his grave was marked by a flat stone rather than the fieldstones or tombstones of others in the family graveyard. African Americans contributed language and food to the whites they lived among. Until she died, Julia Dinsmore remarked on very hot days that it was “hot as Juba,” a phrase she took from a song sung by Nancy Mcgruder, a slave woman who returned to the farm after the Civil War. Okra, rice, and yams were a part of the Dinsmore diet, all foods that came from Africa. However, as slaves, blacks contributed more to the life of the county than they did as individuals. Their very presence instigated fear and a consolidation of the white community to protect itself (and its property) against outsiders. When the Civil War came, whites in Boone County had few illusions about how their property would react. For their part, blacks recognized the weakness of the system as it existed on the Ohio River and the border of freedom, taking advantage of it as often as they could.²⁹

Beyond the status provided by slave ownership, “uncommon” whites may not have had the resources of southern planters, but they had enough money to visibly set themselves apart from their neighbors. Obvious to everyone was housing. Although tenants and small landowners often lived in log cabins as late as the 1840s, their market-oriented neighbors built commodious stone, brick and wood houses, and they furnished those houses with items they believed would be markers of gentility to the outside world.
Clothing, too, was an observable marker of culture; jeans were for men who worked in the fields and a black frock coat was for a gentleman of leisure. However, one must be careful not to assume that all well-to-do farmers in Boone County rejected common white culture—they did not. Jonas Crisler had a substantial 298-acre farm and was worth over thirteen thousand dollars in 1850. He raised cattle, sheep, and hogs and had a productive orchard. As a member of the Baptist faith, though, he lived a simple life. Every winter his wife, or his son as his wife aged, wove their wool on a loom and made clothes for the family. Dinsmore also had a loom, but his family did not wear clothing that was made on the loom; they purchased material in Cincinnati for their dresses and pantaloons. The loom was for clothing for the bondpeople and for bedcovers and floorcovers. When his nephew inquired of Dinsmore how he acquired the title of “Colonel,” he suggested that it might have been “because I wear a black coat, while all the other people wear Kentucky jeans.”

Household items such as tea services, game tables, bookcases, maps, and artwork indicated an attention to comfort and education that was lacking in common white households. If one were invited to the home of B. F. Crutchfield, for instance, upon entering the parlor they would immediately notice the Brussels carpet that covered the wood floor. Seated on the sofa, they would be entertained with music from a piano. At dinner they would eat off china with ivory handled knives and forks and would then retire back to the parlor for an evening of cards by the light of candelabras. An evening at the Fielding Delph house would be quite different. Delph was a successful farmer with hogs, cattle, sheep, and four horses, but he had little in the way of entertainment or display in his house. His family sat around two tables and talked by the light of smoky beeswax
candles they made themselves from the bee stands he kept, while his wife spun their sheep’s wool into yarn for the family’s clothes. They shared their living space with a female slave.31

In the eighteenth century gentility was reserved for only the elite of American society, but the nineteenth century saw the democratization of genteel culture. Central to this display was the family parlor, though it was not merely an exhibition of genteel things. Crutchfield’s superiority over his neighbors had less to do with the fact that he could purchase items his neighbors could not; it was based more on his ability to turn those material goods into a way of life that common whites could not hope to imitate or, in some cases, did not desire to imitate. Dinsmore’s home was similar: the sofa, piano, oil paintings, and bookcase all allowed him to express his cultural superiority. His language and manners were more refined and his tastes were more cosmopolitan than many of his neighbors. One accepted Crutchfield’s or Dinsmore’s claim to gentility upon entering their parlors; others in their neighborhood might be on the cusp of gentility, perhaps just beginning to manufacture their claim to such status. John Holton, who had nine slaves, spent his farm income on silver teaspoons, chairs for ten people, a clock, and a bureau. He could entertain nicely, but without books, a musical instrument, and artwork, it is unlikely he would have impressed his neighbors in the same way as Crutchfield or Dinsmore. However, with a proper education and inheritance his children would be able to move ahead.32

While the ownership of slaves was not a prerequisite for gentility, an attitude of leisure enhanced the performance and leisure was most suited to the slaveholder. Although gentility was a manner of thinking and a way of life that was shared throughout
nineteenth-century America, leisure was primarily a southern value and was often juxtaposed against the Yankee’s single-minded pursuit of wealth. Dinsmore’s brother, a farmer in New York, always believed James’ preference for leisure over labor was a contrived attempt to conceal his indolent habits and found his brother’s advice to not work so hard annoying, replying: “I don’t think that you deserve any merit for not working for I don’t think you ever worked from choice.” Conversely, his old friend from Louisiana, Lewis Cruger, now holding an office job in Washington, D.C., understood the southern lifestyle and wrote that while he had “little or no spare time” to correspond, Dinsmore had “plenty of leisure.” Cruger defined leisure as Dinsmore wished it to be defined while his own brother challenged his understanding of the term.

For the genteel landowner in Boone County education was necessary and it was not always easy to obtain for their offspring. Common whites living near Dinsmore and laboring for him had little free time to improve their minds and several were not even literate. Until the 1850 state constitution required the state to invest more in the school system and increase oversight, little money was spent on public education. By 1860, Boone County had forty-two common schools teaching sixteen hundred students and three academies, a dramatic increase from the six common schools there in 1850. Dinsmore did not trust his daughters to the local public schools. Rather, he sent them to school in Cincinnati, approximately four hours upstream. He chose the Cincinnati Female Seminary, run by Miss Coxe and a Greek professor, Mr. Zachos, located on the corner of 9th and Walnut Streets. Miss Coxe was an acquaintance of Martha Dinsmore’s from New Jersey and believed in a rigorous training of the mind. Students learned Latin, Greek, and French, and Natural Philosophy, Composition, Algebra, Geometry, and
Phrenology, among other disciplines. The cost was over sixty dollars per semester, plus the cost of boarding nearby.\textsuperscript{35}

Isabella and Julia Dinsmore’s private education reinforced the distance the Dinsmore family felt from their neighbors, as it did for other Boone Countians of means who sent their children to schools outside the county. Writing to her father about a picnic and dance her sister attended, Isabella remarked dryly: “The company was very large and I imagine not very select and from all accounts the display of beauty and fashion must have been terrific.”\textsuperscript{36} They also mocked the intelligence of their neighbors. A cousin wrote about spending time in Boone County and recounted going to the local store where he was told by the storeowner that James Dinsmore was a little “tetched” because “he tried the other day to make me believe that the world was round and kep on turning (sic). Now, what would become of the steamboats when they got underneath?”\textsuperscript{37} Sometimes his neighbors turned the tables and had a laugh at Dinsmore’s expense. While sleighing with his daughters in the late 1840s, his sleigh passed a group of men “raising a building and they all laughed loudly and Mr. R[ice] said Well squire that’s the first time I ever saw you driving a team.”\textsuperscript{38}

County marriages illustrate the preference young men and women had for spouses from a similar economic background. Looking at fifteen marriages each in 1850 and 1860, it is clear that an offspring of a slaveholder was becoming less concerned that his spouse came from a slaveholding family than that he or she did not come from a less well-to-do family. In 1850, both partners of three of the couples were from slaveholding families; ten years later none of the marriages involved two slaveholding families. Meanwhile, ten of the 1850 couples brought together families of similar economic
circumstances, increasing to twelve by 1860. While this does not speak specifically to an increasing interest in gentility, the first step in getting there was having the money to purchase conveniences and then luxuries.\(^{39}\)

In the North, South, and West, people shared assumptions about how the family should be organized. Middle-class parents generally read similar publications, like the *Dollar Weekly Times*, the *Country Gentleman*, and *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, all of which had advice for men, women, their marriage, and raising children. The nuclear family was becoming accepted as the typical household structure. Figuratively, slaveholders enlarged upon this, but even for them, the important part of the family was the white nuclear family. A companionate marriage was the ideal for most, although poorer Americans in every region were not always able to achieve that goal. The lives of southern women were constricted by separate spheres to a larger degree than northern women because of the more isolated nature of southern society. The northern emphasis on individual responsibility, however, did not translate well in the South where the patriarchal ideal of fatherhood was dominant; but it was present in the Middle West, particularly in urban areas.\(^{40}\)

Boone County’s location at the northernmost point of Kentucky helped to influence its definition of family and gender roles. As in the Little Dixie region of Missouri, some yeomen couples were far too busy with everyday survival to worry about companionate marriages. Yet neighbors occasionally took exception to what they considered to be the mistreatment of wives. When asked about the work Margaret Corey did on her husband’s farm, one male neighbor replied: “I have seen her working on the Farm planting and replanting corn Binding Wheat shearing sheep and doing all kinds of
housework.” When pushed to place a value on Margaret’s labor, a female neighbor exclaimed that she “would not do the work and receive the treatment [Corey] did.” She did not say she would not do the same work, just not the same work and the treatment. For some families in Boone County, such work would be a necessary part of their lives, they simply expected to be treated more as helpmates than slaves, because they knew what the latter looked like. Margaret’s experiences point to the continued existence of the patriarchal family, likely more evident within common white households. Jorden Miller’s fatal confrontation with his father was the result of what he considered unfair patriarchal power—his father kept putting off paying him for work he had completed for a neighbor.41

Families that owned slaves or could afford to pay for tenants or day laborers allowed women to spend more time on household duties. Martha Dinsmore certainly did not work outside; she accepted that women had different roles to play and she took her pious leadership of the family very seriously, more so because she must have had doubts about her husband’s salvation. Her ideal of womanhood was very much like the northern ideal, though with the addition of a muted form of mastery added to the mix. The younger slaves were under her control and either worked in the house, in the yard, or in the garden. The mastery of her husband was much more clear as he was the one organizing what was considered the productive labor of the farm and, significantly, keeping the accounts. Though the family was less isolated than they had been in Louisiana and visited frequently with neighbors, Martha did not take advantage of the opportunity to become involved in any reform movements, as many other middle-class women did. In that sense, she reflected the southern ideal of separate spheres without an
independence of action by women. Although she did not shrink from stating her views about the move to Kentucky, her voice has been muted by the few letters in her hand that have survived. Since her daughters became independent thinkers themselves, one can imagine that she continued to speak her mind. How families defined the roles of each member was dependent on their socio-economic status and their cultural background.42

In contrast to the time the Dinsmore family spent in Louisiana, when the family moved to Boone County the United States was just beginning to be affected by a reform spirit that was sweeping the North and West. While many aspects of this movement were evangelical in nature, some of the reforms were open to liberal religious beliefs, which Dinsmore found more appealing. These new ideas were disseminated through the steam-engine printing press and took advantage of the market revolution to expand their influence. Cincinnati, like other urban areas in the region became part of the traveling circuits of Spiritualists, phrenologists, and promoters of other reforms. With the city’s numerous printers and booksellers, it was easy for the family to stay informed on the most current beliefs in circulation. The leisure time he experienced and his thirst for knowledge encouraged Dinsmore to investigate a variety of reforms that today would appear ridiculous. Most of these reforms, other than temperance, were unpopular in the South where it was felt they pushed the boundaries of gender roles and questioned traditional beliefs about the nature of God and the after-life.

Dinsmore’s optimism, curiosity, particularly as it regarded science and religion, and his insatiable appetite for books, made him an ideal candidate for various reforms. Historian Ronald G. Walters points to the first two of these factors as essential in an individual’s receptivity to the various appeals for improvement that were appearing in
antebellum America. Dinsmore’s friend, Tobias Gibson, had called him “a Captain of a forlorn hope” because of his positive attitude toward sugar planting and his interest in scientific agriculture was a reflection of his curiosity about science. He was also a Whig and as such, he believed in the “redemption of society.” To his family and close friends, then, his increasing attention to mesmerism, phrenology, spiritualism, and hydropathy was not so unusual. To some of his neighbors, however, he might have appeared slightly strange. Such beliefs did not accord with the Baptist faith and a number of his neighbors were illiterate and would have been ignorant of the deeper spiritual nature of the reforms as Dinsmore understood them. Even if there is no written evidence of others in Boone County evincing an interest in antebellum reforms, they were certainly exposed to them on their many trips to Cincinnati and it is likely Dinsmore was not alone, but he was certainly in a small, select group of believers and practitioners.

