"The Deadly Influence of Negro Capitalists": Southern Yeomen and Resistance to the Expansion of Slavery in Illinois

Suzanne Cooper Guasco

On a cold blustery evening in late February 1823, Justice Joseph Phillips, Senator Theophilus W. Smith, and Rev. William Kinney, followed by the majority of the legislature and the "hangers-on and rabble about the seat of government," assembled along the steps of the statehouse in Vandalia, Illinois, to celebrate their glorious victory. The day before, two-thirds of the House of Representatives successfully passed a resolution calling for a convention to revise the state's constitution, the first step in a scheme to legalize slavery in Illinois. Armed with torches to light their way, the crowd of convention supporters formed "a noisy, disorderly, and tumultuous procession" and marched through Vandalia's muddy streets "blowing . . . tin horns and . . . beating drums and tin pans," reportedly shouting "Slavery or death" as they went. They paused twice, once in front of the governor's residence and then again at the door of a local boarding house that lodged some of the state's assembly members. On each occasion they demonstrated their "contempt and displeasure" toward their antislavery opponents by coupling their musical discharge with "a confused medley of groans, wailings, and lamentations." Drunk with the arrogance of triumph and undoubtedly a healthy dose of whiskey, the crowd sought to "intimidate and crush all opposition" to a constitutional convention. Despite this show of bravado, the contest had really only just begun.[1]

The author would like to thank the anonymous readers for the journal, as well as Chandos Brown, Fredrika Teute, William Freehling, Carol Lasser, Joseph Heinen, and Michael Guasco for their helpful comments on several early drafts of this article.

1. Governor Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois from its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (1854; reprint, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 32. See also Horatio Newhall to [J & J] Newhall, Mar. 22, 1823, Horatio Newhall Papers, folder 1, Illinois State Historical Library (hereafter ISHL); William H. Brown, "An Historical Sketch of the Early Movement in Illinois for the Legalization of Slavery," (Chicago: Church, Goodman and Donnelley, 1865), 29–30, 185; Rev. Thomas Lippincott, "The Conflict of the Century," typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers, Illinois State Historical Survey (hereafter ISHS); Morris Birkbeck to the editor of the Illinois Gazette, Jan. 6, 1823, reprinted in George Flower, *History of*

Civil War History, Vol. XLVII No. 1 © 2001 by The Kent State University Press

Within weeks of the riotous parade in Vandalia, residents began to crowd the state's newspapers with lengthy articles against the convention. One of the contest's earliest editorialists, who identified himself as "Aristides" and typified the position of most anti-conventionists, immediately sought to convince his readers to vote against the convention by declaring that "the labor of the free man is always more productive than the labor of the slave" because "the white laborer has an interest in his toil and in his reward." Free labor, he continued, promoted "active industry" and accelerated the circulation of money within the community, while simultaneously inspiring "the mass of society . . . to energy, enterprize, and improvement." In a free state, he argued, "lands are parcelled out in small quantities, and cultivated by industrious farmers" whose products supplied "the wants of its inhabitants" as well as added to the state's "stock of strength and wealth." Conversely, the labor of a slaveholder's "miserable horde of blacks does not contribute to the improvement or wealth of the country" because slaves only produced what the slaveholder "deems necessary, . . . and he cares for no more." Additionally, in a slave state "the wealthy monopolize large tracts" of the best land and "only cultivate so much as will pamper their pride, luxury, and vice." The rest of his acreage, the writer assured his audience, remained unused and wasted. Aristides also noted that "a sweeping majority of us are poor" farmers who could barely afford to pay for a quarter section of land, much less purchase slaves. If most Southern-born farmers migrated to Illinois to settle in a region where "our energies are not crampted [*sic*] by the deadly influence of negro capitalists," he asked, then why invite as our neighbor the "wealthy nabob, who would sink us to a level with his blacks?"[2]

Aristides' distinct comparison of free and slave societies immediately brings to mind the expressions of Republican ideas about free labor that cluttered national newspapers during the last two decades of the Antebellum period. On the eve of the Civil War, Republicans routinely disparaged slavery and the South by asserting that the institution had caused the South to be "the very poorest, meanest, least productive, and most miserable part of creation." Horace Greeley championed free labor by declaring that enslaving a man destroyed "his ambition, his enterprise," because a slave, who produced only for his master, possessed no interest in his own work. Such observations led Northern Republicans to conclude, as Boston editor William Schouler declared in November 1858, that the sectional struggle plaguing the nation was a reflection of the existence of "two kinds of civilization in this country. One is the civilization of freedom and the other is the civilization of aristocracy, or slavery."[3] Despite the obvious resemblance in language, few historians of Illinois

---

the English Settlement in Edwards County, Illinois, Founded in 1817 and 1818, by Morris Birkbeck and George Flower (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1909), 188.

2. "To the People of Illinois, No. II," signed "Aristides" *Illinois Intelligencer,* May 24, 1824.

3. Robert C. Winthrop Jr., *A Memoir of Robert C. Winthrop* (Boston, 1897); *New York Tribune,* Nov. 9, 1856; and *Congressional Globe,* 30th Cong., 1st sess., Appendix, 835, cited in Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43, 46. See also Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest*

and the Midwest have highlighted the similarities between the rhetoric that shaped the political discourse in Illinois during the 1820s and the language employed by Free Soilers and Republicans during the political controversies of the 1840s and 1850s.[4]

While they hardly held such national consequences, the events in Illinois in the 1820s anticipated much of what was to come twenty years later, with one important exception. Where the idea of free labor espoused by men such as Salmon P. Chase, William H. Seward, and Abraham Lincoln targeted an exclusively Northern constituency, the politicians in Illinois competed for the support of a predominantly Southern-born electorate. Aware that the majority of the state's residents were intimately familiar with slavery, both sides—but the anti-conventionists in particular—attempted to generate support for their cause by exploiting the anti-black prejudice they assumed many immigrants brought with them. In addition, a constituency that complained bitterly of their dire economic condition in the wake of the Panic of 1819 forced the combatants to cast their position in terms of how either the introduction or exclusion of slavery would affect the prosperity of the state.

The Illinois convention crisis of 1822–24 suggests that before the 1830s some Americans inhabited a "middle ground" that allowed them to resolve conflicts over the slavery issue without undermining the sanctity of the Union. In Illinois, residents inhabiting this political "middle ground" orchestrated a campaign in which a comparison of free and slave labor, and a democratic and aristocratic social order, dominated the political discourse. The degree to which such rhetoric resonated with Illinois residents demonstrates that an antislavery ideology founded on notions of

---

Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 66–125; William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852–1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), esp. 347–73; Richard H. Sewell, *Ballots for Freedom: Antislavery Politics in the United States, 1837–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), esp. 292–320.

4. For historiography of the Midwest, see Andrew R. L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990). For slavery and race, see Paul Finkelman, "Slavery and the Northwest Ordinance: A Study in Ambiguity," and "Evading the Ordinance: The Persistence of Bondage in Indiana and Illinois," in *Slavery and the Founders: Race and Liberty in the Age of Jefferson* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1996); Eugene H. Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery: Western Anti-Negro Prejudice and the Slavery Extension Controversy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971); N. Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in that State, 1719–1914* (1904; reprint, New York: Negro Universities, 1969). On Illinois generally, see James E. Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998); John Mack Faragher, *Sugar Creek: Life on the Illinois Prairie* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987). Two works that examine free labor rhetoric in Illinois include Charles N. Zucker, "The Free Negro Question: Race Relations in Ante-Bellum Illinois, 1801–1860" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1972) and Donald Martin Bluestone, "Steamboats, Sewing Machines, and Bibles: The Roots of Antislaveryism in Illinois and the Old Northwest, 1818–1860" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1973). For another important work, see Merton L. Dillon, "The Antislavery Movement in Illinois, 1809–1848" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1951). On the politics of slavery in Illinois in particular, see James Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

free soil, white labor, and white men potentially had a national appeal. Just as William Seward had acknowledged in 1858 that the nation as a whole "must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slave-holding nation, or entirely a free-born nation," Illinois residents recognized that the convention vote on August 2, 1824, marked the point at which Illinois would become either a democratic free or an aristocratic slave state.[5]

