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The collapse of the Iowa Democratic Party: Iowa and the lecompton constitution

by

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Introduction

The ideal of compromise consumed the politics of America during the antebellum era. The political arguments of expansion and abolition of slavery constantly threatened to tear the Union apart because with every piece of new legislation a state would threaten secession. The political issue in America that continued to pervade discussion was the expansion of slavery. Events like the Mexican-American War, the Compromise of 1850, and the organization of the Kansas and Nebraska Territories raised the issue of slavery and had a profound effect on America in the early 1850's. The consequences of these events would cause the decline of the Whig Party and the ascendancy of the Republican Party.

The expansion of the slave power concerned Northern politicians. Societal differences aside, both North and South constantly struggled for political control of the Union. The South believed the expansion of slavery prolonged their control of politics in Union, as the North believed expansion of slavery lead to the economic and moral deterioration of the country. Republican ideology consisted of free-soil, manufacturing, banking, and prohibition. Moral opposition to slavery certainly defined one aspect of the Republican ideology, but by no means the only one considering the distaste of the majority of northerners for the "Negro" and the widespread hostility toward abolitionists.¹

The Democrats of the 1850's were naturally divided by economic differences. The southern wing of the Democratic Party maintained the need for slavery, a political necessity that the northern wing did not share. The ideology of most Democrats consisted of expansion of slavery, strengthening the Fugitive Slave Law, and non-intervention of the Federal

¹ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 5.

government in territorial issues. The organization of new territories provided the southern Democrats with the possibility of expanding their influence and political power.

The organization of the Kansas and Nebraska Territories created much controversy in America. In 1853, Democratic Senator Augustus C. Dodge of Iowa submitted a bill for the organization of the Nebraska Territory for the benefit of Iowa. The reason for this legislation primarily was for placement of a railroad through Iowa. After referring the bill for organizing Nebraska to a committee, Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois rewrote Dodge's bill, which became the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854.

The introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act faced hostility from the Northern states. The provision of "popular sovereignty," which Douglas added to the original bill, allowed for the expansion of slavery into all territories based on a referendum from the people of that territory. The political repercussions of Douglas's political maneuver to circumvent the Missouri Compromise allowed for Whigs in the north to gain political momentum for the elections of 1854. The birth of the Republican Party came out of the political battles over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Democratic Party passed their legislation at a great cost to the party. The notion of popular sovereignty became a political tool used by Democrats. This same political tool would backfire on the party during the ordeal that became the Lecompton Constitution. This thesis looks at the effects of the Lecompton Constitution on the state of Iowa, and how it led to the collapse of the Iowa Democratic Party.

The Democratic Party controlled the state of Iowa for much of its early existence. The Democrats in Iowa were considered the champions of compromise as they voted for the compromise of 1850, as well as the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Iowa Senators Augustus C. Dodge

and George W. Jones campaigned in Iowa and Washington to help their political ally Stephen A. Douglas pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act in Congress. Due to the Democrats' poor political campaigning, Iowa's Whig Party captured much of the General Assembly and elected their first Whig Governor, James W. Grimes. The Whig Party quickly coalesced with Know-Nothings and Free-Soilers to form the Republican Party. Although the state of Iowa was still considered a Democratic State, the Republican Party was a growing opposition party.

The political actions of President James Buchanan and his followers during the mid 1850's lead to the downfall of Iowa's Democratic Party. The Lecompton Constitution of 1857 caused a schism within the National Democratic Party that forced state parties to choose between President Buchanan and Stephen Douglas. Opponents objected to Buchanan's attempt to force a fraudulent constitution on the people of the territory of Kansas, which contradicted Douglas's popular sovereignty ideal.

In Iowa, Senator George W. Jones and a small fraction of Democrats split with a majority of Iowa's Democrats, who favored Douglas. This split allowed the Republican Party to make political gains in every state election up to 1860. The split caused much tension between Jones of Iowa and Douglas of Illinois. The Lecompton Constitution of 1857 failed to pass in Congress but it continued to plague the Democrats of Iowa. The Democrats' political base broke into pieces. Some Democrats jumped ship to the Republican Party, while others formed new parties like the Constitutional Union Party.

The consequences of the Lecompton Constitution for Iowa led to the Republican Party's complete control of Iowa. The Republicans gained a foothold on Iowa politics that

lasted for the rest of the nineteenth century. The Lecompton Constitution caused an irreparable schism in the Democrat Party of Iowa. Democratic attempts at reconciliation failed, as the tensions caused by the schism of the Lecompton Constitution beleaguered them in future elections. The Lecompton Constitution became a political weapon wielded by Iowa Republicans during elections from 1858-1860. The political outcome led to a stronger hold on Iowa for the Republican Party.

There are not many histories written on the political developments of Iowa during the 1850's. The two major books offered on Iowa politics during the antebellum era are Morton M. Rosenberg's *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* published in 1972 and Robert Cook's *Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878* published in 1994. Rosenberg's *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War* is perhaps the most complete work done on the political history of Iowa to this date.² Though Rosenberg addresses the Lecompton Constitution and its effect on Iowa politics, he neglects to fully explore the lasting effects of the Lecompton issue during the years of 1859-1860. Rosenberg argues "Iowa Republicans prospered from the controversy over the Lecompton Constitution which divided the national and state Democratic Parties in 1857-1858."³ He further argues that the "the Jones group had never completely forgiven Douglas for his quarrel and subsequent break with Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution. In 1860 they sought to

² Iowa historians have a tendency to overlook the significance of the Lecompton Constitution or to overlook the issue entirely. In *Baptism of Fire*, Robert Cook acknowledges the help and advice of Iowa historian Leland Sage. In looking at Leland L. Sage's *A History of Iowa* published in 1974 the book does not mention the Lecompton Constitution once. When discussing political events of the 1850's Sage details the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the Dred Scott decision.

³ Morton M. Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 237.

defeat him without reflecting on the consequences of their actions.”⁴ Rosenberg’s insistence on the Lecompton Constitution ending in 1858 does not take into account Lecompton’s central role in the Governor’s election of 1859, and Governor Samuel Kirkwood’s inaugural address in 1860. Arguing that the Democrats were not united in 1860 overlooks the bickering and forced coercion of the election of 1859 for Iowa’s Senate seat.

The split within the party effected every election from 1858, 1859 and 1860. The false front put on by a “united” Democratic Party became undone after the election of 1859. Rosenberg argues that local issues like homestead legislation, taxes and issues of slavery kept the Democrats from re-taking control. These factors undoubtedly played their part for local offices, but the schism caused by the Lecompton Constitution created too big of a divide, and cost them so much power that they could never quite catch up.

In *Baptism of Fire*, Cook argues for the death of the Lecompton Constitution in 1858. Republican “hopes that Lecompton would keep the party afloat during 1858 were dashed during the summer by congressional Democrats who passed a compromise measure over the opposition of the Republican minority. When Kansans rejected statehood in August the issue was dead and buried, much to the relief of Douglas’s followers in Iowa.”⁵ Although defeated on a national scale, Cook misses the impact on the local level. The repercussions of the split over the issue prevented its death in the state of Iowa. The Lecompton Constitution caused concerns for former Senator Jones when he was asked to support Congressional hopeful William Leffingwell. The Lecompton issue showed up on the campaign trail for Governor in

⁴ Ibid., 238.

⁵ Robert Cook, *Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878* (Ames, Iowa State University Press: 1994), 118.

1860 during debates between Republican Kirkwood and Democrat Dodge. The lack of coverage of the Lecompton Constitution in *Baptism of Fire* might be attributed to the work focusing on the rise of the Republican Party, and not on the decline of the Democratic Party.