The portrayal of phrenology as a science heightened its appeal for Dinsmore. Though some in America considered it biologically deterministic in its claim to discover a person’s permanent personality traits in the shape of their cranium, Dinsmore likely followed the beliefs of its founders, Franz Joseph Gall, Johann Spurzheim, and George Combe, in seeing the science as a way to improve oneself, because even as a young adult he was interested in improving himself mentally. In 1848 he purchased a phrenological bust but apparently he did not feel comfortable doing readings himself because three years later he paid seventy-five cents for each of two daughters to undergo an exam in Cincinnati. According to the results of an exam that was kept with other records belonging to James, the shape of his own skull probably fit with his general view of himself. He was described as having the “large qualities” of high-mindedness,
independence, stability of character, and aspiration for greatness. His scores were fair to strong in his partiality to the opposite sex (and their reciprocation), enjoyment of children, ability to be somewhat systematic, love of music, and lively imagination and wit. His low scores meant that he tended to avoid difficulties (as in sugar planting) and was slow to anger. His brother, John, would have been surprised that he did not receive a high score on the Lymphatic region; instead he was evaluated as having a Sanguine temperament, meaning he was considered to be passionate, optimistic and cheerful.  

Soon after the first reports of children talking to the dead emerged from Rochester in 1849, Dinsmore’s interest was piqued by Spiritualism. What began as knuckle-cracking in upstate New York became a rather popular movement, although many of its followers considered it more than a quirky show to amuse the public. Dinsmore took it very seriously and judging by the books he collected on the topic, it became a significant part of his spiritual beliefs. The fascination of talking to dead people for a man like Dinsmore lay in their ability to give advice on how to make the world a better place. But it also appealed to his sense of hierarchy and order. The information came from above and did not promote radical solutions to the social and economic difficulties Americans were experiencing. Additionally, Spiritualists created a life after death that rewarded the moral, spiritual, and social status one had attained in life and then each spirit advanced in a controlled way toward ultimate perfection. Certainly this meant that Dinsmore would have a head start on many others. In January 1851, he had a two-dollar session with Mrs. Bushnell, a Cincinnati medium. Six months later his youngest daughter, Susan died at the age of fifteen in a boating accident on Lake Erie. This was a “severe affliction” for the family and it likely increased Dinsmore’s interest in speaking with those who had
died. Few of his regular correspondents were fellow believers, but he did have a cousin, Luther V. Bell, who also attended séances and they discussed their experiences in letters. He began subscribing to Spiritualist journals that recited séances from various places. In 1858 he also subscribed to the *Le Spiritualiste de la Nouvelle Orleans*, a similar magazine published in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{46}

Dinsmore’s scientific interests led him to investigate some of the more radical ideas that were being disseminated to the public. One of those was discussed in a text by Robert Chambers, published anonymously, titled, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. Hugely controversial when it came out in 1845, Chambers made a case for the materialistic origins of man and animals, though he was not very clear on the specifics of how. He did his best to take God out of the picture: “What is to hinder our supposing that the organic creation is also the result of natural laws, which are in like manner an expression of his will?” It was a very popular book and went through many editions in its first years, which gave the author time to address his critics. Dinsmore was likely one of the few Boone Countians who owned the text. Later, in 1855 he briefly became a member of a secret society in Cincinnati, the “Family of Patriarchs,” dedicated to “harmonize & elevate the whole human race.” It was advertised as being like other reform movements, but different from all of them, and it included a rock with a message to be interpreted. The connections he formed in Cincinnati and the knowledge he gained from his readings helped to set him apart from his neighbors who preferred a Biblical creation and a God that conversed with them during prayer, not by writing on rocks.\textsuperscript{47}

Many of the more visible markers of culture in Boone County, and in Kentucky in general, were southern. Slavery and the tendency toward violence were both facets that
people acknowledged separated the northern states from the southern states. There were other ways that the men and women living along the Ohio River just downstream from Cincinnati resembled states farther south; the popularity of the Baptist religion and the yeoman culture within the county were shaped by southern influences. However, as the market revolution made its way downriver from the Queen City and up into the knobs of Boone County, the ties that bound the yeoman culture to nature and community began to erode. Leisure, comfort, and education became more important and more liberal religious sects competed for congregants with the old-style Protestant groups. Even seemingly radical ideas like Spiritualism could find a home in the pastoral county, stressing the tremendous effect a large urban area just an afternoon away and steam printing presses could have on a rural community’s culture. With the Civil War on the horizon, Boone County’s location on the very border of slavery indicated that it would be dragged into the conflict regardless of its desire for peace. How the war would affect the county was uncertain.⁴⁸
Endnotes


3 Elizabeth Tuttle and Richard W. Jeffries, *Overview of Historic Settlement along Upper Gunpowder Creek, Boone County, Kentucky*, (Lexington: Program for Cultural Resource Assessment, 1987), 5; some of the families who purchased land along the river include the Piatts, Humphrey Marshall, the Montague and Johnson families, and John Brown.

4 Lee Willis and others vs. J. C. Hughes, Admin. of Trundle and others, Item 36, April 1861, Boone County Circuit Court (BCCC), Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives (KDLA), Frankfort, KY; quoted in Will of John Brown, 22 January 1824, Will Book B, 156-61, Microfilm, Boone County Public Library (BCPL), Burlington, Kentucky.

5 Will of J. W. Piatt, 19 May 1857, Will Book G, 201-2, BCPL; Martha Macomb Dinsmore to Sara Dinsmoor, 19 September 1838, Dinsmore Family Papers (DFP), MS 1016, Dinsmore Homestead Foundation, Burlington, Kentucky.


10 Commonwealth vs. Abraham Piatt, Item 19, September 1838 and July 1839; Commonwealth vs. B. F. Bedinger, Item 29, May 1850; Commonwealth vs. Hume, Item 29, May 1850, all BCCC, KDLA.

11 Belleview Baptist Church, Book One, 14 September 1805, Microfilm, BCPL.

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Chapter Seven

The Border of Unrest: Political Realignments on the Eve of War

In his history of agrarian Kentucky, Thomas D. Clark remarks forthrightly, “The central theme of Kentucky history is politics. No aspect of life in the commonwealth has escaped its influence.” The antebellum era was dominated by the politics of Henry Clay, and this Whiggish bent separated the Bluegrass state from most of its slaveholding sister states to the south. In making his decision to move to Kentucky, James Dinsmore took advantage of the state’s slaveholding status, and he was also quite aware of the dominance of the Whig Party in state politics. Leaving Louisiana at a time when the Democratic Party was increasing in power consequent to the promulgation of a more democratic constitution, he was entering a state that leaned toward the Whig Party despite its universal white male suffrage. Politics was not his primary interest, but Dinsmore had become familiar with Robert Breckinridge and Henry Clay through his friend, Tobias Gibson, and this contributed to his sense of ease. This was not the relocation of a political outsider, but the action of a conservative slaveowner who recognized no challenge to his own political beliefs.
Early settlers held out high hopes for the fulfillment of the Jeffersonian yeoman republic in Kentucky, the first state in the Union that allowed for universal white male suffrage. While this was an overtly democratic move for the state’s first constitutional convention in 1792, the power of the common man was blunted by his inability to vote for local officials. This step, and the protection given to slavery in the 1798 constitution illustrate the power of the elite in the state’s history. Slaveholders won out in the first constitution making slavery legal, but the peculiar institution did not have the protections that it had in other states. The 1798 constitution explicitly protected slavery and made it difficult, but not impossible, to abolish it. More slaveowners had been encouraged to settle in Kentucky, allowing them a larger representation in the second convention.¹

When Dinsmore arrived in Kentucky in 1842 conservative politics were still dominant. The state’s favorite son, Henry Clay, headed the national and state Whig Party, whose policies Dinsmore favored. Dinsmore stopped in Lexington to collect his wife and three daughters before traveling to Boone County. At this time or during a subsequent visit to Lexington he was invited to dine with Clay at Ashland, an invitation he likely accepted despite his previous description of Clay as a “stumper.”²

Arriving in Boone County he found a political situation that in some obvious ways differed from Terrebonne Parish. Few ethnic divisions in society spilled over into politics, but the ability of all men to vote for state offices created a more contentious atmosphere near election time. Candidates for state offices and the House of Representatives were forced to visit their constituents to give speeches, have barbecues, picnics, and parades, all in an attempt to increase their vote. Yet Boone County was similar to Terrebonne Parish in that both localities often had Whig majorities and the
party dominated, but did not monopolize, local offices. In many Kentucky counties, since most local positions were for life with good behavior, politics saw little change. An appointment as Justice of the Peace depended on one’s friendship or kinship with those already in power, so the positions often went to men who were active in party politics and in a financial position to pay the necessary fees. Dinsmore was pleased to find out that in Boone County the Whig Party had cornered all county appointments except for the county clerk. One historian argues that “money, not political affiliation, was the paramount consideration.” If true, wealth in Boone County correlated very closely with Whig politics. More likely, though, party affiliation played a dominant role in who was nominated to serve on the local court or as sheriff.  

While a Whig majority was understandable in Terrebonne Parish, less clear was why a majority of voters in Boone County would support Whig policies. In the Louisiana sugar parishes property qualifications limited voter eligibility, ensuring that most voters were Anglo, Creole, or Cajun planters. Planters there relied on improved transportation for their crops, stable banking for their volume of financial transactions and for the value of such transactions, and tariffs to protect their final product from the Caribbean islands. In Boone County, where all white males could vote and farmers were not as prosperous as the planters in southern Louisiana, the Whig Party could not survive if only wealthy Americans voted. Boone County’s farmers reflected another constituent group. These were farmers and tradesmen who Michael F. Holt described as “self-consciously respectable, God-fearing, church-going, sober middle classes” found in both northern and southern towns, and “prosperous agricultural regions.” As more Boone County farmers
looked to the markets of Covington, Cincinnati, and other Ohio River valley cities, they turned to the Whig Party to protect and support their business interests.⁴

Not all farmers in the county looked to the market for their livelihood. Alongside the prosperous and aspiring farmers were others who continued to look inward to their community. They remained suspicious of banks and interpreted their interests to be primarily social rather than economic. At the end of the harvest they might have excess, marketable crops but they sold them locally or shared them with their neighbors. These common white men often belonged to the Baptists parishes and were wary of new ideas that challenged their religion. They complained when their neighbors charged too much for mill tolls and were indignant when their neighbors put on airs. The fact that many small farmers in Boone County originated from the backcountry of North Carolina and Virginia supports the view that, even in the 1850s, some of Dinsmore’s neighbors would have continued to harbor ambivalent views of the market economy. Such views made them more likely to support the Democratic Party for its small government and anti-business policies.⁵

Dinsmore moved to Kentucky as the topic of slavery was becoming more controversial among the state’s inhabitants. Living so close to the border of slave and free states, Conservatives saw Kentucky falling behind their northern neighbors and realized the competitive benefits of free labor. Nevertheless, they feared the effects emancipation would have on their society and wanted to ensure the process was slow and orderly. Unlike many in southern states, these men saw the slaveholding environment as a significant factor in preventing African Americans from improving themselves. With their own guidance, they believed they could groom the enslaved for eventual freedom.
Viewing emancipation with hope and trepidation simultaneously, they were convinced that the propitious conditions that would accompany controlled and gradual freedom could bring about a peaceful and prosperous society where both races would live side by side. Heeding historian James Oakes’s characterization of southern paternalists’ “obsession with stability,” Harold D. Tallant argues that Conservative Kentuckians more closely resembled northern conservatives in that neither saw slavery as a “positive good.” While Tallant places the motivation for Kentucky Conservatives in the economic sphere, historian Lacy K. Ford emphasizes the racial aspect of slavery. Whitening the state was important to Kentuckians who supported the importation ban in the 1830s and gradual emancipation in the 1840s. The Deep South did not have a realistic option of whitening their states and instead entrenched themselves behind the bulwark of the “positive good” ideology. Thus Kentucky and other states in the Upper South separated themselves further from the slave states in the Deep South.⁶

Kentucky had a long history of interest in emancipation, but many supporters attached to it the removal of freedpeople, indeed all African Americans from the state. Henry Clay was an important leader of the American Colonization Society and their goal was to encourage slaveowners to free their slaves. The Society would reimburse the owners and send the freedpeople to Liberia in West Africa. Prior to 1830 more societies working toward emancipation were located in the Upper South than in the North. In 1820, the Niles Weekly Register predicted that Kentucky and other Upper South states would soon be free states, “as well from principle as from interest.”⁷ Locally, a resident of northern Kentucky wrote to the Licking Valley Register in 1841 calling for the amending of the federal Constitution to authorize Congress to purchase land in Africa or
some other region fertile enough for “a flourishing colony” for “the whole of the free black population of the United States with their consent.” Owners and individual states would fund the transportation. After 1860, all free blacks still remaining were to be removed by force. While such a solution would have been logistically and economically prohibitive, the ability of a citizen from a slaveholding state to put such thoughts into print is significant in illustrating the breach between Kentucky and states further south. However, even with such an environment of support, Kentucky only sent 661 blacks to Liberia.⁸