With almost eighteen months to persuade voters to support or reject the convention resolution, both factions organized to inform the public. The anti-conventionists acted first. Undisturbed by the riotous parade of convention supporters, several opponents of the convention gathered in one of Vandalia's rooming houses to coordinate a strategy "to avert the tremendous curse that hangs over our State." As Rev. Thomas Lippincott later recalled, "never, probably, since our revolutionary fathers met to consider their rights and wrongs and dangers, has a meeting of free citizens, convened to consider a political question, been more completely under a sense of responsibility." Despite "a great deal of anxiety and some despondency," the attendees committed themselves "to keep out of our State the monster slavery." To that end, the anti-conventionists circulated pamphlets, published articles, and announced the establishment and meetings of a network of anti-convention societies gathering throughout the state. As they delivered countless stump speeches across Illinois, the state's anti-convention leadership emphasized the superiority and security of an exclusively free white society. Their motto, chanted at every opportunity, was "Convention and Slavery, No Convention and Freedom."[6]

From the outset, the anti-convention forces contained two recognizable factions: abolitionists and exclusionists. While both groups expressed a commitment to prevent the expansion of slavery, abolitionists also sought to improve the condition of the state's free black residents by extending to them the same civil rights enjoyed by their white counterparts. Conversely, exclusionists, to borrow a term from historian Lacy K. Ford, wanted to reduce even further the role of black persons in the civic, social, and economic life of the state. To accomplish their goal they intended to prohibit the further immigration of all blacks, enslaved and free. Ultimately, exclusionists proposed to "whiten" their society by diminishing the size of the black population.[7]

Although a minority, the abolitionists hoped to use the convention crisis to eliminate all remnants of slavery in Illinois and to revise the state's black code. Slavery, in one way or another, had always existed in Illinois. French inhabitants, who initially settled in the Illinois Country in the 1680s, employed slaves on their wheat

5. Seward quoted in Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, 70.

6. Lippincott, "The Conflict of the Century," ISHS. See also Dillon, "The Antislavery Movement in Illinois," 85–87; E. B. Washburne, *Sketch of Edward Coles, Second Governor of Illinois, and of the Slavery Struggle of 1823–4* (1882; reprint, New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 99–102.

7. Lacy K. Ford, "Making the 'White Man's Country' White: Race, Slavery, and State-Building in the Jacksonian South," *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Winter 1999): 713–37, esp. 719.

farms throughout the eighteenth century.[8] The United States gained jurisdiction over the Illinois Country in 1784 and prohibited slavery in the region three years later when the federal government passed the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. Article VI of the act declared that "there shall be neither Slavery nor involuntary Servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in the punishment of a crime."[9] Almost immediately, residents of the Old Northwest voiced their objections to the exclusion of slavery. Between 1790 and 1807 residents forwarded to Congress a series of petitions requesting the repeal of Article VI of the Northwest Ordinance. Despite the petitioners' persistence, Congress consistently rejected or ignored the territorial residents' requests and slavery, although present, remained illegal in the region north of the Ohio River.[10]

Undeterred by their inability to repeal the slavery prohibition clause, the proslavery residents of the region circumvented Article VI by promulgating laws that concealed slavery behind the mask of indentured servitude. In 1809, when Illinois became a territory independent of Indiana, the territorial leadership adopted an Indiana law that made it legal "for any person being the owner or possessor of any negroes or mulattoes . . . owing service and labour as slaves . . . to bring said negroes or mulattoes into this territory." Five years later, the governing elite restated their determination to shield the use of slave labor behind a veil of indentured servitude when they passed another law declaring that any slave contracted to serve a master in Illinois "shall for the time being be considered and treated as an indentured servant."[11]

Despite the shift in terminology, the distinction between slave and servant was more chimerical than real. Although the law required the slave voluntarily to agree to the contract, the threat of sale to the Deep South was real enough to compel slaves to agree to the indenture contracts. In addition, although the law stipulated that the contracts could only last for a "term not exceeding twelve months," slaveowners routinely indentured their servants for as few as thirty and often as many as ninety-nine years, effectively ensuring the enslavement of most black laborers for the majority, if not all, of their natural lives. Indenture contracts, like slave property, could also be sold or bequeathed to other individuals. Just like Southern slavery, the condition of

8. Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998); Charles J. Balesi, *The Time of the French in the Heart of North America, 1673–1818* (Chicago: Alliance Francaise Chicago, 1992) and Clarence Walworth Alvord, *The Illinois Country, 1673–1818* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965).

9. "An Ordinance For the Government of the Territory of the United States, North-west of the River Ohio, July 13, 1787," reprinted in Francis S. Philbrick, ed., *Pope's Digest, 1815*, 2 vols. (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1940), 1:15–29, esp. 28. Regarding the creation of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, see Peter S. Onuf, *Statehood and Union: A History of the Northwest Ordinance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

10. For the petitions, see Jacob Piatte Dunne, ed., "Slavery Petitions and Papers," *Indiana Historical Society Publications* 2 (Indianapolis, 1894): 445–529. See also Finkelman, *Slavery and Founders*, 48–55, 58–67; Onuf, *Stathood and Union*, 116–23; Berwanger, *Frontier Against Slavery*, 8–9.

11. Philbrick, ed., *Pope's Digest, 1815*, 2:467–73

an indentured parent passed to his or her children. The laws passed by the territorial legislature declared that any child born to "a parent of colour, owing service or labor by indenture" was required to serve his or her parent's master, "the male until the age of thirty, and the female until the age of twenty-eight." Like Southern slaves, indentured servants endured a condition that was inherently involuntary, lasted nearly their entire lives and passed from one generation to the next. By the close of the territorial period in 1818, the proslavery residents and politicians in Illinois established a de facto slave system that was certainly slavery in practice if not in name.[12]

In April 1818, Congress passed an enabling act instructing the residents of Illinois to draft a constitution and granted them permission to petition for entrance into the Union. Recognizing that Congress would not accept an overtly proslavery document, the delegates to the 1818 constitutional convention approved a constitution that prohibited the further introduction of slaves. In an attempt to highlight their supposedly antislavery sympathies, the delegates adopted the same language employed by the framers of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The final draft of the constitution declared that "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude" would hereafter be introduced into the state "otherwise than in the punishment of a crime." The new document also proclaimed that "No person bound to labor in any other state" could be "hired to labor" in Illinois, except at the Gallatin County Saline until 1825. Furthermore, any indentures contracted either within or beyond Illinois's borders exceeding one year were not "of the least validity" and those bound to labor had to agree to their term of service while "in a perfect state of freedom," otherwise the contract could be revoked. From the perspective of most delegates and many residents, the constitution submitted for congressional approval in the fall of 1818 adhered to the instructions laid out in Congress's enabling act. They had fashioned a document that was not in the least bit contrary to the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.[13]

The rhetoric of the Illinois constitution showcased enough antislavery sentiment to secure the approval of Congress; however, the substance of the document and the latitude enjoyed by slaveowners throughout the state during the initial years of statehood hardly reflected the ordinance's antislavery spirit.[14] In reality, the 1818 constitution protected and perpetuated the slave system established during the territorial period. Section 1 of Article VI of the Illinois constitution prohibited the introduction of slavery and involuntary servitude after 1818, but permitted those

12. Ibid.

13. Emil J. Verlie, ed., *Illinois Constitutions* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1919), 39–40. See also Dillon, "The Antislavery Movement in Illinois," 48–53; Zucker, "The Free Negro Question," 60–62; Solon J. Buck, *Illinois in 1818* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967), 262–93.