The Lecompton Constitution has great significance in Iowa political history. The early political mishaps of the Republican Party and the Panic of 1857 illustrate that the Republican Party was not above criticism. The Democrats' inability to unite their party in the wake of the Lecompton Constitution cost them control of both their party and the state of Iowa. The Lecompton Constitution had further repercussions on a national scale as it caused a split at the Democratic Convention of 1860 in Charleston, South Carolina. This split would foster new political parties, allowing Abraham Lincoln to achieve a political victory in 1860.

This thesis relies on a number of nineteenth-century sources. The most influential of these sources are *The Congressional Globe*, the *Journal of the House*, and the *Journal of the Senate*. These accounts provide important debate and testimony by the politicians' during the 1850's. Newspapers help explain the political sentiments of the populace of Iowa. They at times provided partisan attacks on one party or another, but they also were important for their reprinting of important letters or proceedings on Iowa politics. Personal manuscripts at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines provide great access to politician's personal feelings on the politics of the day.

Many letters of two of Iowa's most important politicians at this time, Augustus C. Dodge and James W. Grimes, are lost to history, burned in a fire. William Salter's *Life of Grimes* is one of the last surviving works that holds letters of James W. Grimes. Although not a complete collection on his letters and correspondence, Salter's *Life of Grimes* is a must

for any scholar on early Iowa politics. Robert E. Lee also contributed to the scholarly pursuit by publishing “Letters of Grimes” in the *Annals of Congress*. The archives hold some papers of Dodge, but most of his correspondence was destroyed. The correspondence of George W. Jones and Laurel Summers contribute a lot to the understanding of the pro-Buchanan wing of Iowa’s Democratic Party. The Samuel Kirkwood and William Penn Clarke correspondences contribute to a greater understanding of the Republicans in Iowa.⁶

The first chapter of this paper will outline the early development of Iowa from the time of territorial status up through statehood. It will illustrate the political dominance that Democrats had during the first decade and a half of Iowa’s existence. The aftermath of the Compromise of 1850 will show the political power that the Democrats achieved. The conclusion of this chapter will focus on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the partial ascendancy of the Whig/Republican Party. The chapter will argue that after twelve years of political dominance, the Democratic hold on Iowa started to slip away.

The second chapter will delve into the politics of the Lecompton Constitution on a national and local scale. The political animosity between Buchanan and Douglas will show the schism in the national party. The Buchanan and Douglas conflict at a national level

⁶ The works of Foner, Gienapp, and Holt offer a detailed look at national politics during this time period: Eric Foner. *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995); William E Gienapp. *The Origins of the Republican Party 1852-1856* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Michael F. Holt *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). The works of Shambaugh, Salter, Pelzer, Sage, Rosenberg, and Cook offer a detailed look at Iowa during the 1850’s: Robert Cook. *Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994); Louis Pelzer., *Augustus Caesar Dodge* (Iowa: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1908); Morton M. Rosenberg *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics* (Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972); Leland L. Sage. *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974); Salter, William. *The Life of Grimes: Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; A Senator of the United States 1859-1869* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1876); Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh. *Fragments of the Debates of the Iowa Constitutional Conventions of 1844 and 1846* (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Society, 1900); Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh. *The Constitutions of Iowa* (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Society, 1934).

spilled over into and build animosity between Jones and Douglas that would tear apart the Democratic Party of Iowa. The chapter will argue that the split within the Democratic Party caused the Democrats to lose to the Republicans in the 1858 and 1859 state elections.

The third and final chapter will argue for the importance of the Lecompton Constitution in Iowa as a whole. The legislation was dead, but the effects continued to plague the Democratic Party. The Republicans used this to their advantage as they wielded the Lecompton Constitution as a political tool to take complete control of Iowa by the start of 1860.

Chapter 1

Early Development of Iowa

The years from 1838-1854 were a period of Democratic dominance in the state of Iowa. Many citizens of Iowa chose to support the Democratic Party because of their policies. The Democrats faced little to no opposition in politics until 1854, when the Whig Party started making political gains, in part due to Democrats' stance on the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Despite this early opposition, the Democrats retained control until the mid 1850's. The dominance the Democrats had in Iowa is significant to note because the Lecompton Constitution brought that dominance to an end. This chapter will lay out the early development of Iowa. The chapter will focus on how the Democrats held complete control of the state until 1854 when they started to lose control.

The territory of Iowa gained statehood on December 28, 1846. The state entered the United States as a stronghold for Jacksonian Democrats. The Democrats held onto power for another decade until the Republican Party won control of the state and took control for several decades to come. To understand how Democrats took control of Iowa when it became a state, one must look at the settlement and policies of the Iowa territory. The issues that Iowans faced during the Jacksonian era were local, but they were the same issues Americans throughout the United States were facing as well. The problem of slavery and the presence of African Americans, the creation and use of banks, and religious revivalism all contributed to political unrest in territorial Iowa as well as the early development of Iowa as a state.

Through many land treaties with Native Americans and settlers moving westward, the Iowa territory became settled and eventually the twenty-ninth state of the Union. Iowa, like

many states in the Midwest, held many Native American tribes like the Sauk and the Fox. These Indian tribes were in constant struggle with the federal government over their lands. These struggles resulted in the Black Hawk War of 1832. Though the government fought the Sauk in Illinois, the tribes lost their land in Iowa during the treaty signing at the war's end. The Black Hawk War concluded with the Sauk Indians and the United States signing the Black Hawk Purchase Treaty on September 21, 1832. The Black Hawk Purchase Treaty removed many Indian tribes from Iowa land and gave way to settlers moving westward from Illinois into Iowa.⁷ Once Native Americans were removed and the land was open for settlement, scores of settlers came north from Missouri and west across the Mississippi from Illinois. These first settlers, squatters as they were called in the United States Senate, were looked down upon their arrival into Iowa.

It was clear that politicians in the East looked down on those who traveled across the Mississippi. Prominent Senators like John C. Calhoun and Henry Clay spoke negatively about the squatters moving west. "The Ioway country," Calhoun declared, "had been already seized on by a lawless body of armed men." Senator Clay described them as "lawless intruders" that should be removed from "property they have forcibly appropriated for their own use."⁸ In the minds of settlers, they were doing nothing wrong, and for sake of survival they were staking claims to land on which to raise their families. In historian Cyrenus Cole's mind these western pioneers were the most courageous, venturesome, and far-visioned

⁷ Leland L. Sage, *A History of Iowa* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1974), 48.

⁸ Cyrenus Cole, *Iowa Through the Years* (Iowa City: The State Historical Society, 1940), 112.

among the Americans at the time. They were men and women who were willing to work and to endure hardships to make their futures secure.⁹

Settlers that went west to make their home in Iowa faced many hardships, just as those who had gone west before them. They had to build shelter for their families and set up farms or businesses in order to make a living. The settlers needed to sow crops of wheat and corn in order to at least subsist for their first few months in the West. These first settlers understood the importance of the market and of the importance of the Mississippi River; therefore they stayed to the eastern border of the Iowa territory. According to historian Robert Cook, these small towns on the edge of the Mississippi contained a small elite group of men who worked to gain advantages for their town, using their influence to gain political advantage. Most members of this privileged group were either merchants or lawyers. Some were self-made; others inherited their wealth or at least had the advantage of a college education in one of the older states. These few elite settlers went on to take control of the local political machines in their towns.¹⁰

Due to population growth in both the territories of Wisconsin and Iowa, Martin Van Buren signed a bill creating the Territory of Iowa on June 12, 1838 which would include all of Iowa, Minnesota, and part of North and South Dakota. Signing the act to divide the territories of Wisconsin and Iowa took place two years after the establishment of the Wisconsin Territory. Now that Iowa was its own territory, a local government had to be established. Until the Iowa Territory held its own constitutional convention, passed the vote

⁹ Ibid., 113.