The successful attempt to revise the state constitution in 1848 energized Conservative Kentuckians to organize themselves to promote a new constitution that contained language paving the way for a gradual process of reimbursed emancipation. In Mason County over 450 men signed a petition declaring that slavery was “a misfortune, and not a blessing,” and organized a meeting to push for gradual emancipation. In March, leading Boone Countians met to discuss the issue of colonization as a gradual means to end slavery in Kentucky. They viewed the market as having a positive effect on their economic well-being. A letter to the editor of the Covington Journal deplored “the injuries which the institution of slavery has already inflicted upon the prosperity of our Commonwealth,” and claimed that a respectable part of Kentucky’s population considered the domestic institution to be an evil.⁹

Colonizationists and Emancipationists like Dinsmore sought to lead the constitutional convention in the summer of 1849. Forty-six men met in the county seat of Burlington in April and Dinsmore was elected vice president, charged with selecting a slate of candidates to attend a statewide meeting in Frankfort the following month. Out
of the forty-six men in attendance, thirty-eight can be located in census documents and county records. Twenty-six were farmers, two were ministers, two were innkeepers, and the remainder consisted of a physician, miller, wheelwright, carpenter, and wagonmaker. Farmers were less represented among these gradual emancipationists than in the general population of the county, where they constituted 73 percent of resident families. Eight of the landholders had increased their acreage from 1840 to 1850 and five lived in the county’s towns. Seventeen of the men (40 percent) owned slaves and six were worth less than one thousand dollars. A majority of the men were born in the Upper South, although ten were born in states to the north of Kentucky. None were born in the Deep South. These were men who interacted with the local and regional market and believed that slaves were incidental to material success.\textsuperscript{10}

Ultimately, the movement was unsuccessful. At the subsequent Frankfort Convention, consistent with Henry Clay’s views on the subject, a vague agreement stated that slavery was bad for the economy, emancipation should be gradual and should affect only unborn slaves, and coupled it with colonization. Clay worried that such changes to the constitution would alienate Kentucky from southern states. The men returned to their homes to try to elect candidates who supported their views, but fewer than ten percent of the delegates to the convention were emancipationists. Their poor showing and their inability to prevent the new constitution from making emancipation even more difficult can be viewed as a reflection of the agreement between a majority of slaveholders and non-slaveholders that emancipation would not be beneficial for the people of the state. Tallant points out that the almost 10 percent of delegates favoring emancipation was a comparatively strong showing in slave states, comparable to the polling of the Liberty
party in the 1848 election. Despite this setback, Kentucky’s emancipation movement had lasted relatively long, and separated it from the experiences of other border slave states.\textsuperscript{11}

The new constitution had several effects on Kentucky’s emancipationists. Strengthening the institution and making it more difficult to manumit slaves silenced the opposition. In the minds of white Kentuckians slavery was made more permanent. In the future, any slave that was manumitted had to be removed from the state and the legislature was given power to deport any free blacks it chose. It was made explicit that the General Assembly had no more power over unborn slaves than they had over living slaves, thus closing that option for emancipationists. The poor showing of the emancipationists likely caused others so inclined to more ardent support of slavery. Judged by the deepening North-South alignment, Kentuckians chose to strengthen ties with the southern states.\textsuperscript{12}

While Dinsmore and other emancipationists were unsuccessful, this episode in Kentucky history belies the idea that “all classes of white society [in slaveholding states] were united on certain fundamentals, particularly on the preservation of slavery.”\textsuperscript{13} Not all slaveowners supported the indefinite continuation of the institution in Kentucky. Because such a topic would not have even been publicly debated in Louisiana, Dinsmore’s direct involvement with the emancipationists confirms his ambivalence about slavery, one he surely felt in Louisiana but did not vocalize outside his close friends. Conversely, public opposition to emancipation in Kentucky may have affected his liberal paternalism regarding his own slaves. Although he extended something approaching freedom to one bondman in Louisiana, Allec, he never opted to emancipate any of the slaves he had in Kentucky.
Dinsmore found public involvement to be a satisfying activity and owning slaves offered him the leisure time to pursue it. In 1846, only four years after he moved to Kentucky, he was appointed a surveyor of the roads, an important job in an area where roads, not bayous, might determine the success of a country store, grist mill, or farm. Those who did not perform their duties to the approbation of neighbors could find themselves at the wrong end of a court injunction. Two years later he was recommended and appointed Justice of the Peace and in 1851, following the changes in the constitution that transformed that office to an elective one, he was elected to the position.  

The issue of slavery was becoming important at the time Dinsmore moved to Boone County for another reason. The border region, especially the river counties, was becoming whiter as a result of runaways and slave sales, a trend that was alternately threatening and unifying in its consequences for slaveholders and non-slaveholders. The absolute number of slaves dropped in ten of the nineteen counties along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, and the percentage of slaves in the population of all border counties dropped by more than one percentage point in all but three counties. Kentucky also saw its percentage of slaves drop slightly during the same time period, and over a twenty-year period the drop was consistent: from 23.4 percent in 1840 to 21.5 percent in 1850 to 19.5 percent in 1860. There was a similar pattern of declension in Maryland, Delaware, and Missouri, despite an increase in the absolute number of slaves in the latter state. Historian J. Blaine Hudson, in his study of slave escapes across the Ohio River, argues that there was an increase in the number of runaways after 1850 and women were more represented in later years as runaways began traveling in larger groups. In Boone County the trend commenced earlier. In 1847 a large group of slaves escaped successfully to
Cass County, Michigan. Five years later, Jonas Crisler reported that at least thirty had run off from the Petersburg area and the county seat of Burlington. “I have no doubt if things continue negro slaves will be scarce neare the O. River,” he complained.\textsuperscript{15} Another fifty-five slaves were reported as running away in 1853, and then in 1856, the year of Margaret Garner’s escape (followed by the nation’s most infamous freedom trials) at least two other groups of runaways were reported missing from her Richwood neighborhood. The following year, more escapes were made from the Petersburg area. These freedom actions suggest slaves’ understanding of the erosion of the peculiar institution’s viability following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, and among the fruits of slavery politics was the involvement of more antislavery whites and free blacks in slave escapes.\textsuperscript{16}

As news of successful escapes spread through the neighborhoods of Boone County, whites responded to the threat by banding together to protect their property. Accusations flew against whites and blacks for enticing their property away. Jonas Crisler held the free black Bates family that lived near the Ohio River responsible for piloting slaves illegally across to Indiana. A letter to the \textit{Licking Valley Register} complained that “we have too many free negroes among us.” In May of 1843, a white man, William Brasher, was accused of “seducing” Jerry, Ben and Jac away from their master. It took three years to locate Brasher, who was eventually sentenced to four and a half years of hard labor. Even slaveowners stood accused. Thomas J. Trundle was arrested in 1853 for being an abolitionist. Although a doctor and slaveowner in the county since at least 1840, owning twelve slaves in 1850, Trundle’s deposition stated that his suspicious neighbors spied on him and witnessed him encouraging an enslaved man
to cross the river to Indiana where white men would be located to help him. His bail was set at a high fifteen thousand dollars. Trundle died in a Kenton County jail where he had been moved for a fair trial, before he could defend himself.\textsuperscript{17}

In a porous environment, whites also formed home protection groups to protect slavery. In 1841, the stated object of the newly formed Kenton County Association was the “security of our servants” and their recovery. Each neighborhood was to establish a Committee of Vigilance of one to three men, and they would regulate all hired slaves, free blacks, and “pedlars and all suspicious [white] persons.” A corresponding committee was also set up to work with other counties.\textsuperscript{18} In 1847, John L. Graves, the sheriff of Boone County, led twelve other men, including at least one original member of the Association, to Cass County, Michigan, to capture runaways from Kenton and Boone counties. Styled the “Cassopolis Outrage” by northerners, they were stymied in their attempt by local residents. Two years later, John Norris, a Petersburg resident who had lost several runaways, made another attempt with seven men. They captured several blacks and were returning through Indiana when they were surrounded. After this failure, Norris gave up hope that he would ever see his property again and sued for damages. He successfully won a judgment of almost three thousand dollars, an amount he hoped would temper the desire of whites to aid fugitives. On the eve of the Civil War, Florence, on the Covington and Lexington turnpike, banned all hucksters and peddlers as “the most dangerous emissaries of the underground railroad companies” and set up a committee of five to investigate anyone trading with Negroes without permission.\textsuperscript{19}

Though the statewide discussions of emancipation have been cited as encouraging slaves to cross the river in search of immediate freedom, in Boone County the drop in the
population of bondmen was gradual and continued to the beginning of the Civil War. There does not appear to have been a concerted effort by owners to sell slaves further south, but it was clearly happening on a smaller scale. The number of slaves dropped from 2,183 to 1,745 between 1840 and 1860, a 20 percent drop. Cautioning his son-in-law who was looking to purchase a young male slave, Jonas Crisler insisted that there were none available for purchase in the area “but what has been guilty of some bad act, sold to the traders and taken below.”

Henry James, a slaveowner in the Richwood area, connected fugitives with the increasing number of Boone County slaves being sold south. In his response to Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, James’s Abolitionism Unveiled has the main character (a Boone slaveholder) blame the slaves’ “officious friends in Ohio, who had, for years, been preparing the way for this great calamity to them.” But this fictional slaveholder believed it was better to sell them south than have them “abandon me at my advanced age, and leave me here without assistance, to struggle on as best I can.”

In 1856, Dinsmore wrote to his friend, Tobias Gibson, noting the numerous slaves who had crossed the frozen river that winter, predicting that “farmers, having become alarmed, will sell off those that do not escape so that our county will soon be cleared.”

In the 1850s, the Whig Party found itself increasingly irrelevant and all but disintegrated outside Kentucky. A new Republican Party was pieced together from Whig remnants and northern anti-slavery Democrats, posing problems for Dinsmore in Kentucky. The economic policies of the new party were similar to Whig policies: they supported a tariff to protect American manufacturing, argued for the necessity for a strong national banking system, and believed the government should invest in internal
improvements. All were issues Dinsmore supported. The party’s support for free labor in the territories and their critique of the South as a region where opportunity was stifled by the economic, social, and political control of the slaveowning class contributed to its unpopularity in slaveholding areas. As a conservative Whig, Dinsmore would have agreed with the Republican outlook that the slave’s indolence was a product of his environment and that the region suffered economically because of slavery, but he would have had a difficult time voting for a party with a wing that denounced slaveowners in moral terms. Despite his distaste for the actions of some slaveowners, he did not view his own actions as a slaveowner as immoral. He was a compassionate owner who was preparing his bondpeople for freedom.23

While Dinsmore and others in Boone County would have found something to like in Republican Party ideas, most southern slaveholders condemned any party that criticized slavery as a menace to their economic livelihood and social order. When those anti-slavery arguments were laced with moral denunciations, the people enunciating them became more unbearable, even in places like Kentucky, where slavery was not the economic basis of society. The upheaval caused by sectional troubles had the potential to set Dinsmore back. With instability in border slave states and outright violence in the Kansas territory, he did not feel he could send his slaves to Missouri where he was a partner in a hemp farm in the Little Dixie region along the Missouri River. He wanted “the Kansas case to be settled, before I expose [my slaves] in that region.”24

The transition from a state that enjoyed Whig majorities in the 1840s to one that turned to the Democratic Party was mirrored in Boone County. Historian James R. Robertson notes the link between support for the Whig Party in the “richer soils” of the
Bluegrass in the 1852 election while the “thinner lands” tended to support the Democratic Party. In Boone County, the results were similarly divided by region, but the results were different. Those supportive of Whig policies tended to live in more populated areas such as Burlington, Petersburg and the Walton-Richwood area, while Democratic candidates won in the more rural communities like Hebron, Florence Crossroads, Union, and Big Bone. (Petersburg would have contained some fertile land along the Ohio River, some of the most fertile in the county, but the Big Bone district was similarly fertile.) The difference is that in the 1840s and early 1850s Petersburg and the Walton-Richwood areas were the most market-oriented communities in the county, along with the county seat of Burlington. By the beginning of the Civil War, Florence had nearly caught up with its sister communities.25

By that time, a political realignment of the county had taken hold, startlingly fast in the last years of the decade. Those last elections ultimately turned Boone County into a Democratic stronghold. Michael Holt argues that in some Kentucky counties, Whigs successfully infiltrated the Know Nothings and turned their message away from vitriolic anti-Catholicism and toward popular issues for Kentucky Whigs, such as appropriations for colonization, agricultural fairs, and asylums, and fewer bank charters to maintain financial stability. The 1855 gubernatorial election saw the former-Whig-turned-American Party candidate, Charles S. Morehead, besting the Democratic candidate, illustrating how successful the Whigs message was within the American Party. Morehead was one of only two nativist candidates to win in a slaveholding state and he managed to pick up the vote in Boone County. Some Whigs chose to vote with Democrats that year but not in the large numbers that observers had forecast. Following
closely on the heels of that election, the presidential election of 1856 saw Millard Fillmore run for the American Party, and he won in Boone County, but many Kentucky Whigs joined with Democrats to elect their fellow statesman, John C. Breckinridge as vice president to James Buchanan. In that election, Kentucky’s elfin Republican Party had put forward its first slate of state candidates and expected the party would draw from Louisville and the eastern region of the state because of the small number of slaves there. Although there was an American Party meeting in the Union settlement prior to the election for governor in 1859, Boone County had gone over to the Democratic Party and voted like all of its neighboring counties and most of the counties in Kentucky.  