14. The article dealing with slavery in the Illinois constitution provoked considerable debate in Congress, anticipating the tone of the Missouri controversy that erupted two years later. Senator James Tallmadge Jr., as he would do in 1820, objected to Illinois's constitutional provision regarding slavery, arguing that it was not antislavery enough. See Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders*, 74–77; Zucker, "The Free Negro Question," 62–63.

who already owned slaves in Illinois to retain their bound laborers indefinitely. Section 2 excluded the Gallatin County Salines near Shawneetown from the prohibition, allowing the managers of that important source of state revenue to employ slaves until 1825. Section 3 confirmed the validity of all existing indentures in Illinois, reminding residents that all contracts remained binding. This final section also guaranteed the owners of indentured servants that they would continue to benefit from the labor of any children born to bound laborers until the boys and girls reached the ages of twenty-one and eighteen respectively.[15] Significantly, Illinois became the only state created out of the Old Northwest Territory that failed to abolish slavery outright during its constitutional convention.[16]

Thus, slavery persisted throughout the territorial period and continued to function unchallenged during the early years of statehood. Indeed, many of Illinois's proslavery residents and politicians confidently anticipated and attempted to orchestrate an opportunity to call a convention to alter the constitution so as to legalize slavery once and for all. As Joseph Gillespie later recalled, "the slavery propagandists contended that you could, the next day after being admitted" into the Union "under an *anti-slavery* constitution, change the constitution so as to admit slavery."[17] It was precisely this outcome that abolitionists hoped to avert during the convention crisis.

The abolitionists also intended to use the convention contest to generate enough support to revise the state's black code. Established in March 1819, Illinois's black laws required all free blacks to prove their status by presenting a certificate of freedom to the local county clerk. They also were compelled to register themselves and each member of their family. Anyone who failed to do so was deemed a runaway slave, arrested, and hired out for up to a year. As in the South, free black residents of Illinois were prohibited from assembling "to the number of three or more." Any black persons found attending assemblies defined as "riots, . . . unlawful" or involving "seditious speeches" were "punished with stripes." As a general rule, black persons who violated any state laws were punished with whipping, while their white counterparts received a monetary fine. In the spring of 1819, the state legislature also passed a statute declaring that black residents could not bear witness or bring suit against white inhabitants. Combined with the constitutional article restricting suffrage to "white male inhabitants above the age of twenty-one," these laws severely restricted free black civil liberties, a state of affairs the abolitionists hoped to amend.[18]

15. Verlie, ed., *Illinois Constitutions*, 38–39; Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders*, 77; Zucker, "The Free Negro Question," 60–62.

16. R. Carlyle Buley, *The Old Northwest, Pioneer Period, 1815–1840*, 2 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1950), 1:58–93. See also Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 163–66.

17. Gillespie quoted in Washburne, *Sketch of Edward Coles*, 70–71.

18. "An Act Respecting Free Negroes, Mulattoes, Servants and Slaves," March 30, 1819, reprinted in Helen Cox Tregillis, *River Roads to Freedom: Fugitive Slave Notices and Sheriff Notices Found in Illinois Sources* (Bowie, Md: Heritage Books, 1988), 2–12; *An Act Regulating the Practices of the Supreme and Circuit Courts of Illinois, at their Second Session, Held at Kaskaskia, 1819* (Kaskaskia: Blackwell & Berry, 1819), 143; Verlie, ed., *Illinois Constitutions*.

The earliest and clearest expression of the abolitionists' intentions appeared on December 5, 1822, when Governor Edward Coles delivered his inaugural address before the state legislature. "Conceiving it not less due to our principles, than to the rights of those held in bondage, that they should be restored to their liberty," proclaimed Coles, "I earnestly recommend to the legislature that just and equitable provisions be made for the abrogation of slavery in the State." Furthermore, Coles announced that "justice and humanity require of us a general revisal of the laws relative to Negroes, in order to better adapt them to the character of our institutions, and the situation of our country." While they did not want to encourage free black immigration into Illinois, Coles and his fellow abolitionists firmly believed that they had a duty to protect those free blacks who already resided in the state.[19]

The second, and most dominant, group of anti-convention supporters accepted the slave system that already existed in Illinois, but wanted to exclude any further immigration of black persons, enslaved or free. These exclusionists, who often counted slaveholders among their numbers, fashioned arguments designed to resonate with a Southern-born audience who feared the negative consequences of a growing black population. For example, one anonymous editorialist warned that if "the importation of slaves, and their constituent manumission" were legalized in Illinois, the population of the state would be "Dark . . . in complexion, but infinitely darker in moral character!" The exclusionists sought to "whiten" Illinois society by prohibiting the immigration of all black people and marginalizing those who already lived in the state. By consistently portraying their adversaries as slave mongers and linking the spread of slavery to the threat of racial violence and social degradation, the anti-conventionists, both abolitionist and exclusionist, made a powerful appeal to the sensibilities of the state's Southern-born non-slaveholding residents.[20]

The pro-conventionists, still basking in the euphoria of their legislative victory, initially saw little reason to organize their forces formally during the early months of the campaign. Slaveholders or proslavery men already controlled three of the state's four newspapers, and would eventually add a fifth to their arsenal. Further bolstering their confidence, a majority of the state's most prominent politicians supported the call for a convention. The state's proslavery residents also exercised political power well beyond their numbers. They elected slaveholders to nearly every top local and national office. In 1818, the governor, secretary of state, congressional

19. "Fellow Citizens of the Senate and of the House of Representatives," Dec. 5, 1822, by Edward Coles, *Edwardsville Spectator*, Dec. 14, 1822, Commonplace Book, Vol. 8, 508, Edward Coles Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter HSP). Edward Coles migrated from Virginia and settled in Edwardsville, Illinois, in March 1819. His chief motivation for the move was the desire to live in a free state and emancipate the slaves he inherited from his father. These actions ensured that the majority of the residents of the state would perceive him as an abolitionist. For more biographical information on Coles, see Kurt E. Leichtle, "Edward Coles; An Agrarian on the Frontier" (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, Chicago Circle, 1982); and E. B. Washburn, *Sketch of Edward Coles*.

20. *Illinois Intelligencer*, Jan. 18, 1823.

representative, U.S. senators, and almost 30 percent of the state legislature either owned slaves or held proslavery views. By 1823, when the legislature passed the constitutional convention resolution, only Coles and Congressman Daniel Pope Cook opposed slavery among the state's top officials, while proslavery and slaveholding politicians expanded their control of the state legislature, increasing their presence there to 60 percent. "Our Governor is a plain good sort of man," observed one resident, "but many of our most influential public officers are dear lovers of Slavery and would gladly introduce into this state the same system which prevails at the South."[21]

Like their anti-convention antagonists, the pro-convention forces contained factions that competed for prominence. Most visible early in the campaign was a politically powerful contingent of proslavery men who unequivocally supported the expansion of slavery and the creation of a full-fledged slave system in Illinois. A second group of pro-convention men admitted that slavery was an evil, but believed that the subordination of black people was essential to the establishment of a stable social order. These subordinationists, then, viewed the legalization of slavery as the most efficient means of controlling the enslaved and free blacks who already lived in the region. A third band of pro-conventionists argued that if slavery spread westward, the horrors of the system, for both white masters and black slaves, would diminish and the institution would eventually disappear. Like subordinationists, diffusionists acknowledged that slavery was an evil institution, but, unlike their colleagues, they believed that the expansion of slavery over a broader territory, when coupled with a colonization program, offered the only mechanism for the system's gradual demise.[22]

Those who favored the convention had cause to be confident during the first few months of the campaign. The slave system had been expanding during the initial years of statehood. Although slaveholders and slaves only accounted for a fraction of the total population, the number of slaveowners between 1818 and 1820 increased by roughly 24 percent, from 265 to 328, while the slave population grew almost 28 percent, or from 777 to 991. Significantly, more than forty percent of the state's 1820 slaveowners were new to the category, either slaveholding immigrants who settled in Illinois after 1819 or residents who acquired slave property sometime between the two census tallies.[23] Slaveowners imported, bought, and sold slaves on the open market with relative ease, and Illinois residents possessed little fear that their right to hold slaves would be challenged. While the proportion of slaves and slaveholders in the state remained small, the institution of slavery was growing

21. Horatio Newhall to [J & J] Newhall, undated, Horatio Newhall Papers, folder 1, ISHL. See also Flower, *History of the English Settlement*, 157.