¹⁰ Robert Cook, *Baptism of Fire: The Republican Party in Iowa, 1838-1878* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 17.

for statehood, and Congress accepted the proposal, the Organic Act governed the state. Passed by Congress in 1787, the Organic Act became the constitution for territories not yet admitted as states.¹¹

President Martin Van Buren appointed a Democrat who would support his political agenda. The first governor appointed by President Van Buren was Robert Lucas of Ohio. Originally from Virginia, politically he was a Jacksonian Democrat. Although elected Governor, Lucas did not show up for six weeks and Secretary of the Territory William B. Conway held the Governor's position until Lucas's arrival. Once in Iowa, Lucas assigned the town of Burlington as the territorial capital. Lucas also had to campaign for a local congressional assembly to help manage the newly formed territory. He (Lucas) also issued a proclamation for a general election to be held on September 10th, 1838 and specified the number of members to be elected to the Council and House from each county or district and chose thirty-nine members of the First Territorial Assembly. The political make up of the new assembly held twenty-six natives of the South.¹²

It is important to note that the majority of the assembly came from the South. With Martin Van Buren as President, and successor to Andrew Jackson, southern political ideologies were aligned with the Democratic Party. With political patronage from President Van Buren, the territory of Iowa was a Democratic stronghold when it became an independent territory. Not all politicians were Democrats; Iowa also had a minority of Whig politicians. James Grimes, only twenty-two at the time, became one of the most famous of

¹¹ Steven Cross, *The Drafting of Iowa's Constitution*, ([Publications of Iowa), <http://publications.iowa.gov/135/1/history/7-6.html> (accessed October, 24, 2011).

¹² Cole, *Iowa Through the Years*, 129.

Iowa's early politicians and would become a leading Iowa Republican. He served as Iowa's third Governor and went on to serve as a Senator from Iowa in the late 1850's. Grimes and his followers combined with those who were both anti-slavery and abolitionists in future elections. This political coalition challenged ideas about slavery in Iowa.

Slavery started to become a growing political issue in the 1850's. Many of America's political squabbles between the North and South were due to slavery. In Iowa, slavery also became a dominant political issue. Slavery was present in the territory of Iowa, although most, if not all, the slaves present came before Iowa's separation into its own territory. The census of 1840 listed 188 "Negros" in Iowa. Sixteen of them were slaves, six men and ten women, who were mostly household servants. When Iowa first became a territory, one of the first laws was a law excluding African Americans from the territory unless they could prove either through certificate that they were free, or they could pay a \$500 bond.¹³

This law became one of multiple black codes politicians jammed through the Iowa legislature. They approved a school bill that limited public education to every class of white citizen, a bill on elections that barred anyone not a free white male citizen from voting, and a militia bill that required enrollment only of free white male persons. This black code became the Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattos.¹⁴ This act prevented blacks from being brought to

¹³ Richard Lee Doak, *Free Men, Free Labor: Iowa and the Kansas-Nebraska Act* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1964), 10.

¹⁴ Robert B. Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star: Black Freedom and White Supremacy on the Hawkeye Frontier* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1997), 26.

Iowa for work as free labor. Any citizen who knowingly engaged, hired, or harbored African Americans in violation of the law could be fined up to one hundred dollars.¹⁵

Iowans believed that slavery threatened free labor. Fear also existed that more freed slaves would make their way to the Iowa territory to start a new life. Freed slaves in the Iowa territory were cheaper labor than the white work force. Midwesterners feared that slaveholders would emancipate their old and crippled slaves to avoid caring for them, and they would become a burden to northern states.¹⁶

Prominent southerners brought their slaves to Iowa. Due to the Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattos, anyone who hired or housed slaves could be fined. Iowans had to find a way around this law. In addition to those who were openly held as slaves, there were many more publicly identified by their masters as servants in order to avoid public censure. Iowans tolerated African Americans as slaves or servants as long as the work force did not compete with white labor. The Iowan desire to be free of both slaves and free blacks could change to indulge community leaders so long as their use of slaves was not done openly and did not damage the economic standing of other whites.¹⁷

Though Iowans passed laws prohibiting blacks in Iowa, anti-slavery sentiment was rising. However, Iowans did not push for abolition. In the eyes of many Iowans abolition was dangerous. There were those who also believed that slavery should be allowed, if only to be respectful of their fellow white citizens and their property rights. In an editorial column appearing in the *Burlington Advertiser* on October 19, 1837, one contributor worried that

¹⁵ David Junius Brodnax Sr., *Breathing Freedom's Air: The African American Struggle for Equal Citizenship in Iowa, 1830-1900* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 25.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

abolition would lead to disunion. “It endangers the peace, and quiet, and safety of slaveholders,” he explained, “and, persisted in, will have a greater tendency than any other single cause, to produce the greatest political evil that could possibly befall us – a dissolution of the Union.”¹⁸ Another opinion piece that appeared in the *Burlington Advertiser* January 13, 1838 echoed the same fear of disunion over abolition of slavery. It read, “The greatest evil that could possibly befall this country is disunion.” The contributor blamed abolitionists in Congress, specifically John Quincy Adams for stating, “If it comes then, upon the heads of the guilty authors may the axe of vengeance fall. They have betrayed the interests of their country.”¹⁹

The Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattos was not popular amongst all those in Iowa. There were a few pockets of resistance to this new law. Most resistance came from religious revivalists in Iowa. Originally starting in the New England area with Charles Finney and the Second Great Awakening, their ideals described a changing landscape of America, one of tolerance and freedom for all. They were powerful ideas, and in the 1830’s they underlay a missionary crusade that transformed society and politics in the United States.²⁰ In Iowa, Asa Turner Jr. and his Denmark Church of Congregationalists lead the movement. Inhabited largely by New England migrants, Denmark quickly became a center for crusading Puritan morality on the prairies. The Church of Congregationalists became one of the leading anti-slavery movements in Iowa. They also lead the abolition movement in Iowa. These

¹⁸ Editorial, *Burlington Advertiser*, October 19, 1837.

¹⁹ Editorial, *Burlington Advertiser* January 13, 1838.

²⁰ Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 5.

antislavery Iowans came from New England. Therefore, New England ideals of antislavery came to Iowa with their migration to the Iowa territory.²¹

Religious movements started by New Englanders recently relocated to Iowa started the abolitionist movement in Iowa. Abolition and anti-slavery were two different ideals in Iowa which separated the majority of Iowans and the religious minority. The beginnings of the Second Great Awakening had not taken its full effect in Iowa; therefore, the religious abolitionists were still a minority. Asa Turner Jr. and Congregationalists like him, believed that slavery was “a cancer eating out the life of politic. There is no remedy for it but the knife.” These abolitionists held much stronger antislavery beliefs than the average Iowan. The Congregationalists’ beliefs towards slavery were “engendered by a profound conviction that salvation was open to everyone and that people had no right to hold despotic sway over the minds and bodies of their fellow human beings, all of whom had equal moral responsibilities in the sight of God.”²²

The religious minority’s abolition movement attempted to repeal the Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattos. At first, their attempts were not successful. During the early 1840s, abolitionists petitioned the legislature for the law’s repeal. They found little support at the capital. Only a handful of predominately Whig representatives from their own districts displayed any inclination to reject proslavery sentiment. Those who favored abolition could only accomplish their goals if they joined together. The abolitionists moved to third-party

²¹ Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 34.