For all the success the Democratic Party had in the 1859 state election, the appearance of unity was ephemeral as infighting began. The split was, predictably, along sectional lines. Some Democrats were more sympathetic to the northern branch of the party and believed that the Kansas-Nebraska Act had unnecessarily fomented conflict, while others aligned themselves with southern Democrats in support of the expansion of slavery westward. Lewis Loder, of Petersburg, began subscribing to the *Spirit of the South*, published in Louisville, in the spring of 1859, indicating where he felt his state’s sympathies should lay. The split in the Kentucky Democratic Party was mirrored in the fate of the national party as the 1860 election approached. In that election the party that won a majority in Kentucky (the Constitutional Union party of John Bell) was called the “safest and most conservative” party by John J. Crittenden. In the tradition of Henry Clay, the majority of Kentuckians and the majority of men in Boone County opted for compromise. Like the Breckinridge ticket, Bell spoke of states’ rights, but he also emphasized the importance of Union, which Breckinridge did not. Abraham Lincoln’s
victory forced an existential debate on Kentuckians—who were they and where did they belong?27

Dinsmore’s long-standing distaste for the Democratic Party made it unlikely he would vote with them, though how he actually voted is unknown. An American Party co-opted by former Whigs would have been the more appealing option for him. With his close connection to German immigrants, he likely would not have voted for the American Party if their message primarily targeted immigrants. As a man who was born in the North, but lived on the border of the South and owned slaves, Dinsmore was politically comfortable in his conservative Whig Party, which survived longer in Kentucky. But as the politics of slavery increasingly consumed the country, he—like Kentucky—was forced to choose between the North of his birth and his adopted South. While he retained strong cultural ties to the North, surely he reflected on the years of his maturity spent in Terrebonne Parish and Boone County and how they affected his aging mind and soul.
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14 Commonwealth vs. James Corbin, Item 19, September 1838 and July 1839, Boone County Circuit Court (BCCC), Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (KDLA), Frankfort, Kentucky; *Boone County Order Book*, 1849, Microfilm, BCPL; Jas. Dinsmore Public Documents, Roll 11, file 2011, DFP.


18 “Kenton County Association,” *Licking Valley Register*, 27 November 1847, KCPL.


21 Henry Field James, *Abolitionism Unveiled; Or, Its Origin, Progress, and Pernicious Tendency Fully Developed* (Cincinnati: E. Morgan and Sons, 1856), 32.


27 *The Loder Diary*, Book One, 16 April 1859; Robertson, “Sectionalism in Kentucky,” 57-59.
Chapter Eight

“Be Tender of Pa’s Feelings:” The Civil War and Reconstruction in a Divided State

The Civil War and Reconstruction left an indelible mark on Kentucky and its people. Forced to visibly demonstrate their allegiance to either the Union or the Confederacy, the conflict pitted siblings, generations, neighbors, and communities against one another. Politically, it transformed a dependably Whig state into a Democratic stronghold and it converted many white westerners into defiant southerners. For James Dinsmore the war reinforced not only his cultural heritage as a New Englander but also his economic and social ties to the North, all of which outweighed his cultural, economic, and social ties to the South and West.

Prior to the war, Kentucky held an advantageous geographic location. Living in a western state with a long northern border on the Ohio River and a western border touching the Mississippi River, its residents benefited from trade to the north and the south. Inhabitants of Kentucky moved north and settled in the southern regions of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, while others moved west into Missouri, spreading their culture as they traveled but preserving their links to their home state. As the home state of Henry Clay, it was looked to as a compromising voice in an increasingly uncompromising political world.¹
By the war’s end, Kentucky had traded in its western heritage for a southern identity, sacrificing a more urban, manufacturing future for a continued focus on agriculture and its byproducts. While its citizens did not vote to secede and join the Confederacy in 1861, by the end of the Civil War their behavior was similar to that of their southern neighbors. Politically they had become a part of the solid Democratic South. The state remained a violent place, but that violence was now more racially motivated and reinforced the views of many Kentuckians that, like the South, white supremacy helped to validate who they were. Due to the violence endemic in most parts of the state, Kentuckians were forced to confront the Freedman’s Bureau as they moved from slave labor to free labor.²

That Kentucky played a unique role in the Civil War has been recognized by historians. As a western border state with economic ties to both the North and the South, Kentucky was a portrait in paradox. As early as 1926, E. Merton Coulter portrayed the state as unpredictable to those who thought they knew Kentucky. His monograph on the war and Reconstruction, though dated by its Dunning-school interpretation, contains much useful research. As the first historian to study Kentucky during this time period, Coulter found much fault with the federal government, both before and after the war. Believing that most Kentuckians sympathized with the Confederacy even if they remained on the sidelines in the war, he identified a number of issues—trade regulations, the hog swindle, the drafting of slaves, and the creation of the Freedman’s Bureau—that turned such people into neo-Confederates after the war. Recently, a more nuanced history of this border state has emerged, though all acknowledge, as did Coulter, that federal policies were responsible for Kentucky’s transformation by the end of the war.
But slavery and race played an equal factor. Since white supremacy was a central value for white men and women in Kentucky, the wartime erosion of slavery and the enlistment of black soldiers were turning points for Union supporters in those states and carried racial animus fully into these states’ postwar experiences. Federal policies and whites’ insistence on continued racial subordination following emancipation precipitated the widespread violence that followed the war.\(^3\)

As the four-way presidential election of 1860 approached, Kentucky, and Boone County, voiced their ambivalence about secession. John C. Breckinridge, a native son and current vice-president under Buchanan, was understood to be the states’ rights candidate and was a favorite of Deep South Democrats. The Constitutional Union candidate and U.S. senator from neighboring Tennessee, John C. Bell, appealed to those who believed that a compromise over slavery was needed to hold the country together. Stephen Douglas, the leading advocate of popular sovereignty and architect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, made himself unpopular to most pro-slavery Democrats once he publicly opposed the controversial Lecompton constitution that attempted to secure Kansas as a slaveholding state. Representing the Republican Party, Abraham Lincoln was an unacceptable choice for most Kentucky voters.

The results of the pivotal election of 1860 point to the significance of how Kentuckians viewed themselves and their place in the Union. While Abraham Lincoln won the popular vote with 40 percent of the electorate, John C. Bell won the votes of a plurality of Kentuckians with 45 percent. The only other states Bell carried were Tennessee and Virginia; two other states where the economic importance of slavery was not uniformly strong throughout the states. However, Bell was also popular along the
southern portions of the Mississippi River, including Adams County, Mississippi where Dinsmore’s friend William Minor still had a home. Boone County’s vote for Bell was a retreat by historically Whig voters from their short flirtation with the Democratic Party in 1859. The neighboring counties of Campbell and Kenton also voted for Bell, following a decade of support for the Democratic Party. Bell made sense for northern Kentucky because of its close trade relationship with Ohio and he was a good fit for a state where Henry Clay was still revered as a compromiser. According to Kentuckian John J. Crittenden, the author of the last compromise before the Civil War, the Constitutional Union Party was “the party that is safest and most conservative.” The rejection of Breckinridge by a majority of Kentuckians, as the candidate who appeared to support secession, was a tacit admission that the institution of slavery was not strong enough to bind the state to the South and break it away from the Union. The state’s residents maintained a strong identity as a western state, the first one west of the Appalachians. Even those in Boone County who strongly supported the Confederacy did not necessarily consider themselves as geographically southern. Polly Bristow, who lived near the small town of Florence and was outraged by the “fanatical bigots” of the North, wrote in late April 1861: “The war commenced between the North and South but East and West is also rising . . . . My every feeling is with the South.” An appeal to those hostile to the Republican Party published in a Covington newspaper following the election was directed toward the “brethren of the Slave States,” not southern states, emphasizing one of the characteristics Kentucky had in common with the South; slavery was not a strong enough bond for most Kentuckians.
The election of Lincoln in November 1860 quickly led to the secession of South Carolina and six other states from the Deep South, leaving many men in Kentucky considering where their loyalty lay. As a border state, those in Kentucky who supported the Union did so partly based on the uneasiness slaveowners felt toward their human property situated so close to free territory. Within the Union, they viewed the Constitution as a protector of this property and the strict Fugitive Slave Law as a means for ensuring that runaways would be returned. Joining the Confederacy would mean an end to slavery for those living close to the Ohio River because runaways who were once crossing a state boundary and subject to federal laws, would, in the future, be crossing a national border whose inhabitants would no longer be obligated to return them. Southern independence, if Kentucky were to join the Confederacy, would dramatically increase the numbers of runaways along the Ohio River, forcing slaveowners to either sell their slaves south or watch their investment vanish. Slaveowners in the Deep South did not have to confront this problem because their property rarely succeeded in escaping to the North, but those along the border of the Confederacy would have to confront the prospect of runaways regardless of where that border was. Conservative Unionists supported the Union and generally regarded secession as a fatal step that would trigger the end of slavery in their state, inevitably leading to economic and social chaos. Although recognizing the complaints of secessionists regarding the protection of slavery, leaving the Union was not a solution to their problems. Their desire was to see their state rival northern states in manufacturing and development, but a war would ruin this dream.⁶