22. The term "subordinationist" is borrowed from historian Lacy K. Ford's discussion of the Jacksonian South. See Ford, "Making the 'White Man's Country' White," 719–20.

23. For census statistics, see Margaret Cross Norton, ed., *Illinois Census Returns 1810, 1818* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1935) and Margaret Cross Norton, ed., *Illinois Census Returns 1820* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1934).

enough to encourage proslavery residents to imagine Illinois as a slave state in the not-too-distant future.

Inspiring even more confidence among the pro-conventionists, the majority of the state's residents were Southern-born yeomen farmers who migrated into the Old Northwest in pursuit of economic independence. John Reynolds, who settled in Kaskaskia in 1800, remarked that "the Americans were almost entirely emigrants from . . . Tennessee, Kentucky [, and] Virginia, . . . and the manners and customs of those States were represented in Illinois by the pioneers." Similarly, Daniel Parkison noted as he traveled through southern Illinois in 1817 that the "inhabitants were . . . principally from the southern states." States such as Virginia, North and South Carolina, Kentucky, and Tennessee provided Illinois with nearly two-thirds of its settlers.[24] Although some of these Southerners may have immigrated to Illinois because of a moral or ideological opposition to slavery, the vast majority of them moved to the Old Northwest "to avoid the overshadowing influences of a slave-holding aristocracy whom they envied." Such distaste for the Southern social order, however, rarely translated into an antislavery impulse. Instead, most white Southern-born Illinoisans retained "many prejudices imbibed in infancy," and continued to "hold negroes in the utmost contempt, . . . look[ing] on *negers*, as they call them . . . as an inferior race of beings." The Southern character of both the white and black population led George Flower, an Englishman who settled in the state in 1817, to conclude that Illinois "was as much a slave-state as any of the states south of the Ohio River."[25]

Perhaps most encouraging for the pro-conventionists, the largely Southern-born population endured what many residents termed "hard times" during the first years of statehood. Subsistence farming dominated the state's early economy. Most farmers

24. John Reynolds, *My Own Times: Embracing also the History of My Life* (Chicago: Fergus Printing Company, 1879), 13–14; Daniel M. Parkison, "Pioneer Life in Wisconsin," [1855], *Collections of the Historical Society of Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 326–27. For the Southern origin of Illinois's early American settlers, see John D. Barnhart, "The Southern Influence in the Formation of Illinois," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 32 (September 1939): 348–78; Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 159–69; Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787–1861* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 306; Faragher, *Sugar Creek*, 45–46; Arthur Clinton Boggess, *The Settlement of Illinois, 1778–1830* (Chicago: Chicago Historical Society, 1908), 91–92; Buck, *Illinois in 1818*, 95–98. This is not to say that no Northerners immigrated to Illinois during this period. While a fairly visible number immigrated into the region during the first decades of the nineteenth century, the majority of the state's Northern-born immigrants settled in the northern portion of the state after 1830. On the marginal influence of Northerners in Illinois politics, see Solon J. Buck, *The New England Element in Illinois Politics before 1833* (Davenport, Iowa: n.p., 1912).

25. Lippincott, "The Conflict of the Century," ISHS; John Woods, *Two Years' Residence in the Settlement on the English Prairie, in the Illinois Country, United States* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1822), 175; Flower, *History of the English Settlement*, 155. For a recent discussion of Southern non-slaveholder's views of slavery and the Southern social order, see Stephanie McCurry, *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).

cultivated fields of corn, wheat and occasionally cotton and tobacco. They also raised hogs and cattle, and produced much of what they needed at home, purchasing any other necessaries at a local store on credit. Few residents produced enough surplus to trade on the market. By the 1820s, however, many residents aspired to achieve more than mere subsistence. Instead, they pursued a future in which they owned their own land and employed enough laborers to produce a surplus to sell on the market in New Orleans. They also hoped to sell their improved farms to the settlers who would follow them westward, making a nice profit in the process. As John Reynolds recalled, new settlers "paid out all the money they had in first installments," intending to sell their farms "before the other payments became due."[26] More than anything else, the pursuit of economic independence, whether secured through subsistence or market participation, shaped the way the settlers responded to the world around them.

The Panic of 1819, however, stymied the ambitions of most Illinois farmers. Declining land values, a severe labor shortage, and a depreciated currency compromised even the most diligent farmer. Worse still, emigration into the state nearly halted, eliminating the promise of new land purchasers. The pro-conventionists offered slavery as the solution to the state's economic woes, promising that its legalization would provide residents with sorely needed laborers and induce wealthy slaveowning emigrants to settle in Illinois where they would spend their money on improved farms. As one resident asked, "What is the only strong inducement held out to the voters for slavery? Inquire of every candid advocate for the measure," he responded, "and he will tell you, it is pecuniary interest—a relief from his distress, his embarrassments."[27] The fluid nature of the slave system, regional character of the state's population, and declining economic conditions together led pro-conventionists to believe that the state's non-slaveholding majority would support the convention resolution.

The pro-conventionists, whose motto was "Convention or death," soon realized, however, that their failure to organize had allowed the opposition to gain public support. In May 1823, Horatio Newhall, a resident of Greenville in Bond County, informed his brothers in Salem, Massachusetts, that although a majority of the people appeared to support the convention at the close of the legislative session, "The free party have been as industrious as possible." As a result, "a pretty considerable change has taken place in public sentiment." He boasted that "if the vote should be taken now, a majority of 2000 would oppose a convention."[28]

Determined to counteract the organizational efforts of the "friends of freedom," the pro-conventionists met in Vandalia in December 1823. "Nearly all the friends of

26. Reynolds, *My Own Times*, 144–52. Regarding the coexistence of subsistence and market oriented farm production, see Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery*, 42–49.

27. "A Shoal Creek Farmer," *Edwardsville Spectator*, Aug. 30, 1823. On the impact of the Panic of 1819 on Illinois and western land sales respectively, see Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery*, 49–56; Malcolm J. Rohrbough, *The Land Office Business: The Settlement and Administration of American Public Lands, 1789–1837* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 137–56.

28. Horatio Newhall to [J & J] Newhall, May 21, 1823, Horatio Newhall Papers, folder 1, ISHL.

the convention," observed Coles, "have been here and held caucuses, . . . adopted sundry resolutions, and made many arrangements." During the early months of 1824, pro-convention societies met, passed resolutions, and published essays in favor of their cause. Both sides, then, had settled in for a long rancorous contest. "The convention question," Newhall observed, "is a dish which is daily nay hourly served up. It furnishes all our food for conversation, for reading and for newspaper scribblings."[29]

In their efforts to mobilize the voting public, pro- and anti-convention leaders initially competed for the reputation as the true defenders of the people's interest, for the label of "republicans." The pro-conventionists maintained that it was "the right of the people to modify" their government whenever they pleased, and accused their opponents of depriving the electorate "of their dearest rights." Those in favor of the convention portrayed themselves as "enterprizing and republican supporters" of the people, and warned their audience not to be bullied by their "federalist" antagonists, men "so base, selfish, or, aristocratical" that they viewed themselves to be "above the control of the people."[30] The anti-conventionists reassured the public that they firmly believed that representatives were accountable to the people, a principle, they reminded their audience, that "will never be questioned." Encouraging the public "to rally round the banner of freedom," the anti-conventionists consistently identified themselves as the "defenders of liberty" and the "friends of freedom," and attempted to convince the electorate that opposing the convention really meant voting in favor of freedom and liberty. By rejecting the convention and slavery, they maintained, the residents of Illinois would prove "to the admiring world, that the principles which warmed the bosoms of their ancestors, still burns in theirs."[31]

In the wake of the Missouri controversy, the appearance of this strategy was certainly nothing new. On the national level, debate over Missouri statehood focused on the balance of power between the North and South in Congress, with antislavery forces charging that adding another slave state to the Union would expand the already disproportionate share of power enjoyed by Southern members of Congress because of the three-fifths clause of the Constitution. More importantly, Northern politicians argued that the three-fifths clause was unrepublican because

29. Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, Dec. 11, 1823, Vaux Family Papers, HSP; Horatio Newhall to [J & J] Newhall, April 14, 1824, Horatio Newhall Papers, folder 1, ISHL.