²² *Ibid.*, 34.

politics with the Freedom Party, because neither Democrats nor Whigs took a hard antislavery stance.²³

On October 31, 1843, sixty-four Iowans and nine visitors from out of state gathered for an abolition convention in Round Prairie Church located near Yellow Spring village to discuss their new movement. They drew up resolutions and wrote a constitution. The convention's resolutions provided the Iowa Anti-Slavery Society with a platform to garner more support. They resolved "that pure and undefiled religion makes thorough and active anti-slavery men and women" and (resolution 5) "that it is the especial duty of teachers of religion...to plead the cause of the oppressed, and if they fail to do so, they preach not the whole gospel of Christ." With these resolutions, the Iowa Anti-Slavery Society was established.²⁴

The Iowa Anti-Slavery Society and the Liberty party were trying to shake up politics in both the United States and the newly-formed Iowa territory. The Liberty Party lead by William Lloyd Garrison argued that the Constitution of the United States was an anti-slavery document. The local abolitionists in Iowa formulated their own Liberty Party ticket. Naturally, the Liberty Party and the Iowa Anti-Slavery Society had the same goal. Where religious abolitionists believed that slavery should be abolished, the Liberty Party, for fear of being too radical, took a more neutral, yet still divisive approach. The Liberty Party argued that slavery existed legally within the various states by virtue of state law; the Founding Fathers had not attempted to abolish it because they lacked the authority to do so. But they had intended that the libertarian principles of the Declaration of Independence and the

²³ Ibid., 35.

²⁴ Dykstra, *Bright Radical Star*, 42.

Constitution ideologically over rid this concession. The Liberty Party campaigned that the federal government lacked the authority to abolish slavery, but that individual state power could abolish slavery.²⁵

This newly formed group in Iowa wanted to reject the Federal Fugitive Slave Law as well as remove Iowa's own black code, the Act to Regulate Blacks and Mulattos. The fourth resolution presented at the conference dealt with Iowa's black code. The conference declared that "the principle of equality...gives the colored people an equal right with ourselves to a residence in this country, together with the possession of all its privileges." The resolution did not stop at guaranteeing blacks what seemed like citizenship but that "the laws of this Territory, making a distinction on account of color, are wrong, and a stigma upon our statute books, and...we urgently recommend the circulating of petitions in every county and neighborhood of the Territory, to present to our next legislature, praying for their immediate repeal." These resolutions, if implemented, were extremely liberal at this time for the state of Iowa. This particular resolution accepted blacks and whites as equals in the eyes of the law.²⁶

The convention held in 1843 ended up being successful for both the Liberty Party and the Iowa Anti-Slavery Society. The Liberty Party exerted its agenda and made their political rivals, the Whigs and Democrats, look politically impotent on the issue of slavery. They exposed the majority of Democrats as militant racists, for the most part, and the Whigs as weak politicians not willing to take a stand. Popular sentiment was turning towards an abolitionist view of slavery. Although Democrats held power, the citizens joined newly formed political and religious groups in favor of abolition. Although in the minority, these

²⁵ Ibid., 42-43.

²⁶ Ibid., 43.

political movements helped change the political landscape in Iowa.²⁷ As the anti-slavery and abolitionist movements started to take hold in Iowa, a new political development was on the horizon and that was statehood for the territory of Iowa.

Iowa's first attempt for a proposal for statehood happened in 1844. The previous two governors, Governor Democratic Robert Lucas and Governor Whig John Chambers, had unsuccessfully campaigned for statehood. Governor Lucas used a referendum to decide if the time for statehood was right but was defeated. In his second annual message to the Iowa House of Representatives, Governor Lucas urged Iowa lawmakers to pass an act for admittance as a state. Lucas started his second message to the House with, "When we consider the rapidly increasing population, and advancing prosperity of the Territory, we may, in my opinion, with such propriety proceed to measures preparatory to the formation of a Constitution and State Government, and for admission into the Union as an independent state."²⁸ The path towards statehood had begun, and Lucas wanted to capitalize on Iowa's increasing population.

In July 1840, he again brought up the subject, but this time asked the lawmakers to submit the question to the people. Lawmakers followed his advice, but in the regular annual elections, held in August, the proposition was decisively defeated, 2,907 to 937. Shortly thereafter, Governor Chambers, newly-appointed by President William Henry Harrison, and the newly-elected Whigs took over. Governor Chambers asked the populace to vote on statehood and, again, the proposition lost. The push for statehood was political. The

²⁷ Ibid., 44.

²⁸ Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, *Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of Iowa* (Iowa: Iowa State Historical Society), 95.

Democrats were in favor due to the Democratic Party's strength in Iowa. The Democrats believed statehood would give the Democrats an advantage for the next Presidential election. The Whigs were opposed. Governor Chambers broke with party lines to call for statehood.²⁹

Each side had arguments to present for the benefit of Iowa. The Democrats favored statehood, seeing it as a way to gain back political power. Those favoring statehood appealed to pride and to the natural desire to participate in national elections to determine the fate of the country. Since the state was dominated by Democrats, it was logical to push for statehood to win back not only the political offices of the territory, but also the Presidency. The Democrats tried to counter by promoting fear of a high federal tax burden by becoming a state. The greater costs and higher taxes under state government were countered by the federal government with assurances that the Distribution Act of 1841 (land distribution) would provide more money than was necessary for Iowa's share of expenses. In addition, the state would receive five hundred thousand acres of land for use or sale.³⁰

In 1845, Iowans again rejected statehood. This time, the rejection was over banking. Settled by Jacksonian Democrats, Iowa feared banks. Whigs wanted a chartered bank, while Democrats did not want a bank in the state's constitution. In a letter to his father in 1845 discussing the population's rejection of the proposal for statehood, James W. Grimes, a leading Whig politician, had a positive outlook. He still believed in banks as a way to make Iowa prosper, arguing "We have no currency except what is furnished from other States. If

²⁹ Sage, *A History of Iowa*, 81.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

we had banks, where our citizens could obtain accommodations, our business would be greatly increased, and the prices of property improved.”³¹

Whigs and Democrats could not even agree to terms allowing their territory to become a state. James Grimes was one of those Whigs glad to see the proposal for statehood fail. In a letter to his father he discussed his satisfaction over Iowa’s failure to gain admittance. “Our people again have rejected the constitution,” he explained, and “the result will probably be that we shall remain a Territory for two or three more years. It is fortunate for the people that the question has been decided as it has, for they will now be free from a heavy debt...in the event of becoming a State.”³²

In order to gain statehood, Iowans had to hold a constitutional convention. In 1846, Iowans finally achieved statehood, where they had failed the previous two years. After the removal of Governor Chambers, who replaced Governor Lucas, newly-elected President James K. Polk appointed a new Democratic Governor and Iowans rejoiced. In 1846, Democrats were holding strong in the territory of Iowa. Whigs had lost the Executive, and were on the wrong side of American public sentiment during the Mexican War. Reactions in Iowa to the Mexican War were determined largely by the fact that the conflict was masterminded by the Democratic administration of President James K. Polk. Democrats had the better argument regarding the Mexican War for Iowans, for a majority of citizens shared the general western enthusiasm for Manifest Destiny.³³ With the passing of the convention on August 3, 1846 by a vote of 9,492 to 9,036, Iowa became a state in the Union. The closeness

³¹Salter, *Life of Grimes*, 23.

³²Ibid., 23.

³³Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 31.

of the vote exemplifies the concern Iowans had over becoming a state.³⁴ As a newly-formed state, Iowa was now able to participate in the national political discussion.

The first national political issues in which the state of Iowa participated were the Presidential Election of 1848 and the Compromise of 1850. On a national scale, political parties were starting to shift, breaking off into sections, and compromising. The Democrats, in 1848, nominated Lewis Cass and the Whigs nominated war hero Zachary Taylor. Former President Martin Van Buren ran as a third party candidate with the Free-Soil Party. Van Buren and the Barnburners from New York seceded from the Jacksonian Democratic camp. These former Democrats created the national Free-Soil Party, a party opposed to the expansion of slavery. The recently-formed Liberty Party in Iowa joined with these former Democrats against both the Whigs and Democrats.