The declaration of neutrality in May 1861 brought together many Kentuckians of different loyalties. Unconditional Unionists strongly supported the central government
even though they did not belong to the Republican Party and these men did not want to see their state ruined by a war. Conditional Unionists supported the government as long as it did not infringe on their concept of state sovereignty. An example of this mindset is reflected in a resolution by citizens of Verona, in November 1860 declaring that “although we deeply deplore the action of certain Northern States in attempting by force to deprive us of the benefit of the Fugitive Slave Law, yet we discountenance secession, in every form until some overt act is committed by the President elect.” Neutrality also appealed to those who supported the South but did not care to join their fight, those who supported secession and may have even had a family member in the Confederate Army and did not want to pay taxes to support the war, and those who had no ideological position on the war and believed they could make a profit trading with both sides in the conflict. One of the complaints about Kentuckians during this neutral phase of the war was that they were more loyal to their pocketbook than to their country. The untenable adoption of neutrality was ended in early September after Confederate General Leonidas Polk sent his troops to occupy the town of Columbus on the Mississippi River as a result of the presence of Federal troops just opposite in Missouri. Quickly responding, General Grant entered the state from Illinois and four Confederate regiments crossed the southeastern border. The legislature issued a proclamation over the Governor’s veto calling on the southern troops to leave the state. Just days after this Boone County men from “all the late political organizations in the State,” met in Burlington to protest against the “introduction and organization of Federal troops” into Kentucky and “the payment of money in the form of taxes” to support the war.7
As the county leaders affirmed their state’s right to be neutral while declaring for the Union, some of the young men of the county were already leaving to fight. Eight men left Petersburg in October of 1861 bound for Tennessee to enlist in the Confederate Army, while several had left in August for Indiana to do the same for the federal army. It is difficult to get accurate numbers for the men in Boone County who fought for the Union and the Confederacy because of the numbers of men who enlisted outside the state and others who purchased substitutes from elsewhere. One source, relying on the official records of enlistees, lists 462 white men who served in the Union Army from Boone County, accounting for about 31 percent of white males twenty to forty years old. This high number must include men who served as substitutes for Boone County draftees, whether or not they lived in the county. In the June and September 1864 drafts, draftees and the county looked to neighboring counties to help fill their quota. A local county historian, Jack Rouse, researched military records for primarily white soldiers on both sides and compared that to census records and mentions of veterans in the local paper and counted approximately 235 men in the Confederate armies and 168 in the federal armies, about 27 percent of white males of military age. Several years after the war, county leaders made detailed notes of families who had sons, sons-in-law, or slaves liable to the September 1864 draft and those who actually served. Their count found that 128 men served with the Union and 84 with the Confederacy and is a helpful snapshot in illustrating the patterns of Unionism within the county. Consistent with William W. Freehling’s findings that most military-age men in Kentucky did not serve in either army, more than 70 percent of white males of military age in Boone County sat out the war, according to the Rouse numbers.8
Local white men who served for the Confederate Army were more motivated early on to risk their lives in part to preserve their slaveowning society, often euphemized as “a way of life.” A sample of seventy men from Boone County who served in the two armies reveals clear trends. Both groups were about the same age, between twenty and thirty. Of the men who served in the Confederate Army, over one-third of their families owned over ten thousand dollars of property, while just 11 percent of Union soldiers’ families were as well situated. A full 54 percent of the sample Confederate soldiers or their immediate families owned slaves and about 17 percent of Union soldiers did. In the 1864 tally the county made following the war, only 40 percent of the Union soldiers served prior to the draft as compared to 75 percent of Confederates, suggesting a higher level of motivation early in the war. On the other hand, it also implies that as the war continued, fewer men were willing to join the Confederate armies.9

The timing of men leaving home to enlist in the Confederate armies directly correlates to dissatisfaction with federal policies. The first men joined up in the summer of 1861 and were insignificant in number. Confederate recruits from northern Kentucky had to leave to leave the state to fight owing to the state’s neutrality and the federal occupation of the northern counties, or once Confederate troops occupied the southern counties they headed to that portion of the state. In the fall of 1862, when northern Kentucky began to feel the hard hand of the Federal Government as a result of a Confederate advance by forces under Edmund Kirby Smith and Humphrey Marshall, a rush of men (and civilians) left for the Confederacy. Until the summer of 1864, few Boone County men ran off to fight with the rebel army, while others began to return home as deserters. In late 1864 another enlistment spike occurred, most likely a reaction
to the enlistment of African Americans into the Union Army. According to the abbreviated county records, one-fifth of the men who fought for the Confederacy joined the army in 1864, during and after the contentious Federal draft in Kentucky.\textsuperscript{10}

Communities, too, found themselves on opposing sides. While a majority of the men in most communities in Boone enlisted in the Union Army according to county records, the precinct of Union had no men from the 1864 draft in the Union Army while eleven men (12 percent) fought in the Confederate Army. Florence had only three men in the Union Army and twelve in the Confederate forces, but 92 percent of the draft-age men in Florence were not serve in either army in 1864. On the other side was the precinct of Hamilton, where 33 percent of the drafted men served in the military, 89 percent of them in the Union Army. In Dinsmore’s small precinct of Belleview, 26 percent of the drafted men served, nine for the Union and three for the Confederacy.\textsuperscript{11} Petersburg’s large slaveholding Terrill family had two sons fighting for the Union and three for the Confederacy. Most siblings who fought in the war, though, fought for the same side. Six Chittenden boys, brothers and cousins, joined the Union Army as did two Anderson brothers. Two boys from the Cloud family fought with the Confederate Army.\textsuperscript{12}

Such figures are reflective of the reality that, as with the rest of Kentucky and other border states, families, neighbors, and communities in Boone County found themselves at odds with one another. Arguments, social, financial, and political, between neighbors soon led to a breakdown in the social environment of neighborhoods and communities. In the first year of the war, William Boone of Union was caught while trying to burn the barn of a Unionist. When Henry Snyder, the former owner of the large
Petersburg distillery and flour mill, left abruptly in the fall of 1861 for Chattanooga, his debts were settled by selling all of his property. This did not satisfy everyone and some turned to the courts, suing his daughter in his place. His absence also allowed earlier suits he had instigated to go against him as it was alleged in court that he “voluntarily aided and assisted the armies . . . of the so called Confederate States in waging war upon the government of the United States and the State of Kentucky” by making “large quantities” of whiskey and flour “for the sustenance of their armies.” The court ruled against Snyder.\textsuperscript{13} As Confederate troops approached northern Kentucky in the summer of 1862, Confederate sympathizers became more bold and it was reported in the \textit{Cincinnati Daily Commercial} that “Union men are driven from their farms every day in Boone County” by gangs of traitors who went unpunished. Elections also created tension and anger among neighbors. They were a continual source of conflict as those who were appointed judges of the elections had the right to insist on an iron-clad loyalty oath for all those taking part. A speech given by Col. John F. Fisk in Burlington in 1862 was praised for being “at once conservative and conciliatory, designed to draw the people together rather than to widen the breach between them.”\textsuperscript{14}

Because the family had only daughters, the war did not affect the Dinsmores in terms of enlistment. By the time the war had begun, James was almost seventy-one years old and his youngest daughter, Susan, and wife, Martha, had died and his eldest daughter had married and moved to Minnesota. Julia Dinsmore, the middle daughter, remained in Kentucky with her father, leaving periodically to visit acquaintances in Lexington and Cincinnati, and relatives in New York. The closest Dinsmore came to the war was the purchase of a pistol in the tense summer of 1862. His old friends, William Minor and
Tobias Gibson had sons fighting in the Confederate Army and although the men may have stopped corresponding by this time, Julia Dinsmore was close to all the Gibson children and was sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Her elder sister cautioned her to “be tender of Pa’s feelings [and] prejudices . . . . He is a Northern man and has a perfect right to his way of thinking.” Although Dinsmore had lived the previous forty-six years of his life in parts of the South and the West, his heart was with the Union, making him a northern man in the eyes of his neighbors and family. That he owned slaves made him the inverse in the eyes of many unionists, especially across the river. The conundrum of slaveholding unionism did not confuse his daughters, and Dinsmore would never support secession to uphold slavery, which he viewed as an economic impediment for Kentucky.\(^\text{15}\)

Outwardly, Dinsmore fit the description of a Conservative Unionist, who placed social and economic stability and tradition over sectional issues. His conservatism had less to do with white supremacy and more to do with a reverence for the Union that went beyond that of his unionist neighbors. The Civil War forced him to choose between supporting the country his grandfather had helped to create and whose birth his father had witnessed or supporting a war against that country. Though slavery had become an integral part of his life and a key to his success as well as a symbol of his success, he did not believe it was worth the destruction of his country. Favoring some aspects of the Republican Party’s economic message, he subscribed to the Cincinnati Commercial, a Republican newspaper, throughout the war. He had always believed the nation’s sections equally contributed to the wealth of the country rather than viewing them as competitors for political power.\(^\text{16}\)
Though traditional in some aspects of his life, Dinsmore was also inquisitive and open to new ideas that challenged his conservatism. His interest in Unitarianism and his proximity to Cincinnati may have introduced him to the “romantic racialism” of William Ellery Channing and Alexander Kinmont. But other aspects of Dinsmore’s life, including his interest in Spiritualism, Phrenology, and other antebellum reforms, illustrate his belief in the ability of humankind to improve, if not actually perfect, themselves and their world. More likely, he was an environmental racialist, meaning that he believed slaves were a victim of their environment and, surrounded by cruel, aggressive, and immoral whites they would have a difficult time making their way in America, so one should not be surprised or dismayed by the physical and mental condition of enslaved people. That he considered the environment to be key in shaping a person’s behavior can be seen in his interest in the books of Alexander Walker, who believed that human beauty was only found in certain places on the globe and that “Women, accordingly, of consummate beauty, are found only in civilized nations.” Relying on a labor force that included blacks and whites, bond and free, Dinsmore relegated all of them to the laboring class. He recognized that enslaved people could become as skilled as white workers, which is why he had a slave trained to become a cooper on Bayou Black. Likewise, for him emancipation was a “stage” in life for those who desired it enough to work for it. While there is no proof that Allec and Lindor, his bondmen in Louisiana, were legally free, they had achieved freedom in Dinsmore’s mind because they had proved they could work for it. If they could work for it, then others could. They might make wrong moral choices, such as Lindor’s excessive drinking prior to his death, but their shortcomings were no worse than those of poor white laborers. The fact that several of his slaves knew how to
read and write while his American-born tenants were often illiterate illustrated his belief that, with opportunity and effort, all men could make something of themselves even if they could not attain his level of education and success.\textsuperscript{17}

The wartime emancipation of slaves would likely not have adversely affected Dinsmore as much as other slaveowners in his area. In Kentucky, his bondpeople were occasionally allowed to go to the local store to purchase items for themselves and were given small amounts of cash to spend. While records were not kept detailing a cash value for their labor and they were never compensated as much as the tenants, if he considered their room and board part of their pay, then their payment in goods was quite similar to that of the tenants. Outside of the basket makers, the tenants and day laborers also received very small amounts of cash since their wages were primarily in goods and credit slips for the local store. The cabins the slaves lived in were not models of comfort but they were likely similar to the cabins tenants built on the property. On Dinsmore’s farm in Missouri, where his bondpeople worked under the orders of a manager, he paid the slaves more substantial amounts for breaking hemp, though women and young people always made less than adult men, as was the case with whites who worked for him. In 1858, John made $26.36 and David Taylor made $19.16. The larger amounts may reflect their inability to get credit at a local store like the slaves in Boone County. Thus Dinsmore was already used to thinking about slave labor in terms of compensation, a concept he learned from his time in Louisiana. He was not the only Boone County farmer whose bondmen had access to cash. The occasional bartender who was cited for serving drinks to slaves are witnesses to the fact that slaves with money was not an unusual occurrence but many slaveowners and county leaders were uncomfortable with
this reality. Allowing slaves economic freedom was frowned on because it weakened the institution, as evidenced in the Boone County prosecution of Polly Bristow in 1864 for “suffering and permitting her slave Sim, to go at large and hire himself out and trade as a free man.” ¹⁸

As it became clear that the war was going to settle the question of slavery, Boone Countians grew anxious at black men and women presuming they would soon be free. For Dinsmore, the payments he made to his bondpeople were a part of his self-image as a slaveowner; they allowed him to accept his ownership of others because he believed he was preparing them for eventual freedom. Certainly, emancipation would have altered Dinsmore’s view of himself and his world, but he would have been less affected by it than some of his neighbors whose view of slavery was more colored by racist beliefs.