30. "TO THE PEOPLE OF THE STATE OF ILLINOIS," signed Thomas Cox, *Illinois Gazette*, Mar. 29, 1823; "FOR THE SPECTATOR," signed "A FRIEND TO LIBERTY," *Edwardsville Spectator*, April 12, 1823; and "For the Intelligencer," signed "CONVENTION," *Illinois Intelligencer*, Mar. 15, 1823. For an analysis of this pro-convention strategy, see Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery*.

31. "Address of the Board Managers of the ST. CLAIR SOCIETY to prevent the further introduction of Slavery in the State of Illinois," unsigned [Reverend John Mason Peck], *Edwardsville Spectator*, April 12, 1823; Thomas Lippincott, "Early Days in Madison County, No. 42," orig. pub. in *Alton Telegraph*, 1864–65, typescript, Thomas Lippincott Papers, ISHS; and "FOR THE SPECTATOR," signed, "FREEDOM," *Edwardsville Spectator*, June 7, 1823.

it ensured the reign of the propertied over the people. The egalitarian assumptions of the emerging "Age of the Common Man," many proclaimed, demanded that the people, not the wealthy, rule.[32]

For Illinoisans in particular, the Missouri controversy caused some voters to impose new demands on their elected officials. By the late spring and early summer of 1819, after the Fifteenth Congress failed to resolve the Missouri question, the residents of Illinois used the months preceding the next congressional session and the coming congressional election to make their views on slavery known to their representatives. All three of Illinois's congressional members favored Missouri's petition to enter the Union as a slave state. Several editorialists accused Representative John McLean and Senators Ninian Edwards and Jesse B. Thomas of not representing "the wishes and interests of *our* state" and frequently asked, "have they, by their votes, spoke the voice of their constituents?" In the approaching election for the House of Representatives between McLean and Cook, the residents of the state answered this question emphatically by pledging "not to support any candidate . . . who either advocate[s] the right to slavery or who is actually a slaveholder."[33]

McLean's vote in favor of Missouri statehood emerged as the central issue of the campaign and was a major contributing factor to his defeat. With the victory of Cook, who had promised "to arrest the progress of slavery across the Mississippi" River, voters stated loudly that "a large majority of the people" objected to admitting Missouri as a slave state.[34] Moreover, they used the congressional campaign to remind their elected officials that they were "nothing more than an agent" of the people, who was obligated to represent the wishes of their constituents. To prevent any misunderstandings, "A Private Citizen" recommended that the people of Illinois "raise our voices and *instruct* our representatives to join in the solemn protest against the extension of slavery" by demanding that their representatives vote against Missouri statehood.[35] By the mid-1820s, then, it was hardly surprising that both sides of the convention campaign recognized the necessity of emphasizing their commitment to representing the will of the people as they competed for the mantel of the true representatives of the common man.

Ironically, in their eagerness to muster public support by boasting of their accountability to the people, the pro- and anti-convention leadership contributed to

32. William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776–1854* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 144–48. See also Glover Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819–1821* (Louisville: University of Kentucky Press, 1953).

33. "To the People of Illinois," signed "An Elector," *Illinois Intelligencer*, June 30, 1819; "To the People of Illinois, No. I," signed "Aristides" [George Churchill], Madison County, May 29, 1819," *Edwardsville Spectator*, June 5, 1819.

34. "To the Independent Electors of Illinois," signed "Camilus, July 19, 1819," *Illinois Intelligencer*, July 14, 1819; "To the People of Illinois," signed "Publis," *Edwardsville Spectator*, Aug. 28, 1819.

35. "Popular Instruction," signed "A Private Citizen," *Edwardsville Spectator*, Sept. 4, 1819. Despite the explicit instructions of their constituents, both of Illinois's senators supported the Missouri compromise, facilitating the state's entrance into the Union as a slave state.

a fundamental shift in political power in Illinois. Where the political elite initially controlled the contours of public debate, the unprecedented need for popular consent during the convention crisis provided the general electorate with an opportunity to determine the focus of the political discourse. By the summer of 1823, it mattered little which side was aristocratic or republican, for, after their experiences during the Missouri controversy, residents had become suspicious of any political leader who slung anti-republican insults at their opponents, a skill both sides had mastered equally. As a result, most of Illinois's small farming residents insisted that their political leaders abandon republican rhetoric and focus the debate on "*how* slavery is to do good to me, and the like of me—that is four citizens out of five in the State." From that point forward, both pro- and anti-conventionists were forced to explain the advantages and disadvantages of introducing slavery for the average small, and Southern-born, farmer. As a result, a comparison of free and slave labor and democratic and aristocratic society dominated the rhetoric of the convention campaign.[36]

Answering the demands of the electorate, the pro-conventionists attempted to garner public support by arguing that the expansion of slavery into Illinois would improve the state's prosperity. The small, but vocal, proslavery faction of convention supporters depicted slavery as a positive good for the community. "If slavery was admitted," they asserted, "our country would populate in abundance, wealth would be in our country, [and] money would circulate." They based this argument on two assumptions. First, the pro-conventionists declared that slave labor was essential for the continuation of the saline works, Illinois's main source of manufactured salt to preserve meat for local consumption and transportation to the market in New Orleans. "A Plain Man" argued that the rigors of the saline "is such as no white man . . . is willing to risk or able to endure." Black slaves possessed constitutions "better adapted to this climate . . . and [able to] endure heat and watching far better than whites." Besides, the author asked, "will any white man . . . take [up] the slavish employments? . . . Would a white man for less than fifty cents a day make himself the veriest slave of the community?" He hoped not only to highlight the economic consequences of precluding the use of slave labor at the saline works, but also to exploit his audience's proclivity to view any labor performed by blacks as best handled by slaves. The implication was that such work degraded any white man forced to perform it. Unlike their proslavery counterparts in the East, whose positive good arguments emphasized that slavery improved the condition of black people, these western defenders of slavery focused on the benefits slavery would

36. "To the Editor of the Illinois Gazette," signed, "Jonathan Freeman" [Morris Birkbeck], *Illinois Gazette*, June 14, 1823. To be sure, other arguments in favor or against slavery emerged throughout the campaign. Participants on both sides of the contest turned to the Bible to appeal to residents' sense of humanity. For the role of divine law, see Dillon, "The Antislavery Movement in Illinois," 98–105 and Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery*, 166–96. See also the numerous editorials that appeared in the *Edwardsville Spectator*, *Illinois Gazette*, and *Illinois Republican* between July and November 1823.

bring to the white community. Where slavery existed, they proclaimed, white economic prosperity blossomed and equality among white people was guaranteed.[37]

Second, many pro-conventionists argued that Illinois suffered from a labor shortage. Introduce slavery, they announced, and all the residents of the state would have access to enough laborers "to raise [an] abundance of products . . . perhaps enough to commence some other manufactories [sic]." Confirming these claims, another editorialist complained that he could not hire laborers to work his farm. Admit slavery, he predicted, and even small farmers will be able to improve their own land. Whether they focused on the saline works or a reported labor shortage, these overtly proslavery pro-conventionists maintained that Illinois's economic prosperity depended upon the introduction of slavery. If anyone doubted the truth of their statements, they instructed the electorate to observe the prosperity of their slaveholding neighbor, Missouri. "Look," the pro-conventionists implored, "at those trains of wagons with their splendid teams, their carriages and their gangs of negroes. They are going over to fill up Missouri, and make it rich, while our State will stand still or dwindle, because you wont let them keep their slaves here."[38]

Pro-convention diffusionists offered another argument that echoed the positive good tenor of their proslavery colleagues with two important exceptions. Unlike their slavery defending associates, diffusionists sought only the "qualified introduction" of slavery by proposing to couple the expansion of the institution with "a system of gradual emancipation." Conrad Will, a pro-convention member of the general assembly from Jackson County, promised that such a program would restore "thousands to their liberty, to whose bondage there is now no prospect of termination." Additionally, rather than highlight the advantages slavery brought to white residents of the state, these qualified supporters of slavery chose to emphasize the benefits the spread of the institution would bestow on the black slaves. They argued that slaves "ought to be scattered over a wider space, . . . in order that better profits to their master might procure better fare for them." Similarly, "A Friend to Liberty" predicted that extending slavery into Illinois "will better the condition of slaves, comport more with liberty and produce their general emancipation from bondage at an earlier day than if they are confined to a more limited district."[39]

Collectively, the pro-conventionists attempted to cast a comprehensive spectrum of arguments designed to generate support among the broadest electorate possible.