Although Lewis Cass won the Iowa primary, he lost the national election to Zachary Taylor. According to historian Robert Cook, Taylor's victory came because his "military record and conspicuous silence on the [Wilmot] Proviso combined with his party's hydra-headed campaign (antislavery in the North, proslavery in the South) to place Whigs in control of the federal government once again." With Taylor in the Presidency, the Whigs of Iowa took an antislavery stance. The Whig state convention "adopted a plank of condemning slavery expansion and calling for legislation to relieve the federal government of responsibility for that institution."³⁵

³⁴ Benjamin Franklin Shambaugh, *Fragments of the Debates of the Iowa Constitutional Conventions of 1844 and 1846* (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Society, 1900), 340.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

This step was a clear oppositional issue to the Democrats. The Whigs looked to be in control of politics during this time. Even though they did not have control of the state, the party was firming its stance against slavery and had a popular President. This short-lived success came to an untimely end with the premature death of President Zachary Taylor. After his death, the nation turned to the next political event, the Compromise of 1850, which tried to deal with the slavery issue.

The Compromise of 1850, written by Whig politician Henry Clay and managed through Congress by Democrat Stephen Douglas, was the first real compromise made by both political parties. The purpose of this compromise was to succeed where the previous compromises between the slave and free states had failed. The Compromise of 1850 was not passed as one bill; instead, it had to be broken into pieces and voted on independently. Where former President Zachary Taylor, although a slaveholder, sided against the expansion of slavery, the newly-ascended President Milliard Fillmore looked to compromise.

The Compromise of 1850 was comprised of five sections. Each section was voted on and passed individually in Congress with the help of Stephen Douglas. The five provisions were admittance of California as a free state, organization of Utah and New Mexico Territory with the option for slavery to be decided by popular sovereignty, changing Texas border boundary, abolition of the slave trade in Washington D.C., and strengthening of the Fugitive Slave Act. Iowa's senators voted for all five provisions of the bill. Only three other Senators could make this claim.

Iowa's senators were two staunch Democrats, Augustus C. Dodge and George W. Jones. Although neither Senator was a leading member within the debates on the

compromise, their voting patterns on all the provisions set a tone for politics in Iowa. Iowans had long been fearful of disunion and therefore always sided with compromise to save the United States. Iowa's senators' views on secession were clear. Both men staunchly opposed to disunionism of any kind and supported the full set of measures advanced to neutralize the slavery issue. The Iowans were thus the only pair of free-state senators to register approval of the controversial Fugitive Slave Law.³⁶

Senator Jones was a former classmate of Mississippi Senator Jefferson Davis. Jones, in a speech showed his disdain for anything that threatened America's democracy. Jones condemned "free-soilism, abolitionism, and every other ism which is calculated to distract and divide the American Democracy."³⁷ Senator Dodge was not as extreme, but was still staunch in Democratic politics. In his biography on Augustus C. Dodge, Louis Pelzer described Dodge's political views as "...not the friend of the blacks as opposed to his own race, and demanded that the Southern people have a right to the enjoyment of their property and to the security and protection guaranteed to it and to them in the Federal Constitution."³⁸ Dodge believed that since the constituents of Iowa held anti-black views when it came to slaves or escaped slaves, he should vote for all five measures. The passage of the Compromise of 1850 was a political victory for Democrats. It focused attention on Democrats and positioned them as politicians who only cared to preserve the union. The Whigs, on the other hand, came out with a big political setback. They did not have any national issues to take political advantage of and had to find local issues to campaign on for political power.

³⁶ Ibid., 37.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁸ Louis Pelzer, *Augustus Caesar Dodge* (Iowa City: Iowa State Historical Society, 1908), 147.

The Compromise of 1850 solidified the Democrats' hold on the political power of Iowa. Senators Dodge and Jones voted to preserve the Union. The victory for Democrats gave the Whigs only one option for different political issues with which to assail their opponents in future elections. The only thing they could turn to was the same economic issues they argued for in the conventions of 1844 and 1846, but could not pass. The political hold on Iowa was significant for Democrats. To gain political leverage, the Whigs combined with political third parties that ended with failure most of the time, each party had their own agenda. Free-soilers, Know-Nothings, and Whigs all had different political ideologies that prevented them from forming a cohesive platform at the time.³⁹

It took just four years for the Whigs to regain control of Iowa, in which Democrats held complete control in 1850, and send the Democratic Party reeling in defeat in the 1854 state elections. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was the contentious issue that the Whigs looked for to unite with third party candidates and win political success. Democrats believed they were fighting for their constituents but, due to political forces outside the state, the public sentiment in Iowa turned against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Democrats who fought for the legislation.

The state of Iowa found itself on the national political scene once again. The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 called for the organization of both Kansas and Nebraska into separate territories. The act was written by Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, but Iowa played an integral part in the Kansas-Nebraska Act. In 1853 Democrat Senator Augustus C. Dodge introduced a bill for the establishment of the territorial government of Nebraska. This bill became his

³⁹ Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 39.

downfall. Believing that he was following the desires of his constituents which wanted an increase in commerce and railroads, Dodge defended the Kansas-Nebraska Act.⁴⁰

The railroad was one of the biggest political reasons why Senator Dodge presented his legislation in 1853. The Democrats had much to gain from the organization of Nebraska. If they could persuade railroad companies that Iowa was a great point through which to run the rails through, it would promote Iowa's growth and lead to possible land grants from the federal government. Politically, organization of Nebraska could potentially all but eliminate Whig opposition in the state. Democrats would undoubtedly hold political control in Iowa.⁴¹

After introduction of the bill to organize Nebraska, the bill went through the Committee on Territories lead by Stephen Douglas. Douglas was the chairman, but another member of the committee was Senator George W. Jones of Iowa, Dodge's Democratic counterpart. Within the Committee, Douglas rewrote the bill and introduced the newly formed Kansas-Nebraska bill in 1854. The new bill split the Nebraska territory into two separate territories.⁴²

Southern political power was a constant threat to the North. In order to gain the South's political backing for the legislation, Douglas re-introduced the bill to which he attached an additional section which negated the slavery sectional line set by the Missouri Compromise. In negating the Missouri Compromise line, Douglas was all but guaranteeing the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Popular Sovereignty replaced the Missouri Compromise. As long as citizens wanted slavery in their state, newly-formed territories and

⁴⁰ Morton M. Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War: A Decade of Frontier Politics*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 82.

states could vote for their own futures. This would eventually lead to fear of slavery expansion.⁴³ The elections coming in 1854 were all but guaranteed to the Democrats. Iowa's two Senators were some of the staunchest supporters of Douglas's bill. However, public sentiment turned against them as anti-slavery movements and Whig politicians joined sides in hopes of a political turnabout in the elections forthcoming. The political backlash came when Whigs met at their political conventions that year and took a radical turn. The convention urged for a recall of the Douglas bill and took a hard stance on prohibition of liquors.⁴⁴

In March 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed the upper chamber of Congress with full backing from Iowa's Senators. Back home however, the Democratic press was split on the backing of the bill. The Whigs were all united against the bill. With all Whigs and certain sections of the Democratic press railing against the decision, it gave political life to a Whig party that was looking for an issue to grab onto. Using Dodge and Jones's adamant support for the bill against them, the Whigs started to regain political favor in Iowa. Dodge used his time in Congress to argue in favor of the bill stating that the Kansas-Nebraska bill and that he was "a sincere believer in the doctrine of squatter sovereignty in its fullest and deepest sense" and "in my humble way, to offer arguments in support of the bill for the organization of the Nebraska and Kansas." Dodge went on to describe the Kansas-Nebraska bill as "the noblest tribute which has ever yet been offered by the Congress of the United States to the sovereignty of the people."⁴⁵

⁴³ Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 45.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁵ 33 Cong., 1 sess., *Congressional Globe*, Appendix, 376.