Dinsmore’s ownership of slaves enhanced his place as a gentleman farmer and scientific farmer, and contributed significantly to his self-image. But, by the mid-1850s he relied more heavily on hired white laborers like John and Peter Deck and August Cook, for the important work on the farm: pruning of the grapevines and making wine, tending the orchard, and making baskets. These were literate, semi-skilled white men. Although Dinsmore had always relied on white men for some of the work on the farm, the number of such men increased in the late antebellum years, primarily owing to his investment in the willow basket enterprise. The male slaves, John, David Taylor, Coah, and Isaac Sanders, spent much of their time with the general upkeep of the farm: grubbing, making fences, and fixing the watergaps. They shared these jobs with the poor, white, illiterate Koons men and with those German immigrants who stayed on the farm.
year-round. Often the black and white men worked side-by-side, illustrating for Dinsmore their status below him.\textsuperscript{19}

Dinsmore’s conversion to white labor might not have been entirely his choice. By 1864, wartime pressures made such conversion nearly inescapable, alongside a parallel conversion of Unionist support into vociferous protests against the federal government. Boone County had seen upheavals before 1864, but Union sentiment had remained visibly strong, even if men and women were privately questioning the course of the government and the behavior of the armed forces in their midst. During the Bragg invasion of 1862, when Confederate cavalry under John Hunt Morgan approached Covington, the county was in an almost constant state of excitement. The \textit{Cincinnati Daily Commercial} reported that Morgan’s presence in southern Boone County inspired gangs of secessionists who were “going about unmolested” and driving Union men away from their homes.\textsuperscript{20} In nearby Petersburg, Lewis A. Loder reported that there was “great excitement” as the authorities began arresting men suspected of supporting or sympathizing with the Confederates. Two men were taken away and “M. Carson skedaddled,” presumably to Canada.\textsuperscript{21} In August, the \textit{Covington Journal} reported that thirty-eight horses were taken from southern sympathizers in Boone County and driven to Cincinnati. One month later, more arrests occurred and they increased throughout the following year, with several men and women being sent north of the Ohio River “until permitted elsewhere.”\textsuperscript{22}

One of the aggravations caused by federal interference was when military authorities began cracking down on the trading privileges of persons whose loyalty was suspected. In August of 1864, the military commander of the Department of Kentucky,
Stephen G. Burbridge, began requiring farmers to obtain permits to sell goods across the Ohio River. Obtaining such a permit compelled one to take an oath of loyalty, so those who supported the Confederacy in any way could be excluded from the lucrative markets to the North. A writer in a Covington paper had great hopes for the new regulations, because he felt that disloyal men had all the economic advantages before: they did not join the army, they did not contribute funds to support soldiers’ families, and they did not contribute to county bounties. However, they “were in particular favor with the wealthy rebel families, and were recipients, of course, of their valuable patronage.” Such oaths gave the advantage to loyal persons. The “hog swindle” of that fall was an attempt by the military to encourage loyal Kentucky farmers to sell their hogs to the military so the military could avoid a ring of meat packers who were pushing the price to exorbitant levels. In September of 1863, mess pork had gone from $17 a barrel to $32. In order to avoid having to pay such a high price, Burbridge was convinced by others to require permits for farmers to sell their pork out of the state in the hopes they would instead sell to the government. The out-of-state packers conspired to ruin the government’s plans by moving into the state and offering a higher price than the government. In the end, the government was able to save some money, but the amount was negligible when compared with the ill will fostered by the scheme. In northern Kentucky, the hog swindle created less of a furor in the local newspapers than the political troubles of that year.23

Politically, 1864 was a critical presidential election year, and increasing numbers of men were kept from the polls because they were suspected of having southern sympathies or because they refused to take an oath of loyalty to the federal government. Beginning with the state elections in August and continuing for over a year, there was an
effort to ensure that men who supported the Confederacy in any way would not be able to vote. If they were on record for not previously taking the loyalty oath, or if they refused to take the oath at the polls they were barred from voting. John Sleet sued the four men who were responsible for rejecting his vote. Voting was the defining act of a citizen, thus the inability to vote at a time when enslaved men were being freed and enlisted into the army was a double insult to the manhood of many whites. The additional insult of a declaration of martial law by the army gave the appearance of an occupied state. Although many in the state and in Boone County still voiced their support for the Union, Kentuckians voted overwhelmingly for Democrat George B. McClellan over Abraham Lincoln in the November election. While Lincoln won in the more urban and ethnically diverse counties of Campbell and Kenton, he lost in the northern counties where the enslaved population made up a larger part of the general population.24

Foremost among the threats to Union support was in the spring of 1864 when the federal government first turned to African Americans to fill the draft rolls for the state when pitifully few white men showed up for duty. As the war lengthened, the goals of the Lincoln administration had changed from restoring the Union to freeing slaves. The promulgation of the Emancipation Proclamation in the fall of 1862 did not cause the uproar that the drafts of 1864 did, because Kentuckians had believed slavery in their state was still safe. Though this draft of blacks began with those whose masters gave their permission, it soon allowed for all slaves to leave their masters with or without permission. This move was actually beneficial to Kentucky in the long run, because slaves were already running away to join the army but their numbers were being added to
the counts of other states. However, the resistance to it produced a backlash that, though expected to some extant, helped to turn the tide of Unionism in Kentucky.\textsuperscript{25}

Predictably, the county’s white residents experienced difficulties with its slave population, whose numbers surprisingly increased during the latter years of the war, likely from the movement of slaves away from areas where the war threatened their servitude. Dinsmore moved seven or eight of his bondmen from his Saline County farm in Missouri to Kentucky in late 1862. Although the number of county slaves dropped between the summer of 1861 and 1862, in 1862 there were 1,635 enslaved people in the county and two years later there were 1,787. With the Union Army in the vicinity, and with federal officers and free blacks accused of enticing slaves away, the value of slaves steadily and understandably eroded, declining by two-thirds by 1864. When slave numbers dropped precipitously by the summer of 1865, slaves as a human commodity were largely worthless.\textsuperscript{26}

The draft of black soldiers was a watershed for Boone County. In May 1864, provost marshals received orders to “accept all Negroes who may offer themselves as recruits, \textit{regardless of the wishes of their owners}.”\textsuperscript{27} Uniformed and armed black soldiers were guaranteed to make enemies of many who believed in white supremacy as a traditional pillar of western conservatism. Several years later, a county leader wrote: “A short time before a second draft of 19 September 1864 a squad of Negro troops canvassed this county and entirely unsettled its Negro population.” Many slaves ran off with the army and, according to him, many had already run off.\textsuperscript{28} Racial violence erupted as local whites, already angered by black troops from Ohio and elsewhere conducting searches of Kentuckians crossing the river to and from Cincinnati, targeted black troops in Kentucky.
Two men from Boone County were arrested and charged with threatening to kill a black soldier “engaged in recruiting.”  Several months after Kentucky’s freedpeople had begun serving in the Union Army, a Covington man was shot in a scuffle with black soldiers.

The effect of recruitment on black men was electric. Not only were they being asked to carry a gun and fight for the Union, but they were promised freedom for doing so, and their families were also given their freedom. Seeing other black men dressed proudly in their blue uniforms encouraging them to fight was an excellent marketing tool. A local newspaper described the result as an “exodus” of not only draft-age men but also their wives and children. As a result, according to one oblivious Boone Countian, “If a Negro remained with his master it was because he chose to, and not of compulsion.”

According to the official figures, approximately 55 percent of military-aged black men from the county served in the Federal army during the war and this may be a low figure due to the numbers who likely left the state to enlist, a stark contrast to the number of white men serving in either army. Slaveowners in the area who did not want their bondmen to join the Union Army and carry a gun had few options at their disposal to prevent them from enlisting. Some may have done like Dinsmore, who paid a commutation fee to keep his bondman, David Taylor, out of the army. In the end, though, more black men served from Kentucky than any other state save one, and helped to precipitate the late spike in the number of white men leaving the county and the state to join the Confederate Army even as it was becoming apparent the Confederacy was doomed to defeat.
Economically, the county experienced a sharp decline in several important agricultural products during the war. While the region suffered little real destruction, the loss of the labor of young men, both white and black, led to an unsettled state that undoubtedly contributed to a dramatic downturn in agricultural production between 1860 and 1865. The most drastic drop was in the number of hogs raised. The number had dropped by 67 percent in 1864 from its high point of 23,758 in the year 1860. Similarly, the corn crop dropped by 44% in those same years, alongside the number and value of horses. The amount of tobacco produced experienced dramatic changes during the war. In 1859 over 600,000 pounds were raised by Boone Countians, but this number dropped to 71,750 two years later and then increased sharply to 1,402,700 by 1863, before decreasing dramatically again by 65 percent in the following year. Overall, taxable property decreased.\(^{32}\)

Eroding social, economic, and political realities deepened the growing alienation from and resentment of federal authority in Boone County and much of Kentucky. Neighbors felt they could not trust each other. One farmer remembered that during the fall of 1864 he avoided the roads because he was wary of meeting Union soldiers and another observed that when men threshed together that year they could not talk freely unless there were no Union men present. Less than two weeks after the diarist Lewis Loder wrote that draft notices were being served to men in Petersburg, he noted that two of the town’s leading citizens were leaving for Canada. They were following a larger group of men and women who traveled north the day after the August election. In November four more men left. Boone County novelist, John Uri Lloyd, later wrote a fictionalized account of the war that reflected the deep anger among native white
Kentuckians: “Calvert [the Provost Marshal] arrested every citizen he could catch in Petersburg . . . loaded them in wagons like cattle, and took them to Burlington, where he put them in jail. Next day he made them take Burbridge’s oath or suffer the consequences.” The result, in his view, was that “Boone County sent a fine group of young men to the rebel army.” As a young adult, Lloyd witnessed the shift in sentiment in the county from supporting the Union to turning “rabidly for the South.”

Although Dinsmore remained an unconditional Unionist throughout the war, he must have been affected by the tensions within the county particularly as his sentiments went from a majority to a minority position among his neighbors. A friend from his college days wrote to him in December: “I almost envy you the opportunity you have of setting an example of firmness [and] patriotism in the midst of a people of dubious [and] unreliable character [and] the means of contributing so liberally in aid of the sacred cause! If all Kentucky were of your mind [and] metal the war in the Southwest would soon be brought to a close.” While it is unclear what Dinsmore was doing to deserve such approbation from his old schoolmate, his neighbors undoubtedly knew where he stood.

For Dinsmore, too, the war resulted in a decrease in some areas of agricultural production. In 1860 he sold about three hundred acres of land, but still had over four hundred remaining, so that would not have affected his output. He reduced the amount of wheat he was raising after 1860 and his corn harvest peaked at 2,500 bushels in 1860 and never reached that amount again. In the last year of the war he raised three hundred pounds of tobacco, but that was the only year it appeared, though it is likely his tenants were producing several acres of the crop. In 1864 his grape crop was destroyed, likely by
the blight that was prevalent in the region during that time. The Catawba Dinsmore raised were more vulnerable than other grapes. Only his basket shop appears to have done well during the war.\textsuperscript{35}

This decrease in production came as Dinsmore saw a wartime increase in the number of slaves on his property. In 1862 he moved most of the men, women, and children who had been working on his Missouri farm to Kentucky. At least seven arrived in Kentucky, including about four children. Dinsmore had more laborers on his farm during most of the war, but he produced less. At some point in 1864 two bondmen went missing from the tax records and either left the farm to join the Union Army or went north for freedom. When the draft of September 1864 threatened to enroll David Taylor, one of Dinsmore’s slaves, James subscribed $400 to the bounty fund to release the young man. David remained on the farm for a short time after the war ended before moving to Indiana where the rest of his family had relocated.\textsuperscript{36}

The end of the war did not bring a return to normalcy for Kentuckians. Violence between whites in Boone County only escalated after the war’s conclusion. Several white men were arrested for carrying concealed weapons and there were a number of murders that occurred between whites. The murder of Silas Merchant by Ephraim Weaver in 1866 was a direct result of the war. Merchant had been on an errand collecting horses for the United States Army in early 1865. At Weaver’s farm he confronted Weaver’s mother and pushed her out of the way; then Weaver stepped forward and tried to hit Merchant when he was thrown to the ground and beat. After the war Weaver was determined to find the man that had so insulted his mother. When he saw Merchant in Burlington, he killed him. Another Union veteran, Thomas B. Johnson,
was taunted by two brothers who yelled “Hurrah for Jeff Davis” as they rode past his store shooting their guns. He followed them and shot one, killing him. Robert Terrell, a former Union soldier was killed by a Confederate veteran, but the crime’s relation to the war was less clear. In all of these cases, the defendant was found to have acted in self-defense. No one in the county was willing to criminalize such actions, although Johnson’s friends sent word to the Freedman’s Bureau that they feared for the man’s life because a grave had already been dug for him by his enemies. Other cases of county violence had nothing at all to do with the war, including two murders in 1867, another in 1870, two in 1873, and another in 1874. In several cases the defendant was pardoned or his sentence was lessened. Violence was condoned at the community, county, and state level. Anne Marshall argues that the level of violence in Kentucky, which was reported throughout the United States, made the state appear anti-progressive and “derailed its trajectory to modernity.”