37. "TO THE PEOPLE OF ILLINOIS," unsigned; "ON THE CONVENTION, NO. III," signed "A PLAIN MAN," *Illinois Gazette,* July 5, and 10, 1823. Regarding the defense of slavery in the East, see Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701–1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 97–123.

38. "TO THE EDITOR OF THE ILLINOIS GAZETTE," signed "X," *Illinois Gazette,* Jan. 10, 1824; "For the Advocate," signed "A," *Republican Advocate,* June 5, 1823; and Lippincott, "Conflict of the Century," ISHS.

39. "THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES . . . ," signed Conrad Will, *Edwardsville Spectator,* Dec. 28, 1822; Lippincott, "Conflict of the Century," ISHS; "FOR THE SPECTATOR," signed "A FRIEND TO LIBERTY," *Edwardsville Spectator,* April 12, 1823.

Although most likely attractive to only a fraction of the state's residents, the proslavery faction sought to lure adherents to their cause by depicting slavery as a positive economic good for Illinois's struggling farmers. Pro-convention diffusionists, on the other hand, claimed a more general middle ground, promising that while the temporary introduction of slavery would ensure economic prosperity, Illinoisans would be able to avoid the negative consequences of the slave system through the forced deportation of all slaves once they gained their freedom. Significantly, both pro-convention contingents pledged that the expansion of slavery would promote equality among all of the region's white residents by ensuring that only black people performed the degrading tasks associated with slavery. Ultimately, this diverse pro-convention strategy targeted the racial prejudices and economic ambitions of the state's predominately Southern-born yeoman farmers. By doing so, they acknowledged that whoever was most successful at manipulating this particular interest group would win the convention contest.

The anti-conventionists, who styled themselves the "friends of freedom," attempted to undermine the pro-convention strategy by focusing on three specific issues. Primarily, they sought to unveil slavery's "impolicy and injurious effects in retarding the settlement and prosperity of the State." One anti-convention editorialist, writing in May 1823, boasted that "the emigrants from the east will bring money, and industry—the very things we want." He warned, however, that "emigrants from the south will bring us idleness, luxury, and the slow but fatal disease of slavery—the things we do not want." Another editorialist predicted that encouraging slaveowners to migrate into the state would stifle the development of manufactures and invite unfair market competition. "Democracy" claimed that slaveholders "are not men of manufacturing characters—they have seldom engaged in that business." Worse still, he decried, "they will raise grain and stock by the help of their servile labor, and . . . will undersell the poor man, who raises such things by the labor of his own hands." As Morris Birkbeck assured his audience, "if we vote faithfully against a convention, . . . true prosperity will begin to beam upon us." Clearly, most of those who opposed the convention believed that introducing slavery would diminish, not increase, the prosperity of the state.[40]

The exclusionist faction of the anti-conventionists were particularly interested in demonstrating both the "superiority of free over slave labor" and that slavery "would operate to the injury of the poor or laboring classes of society." One of the contest's more prolific writers, "Martus," claimed that "a white man in his own business, is more efficient than a black man in another's." He explained that "slavery destroys almost every inducement to action and to virtue; by withholding the rewards of industry and the virtues from the slave." From his perspective, only free

40. Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, June 27, 1823, Vaux Family Papers, HSP; "To the People of Illinois," signed "Aristides," *Illinois Intelligencer*, May 24, 1823; "Democracy," *Republican Advocate*, July 24, 1823; "To the Editor of the Illinois Gazette," signed "Jonathan Freeman" [Morris Birkbeck], *Illinois Gazette*, July 19, 1824.

white labor would improve the prosperity of the state. Exclusionist opponents of the convention often recited statistics, comparing the productivity and prosperity of free and slave states, to support their contentions. Rev. Thomas Lippincott, the corresponding secretary for the "Madison Association to oppose the introduction of Slavery in Illinois," compared Pennsylvania with Virginia. He found that both the property values and population increased more rapidly in Pennsylvania than in Virginia. He concluded that "the existence of slavery in one, and its non-existence in the other state, has caused the discrepancy."[41] The only way Illinois would prosper, they implied, was if slavery was excluded from the region.

Perhaps most appalling, many argued, slavery degraded white laborers. Citing an 1817 letter from Congressman R. G. Harper, of South Carolina, to the secretary of the American Colonization Society, Coles informed his audience that "when the laboring class is composed . . . of slaves distinguished from the free class by color, features, and origin," free men "are almost irresistibly led to consider labor as a badge of slavery, and, consequently, as a degradation." Harper had claimed that "in a country where slaves are generally employed, . . . the mere circumstance of a freeman pursuing the same labour . . . [will] subject him to the contempt of the haughty master." Ultimately, the introduction of slavery, according to the "friends of freedom," threatened "to degrade honest but humble industry and sink the laborer." Glorifying the advantages of free labor, Coles and his contemporaries sought to convince the electorate to oppose the convention by celebrating a social order that rewarded efficiency and honest industry with economic independence and equality among white men.[42]

Finally, both abolitionist and exclusionist opponents of the convention sought to demonstrate that slavery inevitably led to a hierarchical social order that oppressed non-slaveholding whites. "Martus," in the fifth installment of a series evocatively entitled "The Crisis," claimed that slavery "begets in its possessor a haughty, insolent, oppressive, overbearing temper dangerous to liberty." He feared that encouraging slaveowners to immigrate to Illinois would create a "*practical aristocracy*." Morris Birkbeck warned Illinois's small farmers that "the planters are great men, and will ride about, mighty grand, with their umbrellas over their head." After the deluge of anti-convention articles, pamphlets, and speeches, the enemies of the convention hoped that few small farmers would doubt that "all equality is destroyed" in a slave state because a slaveholding "community tends . . . to divide the citizens into different ranks and different castes or classes." From the perspective of those who opposed the convention, the very nature of Illinois society was at stake. In

41. Nicholas Biddle to Edward Coles, May 20, 1823, The Papers of Edward Coles, 1786–1868, Firestone Library, Princeton University (hereafter PU); Edward Coles to Roberts Vaux, June 27, 1823, Vaux Family Papers, HSP; "The Crisis, No. III," and "The Crisis, No. IV," signed "Martus," *Republican Advocate*, June 19 and July 3, 1823.

42. "The Voice of Virtue, Wisdom, and Experience, on the subject of NEGRO SLAVERY," unsigned [Edward Coles], *Illinois Intelligencer*, July 13, 1824; "Remarks Addressed to the Citizens of Illinois on the Proposed Introduction of Slavery," [Roberts Vaux, 1824], ISHL.