Dodge's defense was called "the best speech on the question" by outgoing Democrat Governor Stephen Hempstead.⁴⁶ Jones also went on to defend the Kansas-Nebraska bill, but not with the vigor that Dodge portrayed. The support that Iowa's two Senators gave the bill led one Washington D.C. publication to label Iowa, "another of the Free Slave States," and that Iowa "is now, and has been from the outset, so far as her actions in the Confederacy is concerned, to all intents and purposes, a Slave State."⁴⁷

The opposition movement led by Whigs, anti-slavery, and Know-Nothings was headed by James W. Grimes. At the Whig convention of 1854, Grimes was nominated as their candidate for Governor. Grimes favored banks and prohibition and was a growing advocate of Iowa's anti-slavery movement. Once nominated, Grimes issued a campaign statement on the issue of banking. Grimes stated, "the constitution which prohibits banks and banking institutions should be changed so as to allow them to be established in the State under proper restrictions." With regards to prohibition he argued, "Should, therefore, an act be passed either prohibiting the sale of intoxicating liquors, or licensing their sale, I would (if elected) approve the law, unless, in my judgment, palpably unconstitutional." Finally on the most important issue of the time, Grimes articulated his views on the Kansas-Nebraska Act: "It is somewhat singular that the same men who used this argument (squatter sovereignty) were all found voting against a proposition to allow the people of the territories to elect their own officers." Grimes went on to challenge Senator Douglas's arguments, "According to the doctrine of Mr. Douglas and his obedient followers, the people of the Territories are fully

⁴⁶ Stephen Hempstead was Iowa's second Democratic Governor, from 1850-1854.

⁴⁷ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 87.

competent to do their own legislation, but wholly incompetent to elect their Governor, judges, and other public servants.”⁴⁸

James Grimes started building a coalition. He needed Free-Soilers and Know-Nothings for his political ascendancy. In the Gubernatorial election of 1854 Grimes ran against Democrat Curtis Bates. Grimes won the governorship with 23,235 votes to Bates’s 21,202 votes.⁴⁹ There are a few reasons attributed to the first election of a Whig governor in a state dominated by Democrats. Temperance, anti-slavery, internal improvements, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act all were reasons for Grimes’s victory. For the first time, the Whigs won an election for the executive of the state. Democrats not only lost the governorship but also one branch of the assembly.⁵⁰

The Whig control of the state meant huge political losses were coming for the Democrats. Senatorial elections held in 1855 meant that outgoing Senator Augustus C. Dodge would not be returning. The Democrats’ loss was in part due to their own confidence in their party. After all, they were the party that fought for compromise in 1850 and railroad expansion in 1854. Neither Jones nor Dodge returned home during the campaign season, therefore only Whigs were seen throughout the state actively campaigning. Grimes should also be commended for his ability to bring together factions of political ideologies to defeat the Democrats cannot be understated.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Salter, *Life of Grimes*, 34-50.

⁴⁹ Roy R. Glashan, *American Governors and Gubernatorial Elections 1775-1978* (Connecticut: Meckler Books: 1979), 92.

⁵⁰ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 105.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 108.

Historians of the antebellum era all argue that the Kansas-Nebraska Act was one of the main reasons that the Whig Party became successful. The Democratic Party as a whole had been suffering from infighting for a few years before 1854. The Iowa Democratic Party generally held strong in the face of infighting from the national stage, but the Kansas-Nebraska Act forced them to choose sides. Historians Eric Foner, William Gienapp, and Michael Holt all have different views of politics during the 1850's. Antebellum era historian Eric Foner argues, "Many states factional bitterness over issues other than slavery—internal improvements, temperance, nativism, and the perennial disputes over patronage—were slowly tearing the party apart."⁵² The scheme of Southern Democrats was to make any Northern Democratic politician fight for the South's loyalty. Foner argues that Northern Presidential aspirants Douglas, Pierce, Cass, and Buchanan bid for Southern friendship.⁵³ Republican Party historian William Gienapp argues that Douglas's attempt at westward expansion was to bring about new leadership within the Democratic Party. Westward expansion would allow for a stronger party.⁵⁴ Some Democrats in the North believed that the party was turning against their own principles and allowing the expansion of slavery. Douglas's failure was his inability to persuade Northern Democrats and Whigs alike that slavery would not expand due to popular sovereignty.⁵⁵ And leading Whig historian Michael Holt argues the significance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act to be, "The reaction to the Nebraska bill and the eruption of Know Nothingism together produced a smashing Democratic

⁵² Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 155.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵⁴ William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party 1852-1856*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 69.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

defeat...and permanently eclipsed the Whig Party.” The consequences were defections from the Whig Party to other Northern parties most notably the newly formed Republican Party.⁵⁶

These three leading historians on the politics of the antebellum era all conclude with the same message: the Kansas-Nebraska Act created a divide that the national Democratic Party had to fix to remain politically viable. The importance of the Kansas-Nebraska Act cannot be debated. It did not, however, damage the party beyond repair like it did the Whig Party. Iowa politics continued with a new political party in power, but the Democrats were waiting in the wings recouping their losses and creating a new political strategy. The newly-formed Republican Party was not as strong as they thought. The start of their political reign was marred with political scandals. The Democrats still had life, and were planning to recapture political control in the next elections.

With the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the attention of the nation turned to the bloody skirmishes in Kansas between the pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces. These bloody clashes were used by propagandists on both sides. Americans on both sides of the arguments were becoming entrenched in their views on slavery. The violence also turned many who were anti-slavery expansion into abolitionists. The events in Kansas had profound effects on America as a whole, but another event in Kansas had a much stronger effect on the local politics of Iowa. Kansas, being a newly formed territory, needed to establish a local government and form a constitution.

⁵⁶ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the onset of the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 805.

The process of forming a constitution brought many problems to the Democratic Party as a whole, especially in the state of Iowa. The events at Lecompton, Kansas split the Democratic Party for good, leading to a Republican success at the Presidential level in 1860. The Lecompton Constitution created a schism between Democrats who favored Stephen A. Douglas and those who favored the Democratic President James Buchanan. This split caused too much damage to salvage the party in time for the Presidential election.

Chapter 2

The Lecompton Constitution

This chapter will focus in on the Lecompton Constitution and its effects on the national Democratic Party, specifically the collapse of the Iowa Democratic Party. This chapter will argue that the Lecompton Constitution caused an irreparable schism in the Iowa Democratic Party that caused the surge of the infant Republican Party. This chapter illustrates how the Democratic Party tried to rebound from their political setback in 1854 only to lose more political elections in the coming years.

The victory of the Republicans in 1854 was a political setback for Democrats. The Democrats looked to rebound in the coming elections of 1856. Numerous issues kept the Republicans gaining political leverage. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, which at first was touted as a political success, now turned out to be a political liability. The fighting along the borders of Kansas and Nebraska over slavery constantly splashed across the front pages of newspapers. The Democrats were reeling already when Preston Brooks nearly beat Charles Sumner to death, keeping the issue of slavery alive in the minds of citizens.⁵⁷ The Democrats had to find a way to put the issue of the Kansas-Nebraska Act behind them, keep politicians from killing each other, and find away to rebound politically to the levels of control they had in 1850. Unfortunately the Democrats would spend the next few years fighting amongst themselves over the Lecompton Constitution.