No social upheaval proved more pervasive in Kentucky’s hostile postwar environment than the demand for racial subordination following emancipation. Clearly slavery was over, but many in the state refused to acknowledge the power of the federal government to emancipate their bondmen and they bitterly held on to the labor relations of the past. Prior to issuing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862, Abraham Lincoln had met with border state representatives to encourage them to free the slaves in their state with compensation to the owners. Kentucky argued that according to the 1850 constitution it would take at least four years for a vote on the issue. Two years later C. A. Preston gave a speech in Covington calling on the state to free the slaves themselves: “Other border states are acting, or about to act, in order to rid themselves of slavery.” He
argued that slavery had no chance in Kentucky once it was surrounded by free states. Missouri and Maryland voted to emancipate their slaves; Delaware, a state with very few slaves, had not yet done so, but Kentucky refused to act.\textsuperscript{38}

With African Americans still held as slaves in many areas of the state at the end of the war, General John M. Palmer, the new commander of the Department of Kentucky, began writing passes that allowed men, women, and children to leave their masters to look for work elsewhere. In June 1865 African Americans wanting passes “besieged” the provost marshal’s office in Louisville, and boarded trains and boats to travel to cities for work or even to other states, according to the \textit{Cincinnati Enquirer}. Palmer’s actions and the desires of the slaves to be free did not go uncontested. In September 1865, Nancy McGruder, one of Dinsmore’s bondwomen, left the state for Oxford, Ohio. Dinsmore did not pursue her, but the Middle Creek Baptist Church excluded her for “leaving the state in a disorderly manner.” In December 1865, Henry Bishop, a black veteran, brought suit against Boone Countians Aaron Yeager, Allen Conner, and Lewis Conner, to get his wife and children out of the state. According to the \textit{Cincinnati Enquirer}, “The defendants deny the validity of the act of Congress, and continue to hold the wife and children as slaves.”\textsuperscript{39}

Freedpeople who attempted to make their future elsewhere were motivated in large part by an explosion of racial violence. This spike in racial violence has been interpreted as an attempt by whites to control the newly freed population, as a response to blacks’ newfound political activism, and as a lashing out by poor, economically displaced whites who felt threatened. Racial control was certainly a factor in the violence and intimidation toward freedpeople that occurred in Boone County, but it appears to have
been motivated by economic and political factors. White men, rich and poor, rejected the power of the federal government to free the slaves and the large number of landless males who now faced threats to their masculinity and their economic livelihood were determined not to accept the situation passively.\textsuperscript{40}

The combination of recalcitrance and violence in Kentucky convinced Congress to extend the Freedman’s Bureau to that state in 1866 though it was bound by no other Reconstruction mandates. There was plenty for the Bureau to do in Kentucky to help the freedpeople but its chronic understaffing combined with rampant violence and a lack of diligence by some Bureau agents made it largely ineffective. The agent in Warsaw, Kentucky, a town that saw violence during and after the war, was away from his office during a critical time in 1867 and had to be removed. Bureau Superintendent John Graham, headquartered in Covington, was responsible for such a large area that he often had no eyes and ears in some sections. What made the job most difficult, though, was the resistance the agents received from the white population. The Constable of Kenton County, A. J. Francis, informed the Freedman’s Bureau agent that he could not help him because the legislature had recently passed a law that would force him to vacate his office if he lent assistance to that organization. Other whites, facing no such threats to their livelihood, were also indisposed to help men who were considered to be the enemy.\textsuperscript{41}

Because slavery was less significant to the economy of northern Kentucky, the primary premise for the institution had become entwined with the demand for racial subordination. Many white Kentuckians demanded that emancipated slaves be removed from the state. The constitution of 1850 had limited the ability of free blacks to remain in the state and made it more difficult for slaveowners to emancipate their bondsmen.
These steps were obviously not due to the importance of slave labor to the state’s economy, but because political leaders realized that free blacks would compete with poor whites for the low-paying agricultural jobs throughout Kentucky and their presence would “demoralize” slaves. Just as Conservative Whigs supported gradual emancipation in 1849 with the intent to colonize the freedpeople elsewhere, “racial anxiety dominated the discussion of slavery” for many Kentucky slaveholders following the Civil War.  

Some freedpeople needed no encouragement to leave. Communities of northern Kentucky blacks were formed in Oxford, Ohio and Rising Sun, Indiana, soon after the end of the war. Sally Taylor, several of her children, and Isaac Sanders moved off the Dinsmore farm soon after the end of the war and went to Rising Sun. Years later, the women would ferry across the river and work for the family by the week, but they saw their children’s chances as better in Indiana than Kentucky. Other freedpeople who remained in Kentucky found their way to Covington where a community of free blacks existed prior to the Civil War, seeking strength in numbers. Unfortunately, the economy of Covington was not prepared for the influx and intense poverty resulted in the immediate post-war period.

Those freedpeople who stayed in rural Kentucky were confronted with widespread violence. Although often interpreted as less debilitating in Boone County than in other parts of the state, according to Freedman’s Bureau records the violence was severe enough to worry some local whites. Following the war a group of white men styling themselves “Rangers” assumed responsibility for intimidating blacks to leave the state. Citizens who helped the Bureau listed twenty-one local whites as Rangers and reported that they whipped a freedman, Harrison Grig, who owned eight hundred dollars
worth of property. Jacob Riley, another freedman with property was visited at night by a group of Rangers and when he tried to run away, they shot him in the heel and burned his house. Consistent with Ash’s findings of class-based racial violence in middle Tennessee and Michael W. Fitzgerald’s study of night riders and Klan members in Alabama after the Civil War, white suspects in these Boone County incidents had an average age of twenty-four in 1865, almost half of them were still living with their parents in 1860, and not even one-fourth of them were worth $5,000 or more in 1860 or 1870. The majority of the suspects were worth less than $1,000 suggesting an economic incentive to remove freedpeople from the county.44

In 1867, when Agent Graham toured Campbell, Boone, and Kenton Counties, he found the freedmen “living in a regular reign of terror.” One bureau official in Covington wrote about the plight of one freedman in the town of Walton, Jordan Finney (or Finnell), when “Returned rebel soldiers . . . combined to drive this family from the State. They attacked the house three times, abused the women and children, destroyed all their clothing, bedding, and furniture to the value of $500, and finally drove them from their homes.” When Finney and an associate went to get one of his daughters who was still held as a slave by Weeden Sleet, “sixteen armed men resisted” them and “beat them cruelly with clubs and stones.” Two freedmen told the Agent in Covington that “certain white men in Boone County told them that the colored people should get up a company for the purpose of resisting” white mobs, but when they tried to do so they failed. During the 1870s and 1880s a spate of lynchings in Boone County were meant to ensure that blacks lived in fear of stepping outside established racial boundaries.45
Whites were successful in Boone County and in some rural parts of the state in decreasing the number of blacks in Kentucky. Although the statewide population of African Americans had dropped by only one percent in 1870 and then increased by 1880, in Boone County the drop by 1870 was 42 percent. Carroll County, also located on the Ohio River, witnessed a 50 percent drop and Grant County, immediately south of Boone, experienced a 27 percent decrease. Counties with urban areas saw increases. Campbell County’s black population rose by 140 percent, Kenton County’s by almost 200 percent, and Jefferson County’s by 50 percent. Across the river in Ohio, Hamilton County’s black population jumped by over 60 percent. In Ohio County, Indiana, where Rising Sun is located, freedpeople from Boone County caused the number of blacks to increase eightfold from its pre-war population of just twenty-three. Job opportunities were more attractive elsewhere and blacks believed they had less to fear from neighboring whites north of the Ohio River. Not all border towns were welcoming. Lawrenceburg, Indiana, which had close economic ties to Petersburg, Kentucky, across the river, saw a drop in its black population in the ten years after the war had ended. Despite convenient access to Boone County’s freedpeople, it was seen as unfriendly territory.46

In economic terms, the Reconstruction period was an adjustment for whites and blacks in Kentucky. According to Ira Berlin, Kentucky managed to thwart free labor for longer than any other border states because it was so insistent that slavery was still in force in the state even after the war had ended. For this reason, it was difficult for freedpeople to make labor agreements. The Freedman’s Bureau was kept quite busy throughout the state attempting to ensure that former bondmen were paid for their work.
Berlin argues that getting some kind of payment became more important than getting a fair wage.\textsuperscript{47}

The initial shock in Boone County created by the war made for mixed results after its conclusion. The number of farms grew between 1860 and 1870 but farms were smaller. In 1860 56 percent of farms were smaller than one hundred acres; the share was 70 percent in 1870. By 1880, some farmers had been able to consolidate resulting in 40 percent of the county’s farms being between one hundred and five hundred acres. However, one-fourth of all farms in Boone County were either worked for rent or for shares. This was about the state average and compares favorably with Campbell and Kenton Counties which saw more than 30 percent of their farms worked for rent or shares. Nevertheless, the number of households who owned no land remained steady at almost 60 percent. This could be seen as somewhat positive for whites since several hundred African American households were now added to the tax rolls almost exclusively as non-landholders, and still the percentage did not increase from 1860. One-third of all farms in 1880 were raising tobacco, which was slightly more than the pre-war high of 28 percent in 1860 and the amount of tobacco raised in the county had more than doubled from its pre-war high in 1860. (1864 witnessed an odd bump in tobacco production.) The wool industry suffered from the war and had not picked up by 1880 and perhaps many farmers had given up on sheep. In 1860, 47 percent of farmers in the county raised sheep. This had decreased by 20 percent in 1870 and stayed relatively static in 1880. Several markers of agricultural wealth had dropped significantly after the war, including the number of hogs raised, the number and the value of horses and the taxable value of property.\textsuperscript{48}
The war ushered in a period of relative economic entrenchment in Boone County. The general drop in livestock and crop production did not result in a corresponding rise in manufacturing. The percentage of the population working in agriculture had been slowly decreasing from 1840 to 1860, when it began increasing again. Likewise the percentage of the men and women in professional careers or trades and manufacturing careers fell after the war. As neighboring Kenton and Campbell Counties increased their manufacturing sector dramatically after the war, Boone County’s manufacturing expanded slowly and traditionally. There was an increase in manufacturing establishments but the number of employees in those establishments had decreased. Though the value of manufacturing products did increase in these years, the change was less than dramatic during an era of rapid industrialization throughout the East and the upper Middle West. The value of Boone County’s products grew by 7 percent each decade after 1860. By comparison, Campbell County’s manufacturing value grew by 42 percent and even Grant County’s more than doubled. The statewide average was 38 percent.49 Boone County appears to have made a choice to step off the path of progress and return to their agricultural roots even as the age of the farmer was winding down. Emancipation had not helped the county catch up with the North as Conservatives had earlier hoped.

James Dinsmore was among those Boone Countians who did well in the postwar period. The agricultural census does not reflect his basket business which was a clear postwar success. In 1866, he figured his income for the year for tax purposes to be over $2000 and though it dropped just below $1000 a year later, by 1868 it was back up to $1500. According to his figures for 1870 and 1871 he grossed over $1000 just on the
sales of baskets. As he had before the war, he relied on a white and black labor force. One family of former slaves remained on the property. Jilson Hawkins had been owned by Dinsmore since the 1820s and was about fifty-five at the war’s end. He had remained in Louisiana when the Dinsmore family moved to Kentucky and was hired out to the succeeding owners of Bayou Black. In the 1850s he was relocated to Dinsmore’s Saline County farm and then to Boone County during the war. Dinsmore also had four or five tenants and laborers working for him in the basket business and farming. He was feeling comfortable enough with his financial situation to have his portrait painted in 1867 and to build a $700 wine house in 1870. By 1880 the Dinsmore orchard comprised approximately one thousand apple trees, one hundred peach trees, and lesser numbers of pear, plum, and cherry trees. When he died he left his only surviving daughter, Julia, in a rather comfortable position if she wanted to manage a large farm. In his will, he remanded to her care “and protection” Sally Taylor whom he had brought from Louisiana with her children in 1842, and for his “old and faithful servant” Jilson Hawkins and his wife he left “a comfortable subsistence” from his estate “during their lives when too old to gain a livelihood by their labor.” Very soon after Dinsmore’s death, Jilson used the money left to him to purchase a house in Rising Sun, Indiana. Nancy McGruder, who had left the farm and family, was not mentioned in the will.  