August 1824, voters would not only choose between slave and free labor, but also between aristocracy and democracy.[43]

All of these arguments proved most effective when the authors wove language laced with racial prejudice into their statements, betraying their preference not only for free labor, but for free *white* labor in particular. Recognizing that the terms were interchangeable, several editorialists substituted "free" for "white" and "black" for "slave" in their essays. "The labor of a free man is always more productive than the labor of the slave," argued Aristides, because "the white laborer has an interest in his toil" while the "miserable horde of blacks" only produced as much as the master demanded. This perspective also led many of these purported "friends of freedom" to denigrate free blacks, a population they thought "always to be dreaded." For example, one author warned that limiting slavery by coupling it with a gradual emancipation plan, as some of the pro-conventionists proposed, would leave Illinois "swarming with old free negroes, worn out in the service of their former master." These newly freed blacks, he continued, would stroll "about the country, . . . begging and pilfering from house to house." Another author described a far more alarming fate in which an expanding free black population "would soon . . . [have] it in their power to contend . . . for supremacy with the whites." If Illinoisans hoped to prosper, anti-conventionists convincingly argued, they would have to preserve "these beautiful and fertile prairies . . . [for] our kindred descendants of Europe, who are like ourselves enlightened," by excluding "the descendants of Africa, who are not only unlike us in person, but are to be a degraded race of slaves." By employing racial language that emphasized not only the inferiority of blacks, but also characterized their presence in Illinois society as a threat to white safety and prosperity, the anti-convention exclusionists attempted to exploit the strong aversion to blacks prevalent among their audience.[44]

Designed specifically to convince them to vote against the convention resolution, this multi-layered discussion targeted the Southern-born small farmer, who would easily recognize the world the writers described. As Abraham Carns informed his audience, "Many of us have been long accustomed to living in slave states, and we know the poor people in those states suffer." He reminded his readers that before they moved to Illinois they "had to lock our cribs, meat houses, and milk houses, through fear of the negroes." He also warned that just as wealthy slaveowners

43. "The Crisis, No. IV," signed "Martus" *Republican Advocate*, July 3, 1823; "To the Editor of the *Illinois Gazette*," signed "Jonathan Freeman" [Morris Birkbeck], *Illinois Gazette*, June 14, 1823; "Democracy," *Republican Advocate*, July 24, Oct. 9, 1823.

44. "To the People of Illinois, No. II," signed "Aristides," *Illinois Intelligencer*, May 24, 1823; "The Crisis, No. IV," signed "Martus," *Republican Advocate*, June 19, 1823; "A Letter from a member of the Christian Convention on the Wabash to Mr. Roger, of White County," signed "A Hater of Slavery and Man Stealing," *Illinois Intelligencer*, Jan. 9, 1824; "To the Citizens of Illinois, No. 3," signed "One of Many" [Edward Coles], *Illinois Intelligencer*, May 28, 1824. Individuals who opposed the convention did not have a monopoly on this type of language. See "Brutus," *Illinois Intelligencer*, July 5, 1823 and "On the Convention, No. III," signed "A Plain Man," *Illinois Gazette*, July 10, 1824. Regarding the importance of racial prejudice in the Old Northwest, see Berwanger, *The Frontier Against Slavery*.

watched "the poor white man . . . become the companion of slaves" when called upon to perform public works in the South, so too will "the haughty slaveholders . . . sit in the shade and drink their grog" as they observe their poor neighbors and slaves build roads across the prairie to facilitate the transportation of slave-produced goods to local markets. According to this author, few residents should doubt that the Southern social order would be replicated in Illinois should slavery be legalized. Similarly, an editorialist, who called himself "A Friend To Illinois," confessed that "I was raised in a slave state," and recalled that those "who are not able to hold or own them [slaves], will be almost levelled with them. This," he declared, "I know from experience." By reminding the state's Southern-born residents why they left their native states and the dangers that would accompany opening Illinois's borders to more black residents, enslaved and free, the anti-conventionists hoped to convince them to exclude slavery from the Prairie state by voting against the convention.[45]

As the convention vote neared, both sides publicly expressed their confidence, but privately feared their efforts would fail. For the anti-conventionists, in particular, the fears were well founded. Not all of Illinois's Southern-born small farmers opposed the convention or slavery. Although they were "despised and trampled on . . . by the aristocratic slaveholders, and contemned [sic] even by slaves," recalled Lippincott, many poor Southern farmers "were found among the noisiest brawlers of the Convention." Asked why he supported the convention, one man replied that he "wasnt gwine to jine in with the darned Yankees." Others, who had left poverty behind when they moved to Illinois, believed that "their wealth might be enhanced and their ease promoted by owning one or more slaves." Slavery appealed to still others. According to Lippincott, men who had witnessed the "severe labor of their wives" and confronted "the difficulty of procuring domestic labor," viewed slavery as the only solution to their labor problems. This last experience, however, was not limited to the state's Southern inhabitants. Christiana Tillson, a Massachusetts native who professed objections to slavery, readily accepted the labor of two runaway slaves when they appeared in her kitchen one morning. To avoid breaking the law, she and her husband purchased their contracts from Robert McLaughlin, the owner of the two fugitives, and exploited the labor of the slaves on their farm. For those who had trouble finding reliable free labor, necessity often overruled conscience. Coles also recognized that the coalition of anti-conventionists was fragile because it consisted of the state's small number of abolitionists, exclusionists, slaveholders who opposed the introduction of new slaves but did not want their own property rights challenged, and many individuals "who profess to be opposed to Slavery and who rail much against it, but yet who are friendly to it." As the date of the final vote approached, it became increasingly difficult to predict if such a weak coalition could win.[46]

45. "Lawrence County Society . . . address," signed Abraham Carns, *Edwardsville Spectator*, Sept. 16, 1823; "Fellow-Citizens," signed "A FRIEND TO ILLINOIS," *Edwardsville Spectator*, Oct. 4, 1823.

46. Lippincott, "Conflict of the Century," ISHS; Christiana Holmes Tillson, *A Woman's Story of Pioneer Illinois*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife, with intro. Kay J. Carr (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995), 137–41; Edward Coles to Robert Vaux, Jan. 21, 1824, Edward Coles Collection, HSP.

In the end, their fears remained unrealized. When the people of Illinois finally cast their ballots on August 2, 1824, they defeated the convention resolution by 1,688 votes. Eighteen counties, 6,640 individuals, or 57 percent of the voting population rejected slavery. Although the gap between the votes in favor and against the resolution appeared to be small, the strength of the anti-convention victory was significant. In eight of the eighteen counties that opposed the convention, more than 70 percent of the voters cast their ballots against the resolution. Only two pro-convention counties garnered a similar majority. In addition, in three of those eighteen anti-convention counties, more than ninety percent of the county's voting residents rejected holding a convention. Furthermore, voter turnout reached an all-time high of nearly 95 percent, with 11,612 residents casting their ballots on that warm summer day. This was a significant increase over popular participation in previous statewide elections. For example, in the congressional campaign of 1820, only 6,944, or 54 percent, of the state's eligible voters cast their ballots. By the gubernatorial race of 1822, the percentage of residents who participated in the election increased to 67 percent, but still remained significantly lower than the 1824 total. Two years after the convention vote, when the population rose considerably but the visibility of the slavery issue practically disappeared, the number of voters only increased by one thousand, reflecting an overall decline in voter turnout. As the slavery issue played an increasingly important role in Illinois's political culture, voter turnout correspondingly magnified. Slavery, then, more than any other issue, served as the catalyst that motivated residents to participate in the political process.[47]

Significantly, a North-South division emerged from the voting results, paralleling the divergence between free and slave states that characterized the nation in the decades preceding the Civil War. This pattern remained a constant feature of Illinois politics throughout the antebellum period, but was particularly visible during the 1850s. As they debated the merits of the Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, and the candidates in the 1858 senatorial election, Illinois's Southern-born residents' political actions continued to be buffeted by the same competing pressures. On the one hand, these transplanted Southerners did not like slavery and objected to its expansion, but they also rejected the notion that outsiders could interfere with the institution and resented Republicans who advocated meddling in the affairs of the South. On the other hand, this sympathy for the South was countered by the Southern yeoman's distrust of the planter aristocracy. Having migrated to Illinois to escape the oppressive influence of a social order based on slavery, Southern-born Illinoisans remained suspicious of Southerners who were committed to the westward expansion of slavery. As in the 1820s, the Southern-born residents of 1850s Illinois discovered a middle ground that acknowledged their competing sympathies. Popular sovereignty and the Democratic Party