⁵⁷ Preston Brooks was a Democrat in the House of Representatives from South Carolina. Charles Sumner was a Whig/Republican Senator from Massachusetts.

On January 12, 1858, Governor Grimes addressed both houses of Iowa's Congress. This was Grimes's last address, as his term as Governor was ending. Grimes used his speech to address many issues concerning Iowans at this time ranging from townships, schools, Native Americans, and the Dred Scott decision. The final topic Grimes addressed was the continuing struggle with the territory of Kansas. The bloody Kansas struggle had been going on for a few years, but the set up of a territorial government pacified some of the violence. The next step for the Kansas territory would be admission for statehood. Political manipulation by the territorial legislature in Kansas caused national concerns due to Kansas's admittance as a slave state.

Concern for the people of Kansas sparked Grimes to address the issue, but more importantly, the concern for the Union caused Grimes to go on the attack for the cause of freedom. The people of Kansas struck down the referendum on Kansas's admission as a slave state. However, the legislature refused to accept their vote and, with President Buchanan's support, the so-called Lecompton Constitution passed as the Constitution of Kansas. The Lecompton Constitution was the first of two competing constitutions being written at the same time by two competing proslavery and antislavery ideologies. Kansas citizens who opposed slavery met at the state convention in Topeka, Kansas and drew up the Topeka Constitution which prohibited slavery. Meanwhile, pro-slavery citizens met in Lecompton, Kansas to draw up a pro-slavery state constitution.

In reaction to the recent political manipulation by pro-slavery forces in Kansas, Grimes took his stand, proclaiming "Notwithstanding the grossest frauds, and the most unequal legislative apportionment, the people of the unfortunate Territory have declared by

an empathetic majority in favor of freedom,” Continuing on, Grimes stated, “No candid mind can now doubt that at least four-fifths of the bona-fide citizens of the Territory desire to erect it into a free state.”⁵⁸

It had been four years since the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and Grimes’s ascent to the Iowa Governorship. The Republicans swept the elections for the General Assembly in Iowa during the 1856 elections. Republicans seemed to be in complete political control of the state. The Democrats had to rebound in the face of back-to-back political embarrassments. Although Democrats were without Senator Dodge, the Democrats still had Senator George W. Jones. The Democrats also controlled the Presidency, as President Buchanan won the election of 1856. In 1857, Grimes stepped down as Governor and newly elected Republican Governor Ralph P. Lowe took control. The Republicans’ most prominent figure was out of politics for the time being. Governor Lowe’s shaky start gave Democrats a renewed sense of political presence.

The panic of 1857 along with political scandals rocked the Republican Party during the opening of Lowe’s term as Governor. However, Lowe tried to trumpet optimism for the state in his address to the General Assembly. In his first address to the assembly in January of 1858, Lowe called for the state to govern based on the principles of Christianity. Lowe believed the state of Iowa should rise above political strife, parties, and sectional conflicts. He called for the issue of banking notes and a stable currency to curtail the hard times Iowans were facing. Lowe ended his speech in a similar way that Grimes did, lambasting those

⁵⁸ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 13-32.

responsible for the problems in Kansas and the political struggles for their admission for statehood.⁵⁹

Lowe's optimism, however, could not shake the political scandals that were taking place in Iowa. The scandals embarrassed the Republican Party and compromised their hold on the political scene. Bribery of officials in the appointment of the new capital building and a failure to produce records kept the current Governor busy while trying to hold political control. The Panic of 1857 as well as poor weather conditions hurt farmers. These were conditions that could not be controlled by Republicans. Democrats had to find a way to capitalize on these early misfortunes for the new Governor.⁶⁰

Early failures seemed to give Democrats a ray of hope. This sense of political optimism was shattered by events in Kansas once again. The national Democratic Party's actions would cause the downfall of the Iowa Democratic Party. In 1858 Iowans learned of the political fraud of the pro-slavery forces at the constitutional convention in Lecompton, Kansas. In the fall of 1857, forty-four delegates headed by John Calhoun met to design a constitution that permitted Kansas's admission to the Union. The delegates designed their constitution based on southern sympathies and did not intend to submit their newly formed constitution to the people for their vote.⁶¹

The delegates of the convention were of southern sympathy. The Democrats held a majority of the delegates and some owned slaves themselves. There were many different occupations from lawyers, merchants, newspapermen. Most, however, were farmers. These

⁵⁹ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 47-58.

⁶⁰ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 162.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 165.

delegates were under the age of forty, with a large number under thirty. Some delegates moved to the territory in 1854, others in 1855. Some were involved on the local political scene, but most lacked any political experience.⁶²

Although these delegates lived in the territory, they were not considered delegates of the people. Samuel Tappan, an abolitionist in Kansas, wrote to a friend describing the coercion anti-slavery forces felt to attend the convention. Tappan asked his friend, “What think you of the recent election for members of bogus constitutional convention?” Tappan continued on to call out Kansas’s territorial Governor and his attempt to circumvent the people, “The Republican element in Kansas is a unit is support of our government... But Walker will not succeed in his attempt to have the people abandon their present position.” Tappan told his friend the aims of anti-slavery forces were to “pass an act prohibiting slavery in Kansas” and to “recognize the Topeka Government as the only one in Kansas.”⁶³

The bloody skirmishes in Kansas weighed on the minds of those in Congress. Democrats and Republicans both urged the territory of Kansas to vote for a convention and write a constitution for admittance into the Union. In 1856, Georgia Congressman Senator Robert Toombs urged Kansas to get its affairs in order for statehood. Toombs took the stand in Congress during the debate, allowing Kansas to gain admittance and argued for the “bona-fide inhabitants of Kansas to make a State constitution, in order to its immediate admission into the Union.” Toombs went on to state the primary purpose “is to leave the people in

⁶² Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 151.

⁶³ Samuel Forster Tappan to Thomas W. Higginson, July 6, 1857, found in <http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php> (accessed 2-23-2012).

Kansas free to make what form of constitution they please.”⁶⁴ Toombs was a former Whig turned Democrat. Even though his constituents were in the South, Toombs saw the importance of a constitution voted upon by the people, whether with or without slavery. Democratic Senator Toombs may have not had anything politically to gain from Kansas’s admittance, but House Republicans did. House Republicans demanded Kansas’s admittance with the Topeka Constitution that banned slavery after 1857. Republicans wanted another free-state; Toombs wanted popular-sovereignty. Neither measure passed in Congress.⁶⁵

As free-state forces met at a convention designed to pass the Topeka Constitution, pro-slavery forces met with their own convention and designed the Lecompton Constitution. Instead of allowing the populace to vote for the Lecompton Constitution outright, they were only allowed to vote on whether new slaves could be brought into Kansas. These delegates misleadingly labeled the two constitutions “constitution with slavery” and “constitution without slavery.” This referendum was supported by the newly-elected President Buchanan. Even though popular sentiment in Kansas was in favor of prohibiting slavery, James Buchanan justified his support for the betterment of the Union.⁶⁶ The political controversy at Lecompton, Kansas was primed to sweep the nation.

In Iowa, Republicans were shoring up political control, or so they thought. Lowe’s early political fumbles allowed Democrats to have hope, that is until the news of political manipulation at the Lecompton Convention in Kansas entered the realm of Iowa politics. The Iowa Republicans called foul on President Buchanan and the Lecompton Constitution. There

⁶⁴ Congressional Globe, 34th Congress, 869.