Politically, Kentucky did an about-face during Reconstruction, moving from a Unionist state during the war to a solidly Democratic state after the war. Unionists split between a pro-Republican Party faction and a larger group that had soured on the Republican Party and its emancipationist agenda, but were not willing to welcome former Confederate soldiers home as heroes. The Democratic Party picked up supporters from
those who had little stake in the war itself but resented the large group of freedmen in their midst. For the next several years former Unionists who broke with the federal government styled themselves Conservative Unionists and vacillated between supporting the Democratic Party and remaining independent. The Unionists who continued to support the federal government were called by their opponents “radicals” and many of them later became a part of the Republican Party. E. Merton Coulter argues that after the election of 1872, the state had stopped using the war as political fodder and had settled down to solve some more local issues. The Democratic Party split, with “New Departure” Democrats focusing more on the future and the economic prosperity of the state.51

This altered political landscape was reflected in events in Boone County, although antagonisms between the varying parties continued to fester for longer than Coulter acknowledged, perhaps because it served his purpose to imagine the political landscape of the state as peaceful once the Democratic Party took control. The political atmosphere kept everyone in a state of agitation, perhaps because men seemed to be voting so often, but also because the momentous issues of the day were often solved politically. The election of August 1865 was hotly contested as far as who could vote was concerned. Prior to that election, which would control the fate of the Thirteenth Amendment ending slavery and so was hotly contested, twenty people were killed throughout the state. Those who had supported the Confederacy or, in some cases, sympathized with them, were often barred from voting by soldiers. By the next election former Confederate soldiers were allowed to vote.52
Previous to the election of 1867, the *Cincinnati Gazette* claimed that Union men (or Republicans) were not safe in Kentucky. Men were instilling fear in the black population, some of whom vacated the rural areas of Boone and Kenton Counties and headed for Covington, where they believed they would be safe. They informed Graham, the Freedman’s Bureau agent, that they had been told “that since the election they are all going to be enslaved again.” He suspected “low ignorant whites” were behind the rumors and they may have even believed it to be true. One year later a correspondent for the *Cincinnati Commercial* traveled through southern Kenton and Boone Counties talking to residents prior to the fall election. Several men expressed the hope that the South would be back in charge of the government after the election and they would get compensated for what the government took from them. There was also some hope that slavery would be revived in the state if the Democrats were to win control of the federal government. As late as 1881, political violence was a feature of Kentucky elections. Wash Roberts, a white man, reported being visited by about seventeen armed and blacked men who beat him and warned him not to stand for the election as a Republican. Even after the Democrats had complete control of all the political machinery in the state, some men took advantage of a violent atmosphere with no expected consequences to lash out at others.53

Given Lincoln’s poor showings and the violence against former Unionists and Republicans, Northern Kentucky boasted a surprisingly strong Republican Party organization following the war, perhaps because of its close relationship to Cincinnati. During the war, Unconditional Unionists especially countered the Democratic Party. After the war, the Unionists split; many Conservatives expressed their disgust with the
Thirteenth Amendment and voted with the Democrats. Others moved into the Republican Party, which was reviled by most Kentuckians and most Boone Countians because its members supported emancipation and the Republican government. In June of 1865 the Republican Party of the Sixth District met to form committees and nominate candidates. James Dinsmore was appointed to the Committee on Permanent Organization and several other men from that county were elected to other positions. The platform expressed support for the government, mourned the president, and called for the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment. Outside of Campbell, Kenton, and Pendleton Counties, the Sixth District voted overwhelmingly for the Democratic candidate. The Conservatives and Democrats who were elected to the state Legislature removed voting restrictions from all white males after the Thirteenth Amendment was ratified nationally in December. The Kentucky legislature refused to ratify it, and would not do so until 1976.54

James Dinsmore did not live to see a peaceful Kentucky. In December of 1872, he died at home at the age of eighty-two with his daughter by his side. Although he was a staunch supporter of the Union, it is doubtful he was involved in politics after 1868 as his health began to fail him. By then, Kentucky politics in the latter Reconstruction era offered no place for his moderate convictions. While he enjoyed politics and thought it was an important duty, he viewed his own success in life in economic and social terms, and by those measures he was a happy man. His family had made his life comfortable and enjoyable and he undoubtedly looked forward to meeting most of them in the afterlife. As a farmer, he had generally seen success, but his later, debt-free years had been much more pleasant to him that the stressful years in Louisiana. Life would have
been much more of a struggle for him had he not accepted slavery as a part of life. And it was that acceptance that allowed him to cultivate his mind and experiment with his fields, two activities that produced a contented man.
Endnotes


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18 Gaines Farm Accounts, 1858, Roll Seven, DFP; Commonwealth v. Polly Bristow, April 1864, BCCCR, Item 4, BCCC, KDLA.

19 Jas. Dinsmore Business Accounts, Roll Nine, DFP.

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27 Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, 18 May 1864, KCPL.

28 Wallace, Bounty Fund Book, introduction, BCAB.

29 “Negroes Search White Men,” Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, 4 September 1864, KCPL; Cincinnati Daily Commercial, 8 August 1864, PLCHC.

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32 Boone County Commissioner’s Book, 1859 through 1866, BCAB; R. Gerald Alvey, Kentucky Bluegrass Country, with a foreward by Thomas D. Clark (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 245.

33 Pryor B. Cloud v. Robert F. Coleman, et. al., Hamilton, ca. 1871-2, depositions of O. W. Huey and John H. Mason, 376, 348, KDLA; Loder, The Loder Diary, Book
Two, 2 August, 19 September, 4 October and 1 November, 1864, BCPL; John Uri Lloyd, *Our Willie* (Cincinnati, Ohio: John G. Kidd and Son, Inc., 1934), 367.

34 D. Elliott to Jas, Dinsmore, 20 December 1864, DFP.


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39 *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, 8 June 1865, KCPL; Victor B. Howard, *Black Liberation*, 30-32; Coulter, *The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky*, 265-266; Middle Creek Baptist Church Book, Book One, September 1865, Microfilm, BCPL; *Cincinnati Daily Enquirer*, 7 December 1865, KCPL.


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Conclusion

Having left New England in search of his own manifest destiny, James Dinsmore found that the nation’s pursuit of the same prevented him from finding full comfort in his western locales, whether Mississippi, Louisiana, or Kentucky. Outwardly, he accommodated his lifestyle to conform to the economic conditions he confronted; indeed, he sought out such conditions. Internally, he was able to manipulate his small environment to fit his personal belief system, a system that changed as he matured and aged. Even as he adapted to the distinct localities in which he lived, those places were developing along divergent paths. Slavery complicated his search for common ground, but it did not deter it. The shifting and opaque nature of western and southern societies, whether founded on slavery or with it, left him on their periphery.

Striving to contribute to the regional and national economy, and to benefit from them, Dinsmore’s desires and culture shifted even as the world around him was evolving and mutating. Leaving a New England that was experiencing the first spasms of industrialization, he ventured south to the Mississippi and Louisiana frontiers. They did not remain frontiers for long. Cotton, sugar, and slavery turned the frontiers of the Old Southwest quickly into what Ira Berlin terms “slave societies,” and slavery increasingly
became the foremost political issue. Uncomfortable with the society he had helped to shape, he moved to the expanding nation’s geographic middle, hoping to create in Kentucky a diversified farm that was less reliant on slavery. But within several years of arriving in Kentucky, the bid to rid the state of slavery—gradually—failed, the strong, centrist Whig Party collapsed, the antislavery Republican Party rose just across the Ohio River, and war loomed on the horizon. Although Dinsmore’s economic world remained viable, he was becoming culturally isolated from his community. The Civil War and its effects on Kentucky compounded his isolation as he clung more tenaciously to the Union and the Republican-led federal government. He had been unable, in either the Southwest or the border region, to shape his small world in such a way that he could feel truly content; for his world was always shifting in uncomfortable ways.

Like many Americans of his generation, Dinsmore was not afraid to test his abilities in new arenas. His optimism and his belief in the interdependence of each section of the nation encouraged him to leave his home in New England and create his future elsewhere. Choosing to relocate to the Mississippi Territory, he rejected the common paths of migrating New Englanders to the Northwest Territory. Confronting a slave society, Dinsmore willingly enmeshed himself in a world he had repudiated as a youth. He was soon purchasing slaves for himself. Although ownership of slaves was a means for Dinsmore to experience mastery, primarily he viewed the ownership of others as the established path to wealth and, just as important, comfort. In Mississippi in the late 1820s, such wealth was based on cotton; and for many planters in the Natchez area sugar was an option on the fertile lands across the Mississippi River in Louisiana. Dinsmore’s partnership in the Bayou Black plantation catapulted him into planter status
and tested his ability to manage large numbers of forced laborers. Again searching for the middle, he adapted his plantation to a variant of the northern factory model, motivating his laborers with cash payments for various products they might sell or for Sunday work. Driven by a perpetual need for labor that its small landholding whites refused to accommodate, he became pro-slavery but was never comfortable with its large scale, slave-based debt culture even as he benefited from it. His decision to marry a northern woman rather than a local belle is a strong acknowledgement of where he believed his sympathies lay and a rejection of a plantation lifestyle he could not fully embrace.

Moving to Kentucky in hopes of living as a gentleman farmer, Dinsmore found the independence in an agricultural society he sought even as the culture of the region did not particularly suit him. In Boone County he found a “society with slaves.” With its large class of landless men, he was able to manage a mixed labor force that relied on little cash. Although he integrated into regional markets, his white laborers and many of his neighbors, were satisfied with independence and community self-sufficiency—a culture that was different in many respects from any he had confronted. The men were primarily yeoman farmers or farm laborers who tended to look inward to the community for approval rather than outward for new ideas. Cincinnati was a welcome relief. There, education and self-improvement were essential pursuits, and he visited mediums, sent his daughters to schools, sought phrenological exams, and acquired an eclectic library for his home that featured biographies, histories, and treatises on farming and societal reform. Retaining his Whiggish proclivities, Dinsmore chose not to join the Republican Party, even though he approved of their free labor economic ideas. The social economy he
created on his farm was not dependent on slavery, making the transition to emancipation a smooth one.

Born at a time and in a place where multiple viewpoints were tolerated and where he could adopt slavery without surrendering all he believed in, as he matured it became more difficult for others to see the world as he did. Sectionalism increasingly determined how men in the Southwest voted and what they read and refused to read. Moving to the border region, he initially discovered a society where some men could openly discuss slavery and a world without it. But even there, such discussions proved meaningless as the 1850 constitution made emancipation less likely than ever. Most men ceased imagining what the world might be like without slavery. It was war that finally brought freedom to all Kentuckians, and it was that freedom that unmistakably isolated Dinsmore from his community. Slavery had played a crucial role in his life, allowing the New Englander to create a life of leisure in the West that became the South; influencing him to move again, this time to the border that also became the South; and it was the loss of slavery that exacerbated his isolation there. Unlike most of his neighbors, though, the loss of his slaves strengthened Dinsmore’s nationalist impulses. That he was not deterred by community disapprobation from joining the Republican Party speaks to his confidence that what he was doing was right.

Dinsmore was not the only Northerner to settle in the South or the border South, but the copious sources he left behind elucidate the lives such people led in regions different from that in which they were raised. His ability to meet people with similar interests would argue for a national culture that subsumed both northern and southern peculiarities, but his inability or reluctance to integrate himself fully into the communities
in which he lived speaks to contingent cultural differences, that, owing to the politics of
slavery, were unbridgeable. While his views on slavery may have distinguished him
from his neighbors, his cultural baggage made it difficult for him to feel at home with all
but a few of his neighbors.

Though he altered his own self-image from lawyer to planter to independent
farmer, Dinsmore never renounced his loyalty to his nation, even as he refined his
cultural beliefs. Living on the border, he tried to remain above sectional feelings,
maintaining social ties to men in the North and the South. Outright hostilities in 1861
forced him to declare his loyalty to the North and as an Unconditional Unionist he
became involved in the Republican Party, a pariah in slave states and, following the Civil
War, hostile new free states. Had he died in Kentucky prior to the war, he would have
appropriately been buried overlooking an Ohio River that connected him to all sections of
the country—economically, socially, and culturally. Rather, at his death in 1872, his
grave overlooked a river that signified division—between industrial development and an
agricultural way of life, between law and order and cultural violence, between North and
South. The world he left had less of his generation’s optimistic belief in the ability of
man to improve himself and society, and more acceptance of structural impediments to it
in the form of class, race, and ethnicity.

That Dinsmore lived in these various places but was not of them is a significant
reminder that during his lifetime, through the Early Republic, sectional era, and a
catastrophic national war, there was no monolithic American “One South,” any more than
there was “One North” or “One West.” Neither he nor the places in which he lived fit the
standard historical view of the antebellum nation. Indeed, the uniqueness of all of these
regions provides a singular story of American sectional development within a national narrative. Perhaps most, Dinsmore’s lifelong search for a center—geographical, economic, political, ideological, cultural—reveals the sectional contestations over nationalism that made finding it so elusive.
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