47. Theodore Calvin Pease, ed., *Illinois Election Returns, 1818–1848* (Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1923), 27–29. See also, Dillon, "Antislavery Movement in Illinois," 116; Zucker, "The Free Negro Question," 132–34.

offered an alternative that permitted them to remain uninfluenced by the Northern and Southern extremes on either side of the slavery issue as they determined for themselves the type of society in which they would live. And, as earlier, the middle ground these Southern-born residents occupied was compatible with their prejudicial views of African Americans. As long as white liberties were protected, they continued to care little about the fate of black Americans.[48]

In the end, the anti-conventionists won a decisive victory by publicizing the evils of the slave system and drawing out more Illinois voters than ever before. By celebrating the merits of free labor and the benefits of a democratic social order, they successfully articulated arguments that would resonate with the broadest possible coalition of voters. Exclusionists—those residents who did not want to see the size of the black population, both enslaved and free, increase under any circumstances—rejected the convention resolution in large numbers. Importantly, this group included slaveholders who wanted to retain their property but did not want to see more slaves imported into the state, and non-slaveholders who left the South to escape a slave society that granted a disproportionate share of political power to slaveowners. Joining this portion of the electorate was at least a small number of subordinationists, men who believed that slavery offered the most efficient means of securing a social order that elevated all whites above their black labors. These men could reject the convention while remaining proslavery because their vote did not abolish slavery. On the contrary, it ensured that the slave system that already existed in Illinois would neither expand nor perish.

The final, and probably the smallest, group of voters to reject the convention resolution were the abolitionists: men like Edward Coles who hoped that the defeat of the convention movement would be the first step toward abolishing every form of slavery in Illinois. Slave labor, however, remained a very visible part of Illinois's agricultural and domestic economy until the 1850s. The central concern that bound all of these anti-conventionists together was a shared understanding that the black population, whether enslaved or free, should not increase if Illinois was to prosper economically. By rejecting the convention resolution, they confidently announced that they had prevented the expansion of slavery and continued to maintain a firm commitment not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, a position that would emerge on the national level under the banner of the Free Soil party. On that fateful day in August, the residents demonstrated their preference for a white egalitarian society, populated by white independent yeoman farmers, by rejecting slavery and the hierarchical social order that placed the poor white farmer only slightly above the black slave.

In the fall of 1851, Coles sat comfortably in his library on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia reading a New York newspaper only to discover that J. R. Poinsett of South Carolina had erroneously credited Coles with preventing slavery from being introduced into Illinois by exercising the power of the veto. Writing to correct the error,

48. Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest*, 108–26. See also Robert W. Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 206–303.

Coles informed Poinsett that it was the people, not he, who had voted to defeat the convention resolution. The error in details aside, Poinsett admitted to Coles that he believed "the principle . . . is the same." He had invoked the events in Illinois, he revealed, to demonstrate "that a majority of the people of [the] Sovereign State of California possessed the power and might exercise it under the Constitution to introduce Slavery." Poinsett indicated that he merely wanted to ensure that Californians would have the same opportunity that Illinoisans enjoyed twenty-seven years earlier. Like Coles, Lippincott feared that Southern advocates of the expansion of slavery would use the events in Illinois to promote their own sectional interests. Writing of the convention crisis in the summer of 1860, he proclaimed that "Popular Sovereignty was not invented so recently as some supposed." Instead, Lippincott revealed that it had been "boldly and continually and impudently used . . . in the discussions of Illinois in 1823–4." And, as during that earlier crisis, he warned that recent politicians used the idea of popular sovereignty "for the purpose of cheating the people out of their suffrages, and placing the power in the hands of the slaveholders." While they thought their earlier efforts in Illinois should serve as an example to those who objected to the spread of slavery across the interior of the continent, both Coles and Lippincott feared that the most important lesson to be discerned from their experiences would remain unrecognized.[49]

From his perspective, Lippincott believed that the lesson to be learned from the events in Illinois grew out of the effectiveness of the anti-convention strategy, a program that emphasized the superiority of free labor and promoted equality among white men. Accordingly, he recommended that the pamphlets emphasizing those issues, particularly M. Jean-Baptist Say's "Political Economy," should "accompany Helper's 1857 work throughout the land." More specifically than the earlier essays, Hinton R. Helper's work, *The Impending Crisis of the South,* was directed toward a particular audience, "the non-slaveholding whites of the south." In an effort to nationalize the influence of the Northern antislavery agenda, Helper compiled endless statistics demonstrating the superiority of free over slave labor and championed the prosperity of the Northern free states while he exposed the economic decline of the slaveholding South. Also like his anti-convention predecessors, Helper attempted to pull non-slaveholding Southerners behind the antislavery banner by exploiting their anti-black prejudices, a strategy that worked equally well among Northerners who did not want to see the size of the free black population increase in their midst either.[50] From the 1820s through the 1850s, then, the ability to cultivate support among non-slaveholding Southerners held the key to orchestrating a political, rather than martial, solution to the problem of slavery.

49. Edward Coles to J. R. Poinsett, Mar. 15, 1851, The Papers of Edward Coles, PU; J. R. Poinsett to Edward Coles, Mar. 28, 1851, Edward Coles Collection, HSP; Lippincott, "Conflict of the Century," ISHS.

50. Lippincott, "The Conflict of the Century," ISHS. Hinton Rowan Helper, *The Impending Crisis of the South: How to Meet It* (New York: Burdick Brothers, 1857).

Although the arguments employed during the 1820s appeared remarkably similar to those propounded a generation later, the context of the slavery debates had changed dramatically, preventing Helper and his supporters from successfully fostering cross-sectional support for their cause. Throughout the 1820s, conflicting views of the slavery issue had yet to crystallize into uncompromising, sectionally defined positions. Many Southerners, particularly those who lived in the Border States, believed that slavery was morally wrong and ideologically inconsistent with their republican principles. As a result, they experimented with the idea of abolishing slavery through gradual emancipation and colonization schemes. While sectional animosities generated during the Missouri controversy inspired some Southerners to conclude that the South needed to stand together as a unified whole against the North, the success of the compromise coupled with the absence of either a strong abolition movement in the North or an outspoken secessionist perspective in the South preserved a window of opportunity in which a national coalition had the potential to resolve the slavery issue.[51] If anything, the Illinois convention contest of 1822–24 demonstrates that such an opportunity existed and could be exploited if sectional passions could be overshadowed by an emphasis on common political and economic interests.

With the advent of the Garrisonian abolition movement and the emergence of the Nullification crisis in the early 1830s, however, the likelihood that a national effort to resolve the slavery issue would emerge or be successful all but disappeared. Whereas during the 1820s free soil rhetoric and a commitment to popular sovereignty both could be dispatched toward excluding slavery from Illinois, those who espoused the same ideas in the 1840s and 1850s approached the issue of slavery's expansion from opposite perspectives both politically and geographically. Americans understood the free soil beliefs of Salmon P. Chase, Martin Van Buren, and Abraham Lincoln as a specifically Republican and Northern position. At the same time, despite Stephen A. Douglas's efforts to define popular sovereignty as a middle ground, too many Northerners remained suspicious of the Southern support it generated and feared that the proposal was little more than a Democratic smoke screen that concealed a desire to keep the western territories open to slavery.[52] By the 1850s, then, the slavery issue had become too sectional and the Illinois convention struggle could only be used out of context to promote the interests of a particular section, an outcome neither Edward Coles nor Thomas Lippincott supported.

51. Anthony Iaccarino"Virginia and the National Contest Over Slavery in the Early Republic, 1780–1833" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1999).

52. On the politics of slavery and westward expansion, see Morrison, *Slavery and the American West*, 96–156; Johannsen, *Stephen A. Douglas*, 206–338.

Copyright of Civil War History is the property of Kent State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

المنارة للاستشارات

www.manaraa.com

Copyright of Civil War History is the property of Kent State University Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

المنارة للاستشارات

www.manaraa.com