⁶⁵ Gunja SenGupta, *For God and Mammon: Evangelicals and Entrepreneurs, Masters and Slaves in Territorial Kansas, 1854-186*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996), 132.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 134.

were two different votes for the constitution, one in December of 1857, and one in January of 1858. Pro-slavery delegates voted in December for Lecompton 6,143 to 569. In January of 1858 the free-staters voted down the Lecompton Constitution 10,226 to 162. John Calhoun, the convention's chair, sided with the first vote and sent the results to Washington, allowing Kansas's admittance to the Union under the Lecompton Constitution.⁶⁷

Democrats in Iowa, like most Northern Democrats, cringed at the actions by President Buchanan. The past few years the issues between Northern and Southern Democrats over slavery threatened the party's power structure. The state and national party started splitting into two factions. Northern Democrats favored Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas. Southern Democrats favored President Buchanan. In Iowa, Democrats split along those same lines. Democratic stalwart George W. Jones and a few of his followers sided with the President. Most Democrats in Iowa, however, sided with Douglas. Many of Douglas's policies in the past aligned with Iowa voters. Douglas campaigned for railroad expansion which was a big issue in the early 1850's with many Iowans. In 1850, as fear of disunion spread, Douglas relieved many Iowans of this fear with the Compromise of 1850.

In Congress, both sides gave speeches defending or degrading the Lecompton Constitution. Stephen Douglas, the champion of popular sovereignty, became one of the main culprits responsible for the expansion of slavery. In 1850 and 1854, Douglas argued for states to determine on their own if they wanted slavery or not. In 1854, Douglas sided with southern Democrats to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act, favoring popular sovereignty. In 1858, Douglas sided against the southern Democrats in favor of popular sovereignty once again.

⁶⁷ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 166.

Addressing Congress, Douglas asked a few questions to determine the validity of the Lecompton Constitution. Douglas asked “have the people of Kansas been left perfectly free to form and regulate their domestic institutions in their own way, subject only to the Constitution?” Douglas also asked is “the Lecompton constitution the act and deed of the people of Kansas?” Douglas then responded by telling Congress if it was not of their will, then Congress has no right to impose it upon them.⁶⁸

Douglas asked for evidence of the vote in Lecompton. Douglas demanded to know certain information from President Buchanan, and believed Congress should have this information before voting. Douglas asked “that the President be requested to furnish all the information within his possession or control.” Specific pieces of information Douglas asked for were: the returns of the votes for and against the convention held in the Territory of Kansas, the returns on elections held in 1857 and 1858 of the different conventions, and finally all correspondence relating to Kansas and the Lecompton Constitution.⁶⁹

In a letter written to Illinois Representative John A. McClernand, Douglas reiterated his commitment to stand firm against the Lecompton Constitution unless accepted by the people of Kansas in a vote. Douglas firmly asserted “we must stand on this principle and go wherever its logical consequences may carry us, and defend it against all assaults from any quarter.” He cautioned, however, against making fast judgments without all the facts: “Of course I will not pronounce a final judgment on this point until I get the facts officially

⁶⁸ Congressional Globe, 35th Congress, 195.

⁶⁹ Congressional Globe, 35th Congress, 570.

before me, altho the newspaper accounts look as if trickery & juggling have been substituted for fair dealing.”⁷⁰

Douglas’s break from the administration surprised President Buchanan himself. He believed that the party would support his decision. In the eyes of Douglas, he could do nothing but go against the administration. In 1858, Douglas was up for re-election in Illinois; therefore, he had to follow his interests politically. Fifty-five of fifty-six newspapers in Illinois were in opposition of the Lecompton Constitution. Douglas became furious over Buchanan’s support of Lecompton. Buchanan countered Douglas’s anger by confirming the legality of the Lecompton Constitution and that the free-soilers refused to participate in the vote, which was their fault.⁷¹

Douglas met with Buchanan at the White House and the two of them traded political barbs. Buchanan argued that the Lecompton Constitution should be accepted as quick as possible as to not wake the hornets’ nest. Douglas countered that he would not support Buchanan, and that he would oppose the Lecompton Constitution. Buchanan referenced former Democrat Andrew Jackson and how he dealt with political dissidents in the Democratic Party. Buchanan warned “Mr. Douglas, I desire you to remember that no Democrat ever yet differed from the Administration of his own choice without being crushed. Beware of the fate of Tallmadge and Rives.” Douglas countered Buchanan’s threat with “Mr. President, I wish you to remember that General Jackson is dead.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Douglas to McClerland, November 23, 1857, Quoted in *The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas*, 403.

⁷¹ Elbert B. Smith, *The Presidency of James Buchanan* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975), 40.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 40.

The belief among many Democrats was that Buchanan would punish those who did not support him. An article written in the *Des Moines Tri-Weekly Citizen* commented on Buchanan and his use of patronage if he did not gain support over the Lecompton issue. The article stated, “The withdrawal of patronage from anti-Lecompton organs, and threats of decapitation...prove that the administration is recklessly determined to coerce every government official if possible into an advocacy of the Lecompton infamy.”⁷³

In a letter written five days later to Samuel Treat, Douglas echoed the same sentiments that the *Des Moines Tri-Weekly Citizen* did on the topic of patronage. In Douglas’s letter he wrote, “You have doubtless seen that they are removing all my friends from office and requiring pledges of hostility to me from all persons appointed to office.”⁷⁴ The article in the *Tri-Weekly Citizen* and the letter to Robert Treat shed light on the devastating split in the National Democratic Party. The Democrats nationally were at odds with each other. Douglas, wanting to win re-election, stood in opposition to the President of his own party. Buchanan, believing this could be a compromise and that it could put Kansas affairs in the past, stood strong on his stance of support for the Lecompton Constitution. The political battle between these two giants would inevitably spill into state parties and forced Democrats to choose sides. Unfortunately for Democrats, their political infighting only strengthened the Republican Party. Political infighting had taken over the National Democratic Party. In Iowa, the political infighting followed, forcing the Iowa Democrats to choose sides.

⁷³ *Des Moines Tri-Weekly Citizen*, February 23, 1858.

⁷⁴ Douglas to Treat, February 28, 1858. Johannsen, Robert W. *The Letters of Stephen A Douglas*, (Urbana: University Press of Illinois, 1961) 418.

Though the start of the new year brought many new issues to the state of Iowa, the Lecompton Constitution became the political issue that dominated politics in Iowa until the Civil War. On January 1, 1858 the *Davenport Daily Gazette* mentioned the results of the Lecompton election in Kansas. The paper expressed their skepticism saying, “The Kansas election seems to have been a complete farce-the Free State men refusing to vote.” It also expressed their gratitude for the free state men for not abandoning their principles.⁷⁵

The *Davenport Daily Gazette* reprinted a piece from the *Missouri Democrat* that detailed the local election returns for the December 1857 pro-slavery constitutional convention. In the column, the *Gazette* reported that Leavenworth City reported a total vote return of 247. 238 of those votes were for the “constitution with slavery” and 9 were for the “constitution without slavery.” The reporter did not know the results from any other precinct, but made sure to point out fraudulent voting taking place due to men from Missouri crossing the border to vote in favor of slavery. Articles re-printed from the *Missouri Democrat* reported from the Lawrence precinct reported little to no votes received. Of the votes received, none were representative of free state men.⁷⁶

The Lecompton debate hit the Iowa legislature in January of 1858. Both the Senate and House debated instructions for the admission of Kansas into the Union. On Thursday, January 20, 1858, the Iowa Senate took up the issue of Lecompton. The Senate started the morning with a prayer, and then took to the “special order for this morning was taken up, which was Senate File No. 10.” This was the first reading of Senate File No. 10 in the Iowa Senate. There were many questions that needed to be asked about Lecompton, none more

⁷⁵ *Davenport Daily Gazette* Jan 1, 1858.

⁷⁶ *Missouri Democrat* reprinted in the *Davenport Daily Gazette* Jan 1, 1859.

important to Iowans than “the fact that the Convention which framed said instrument refused to submit it fairly to the people of said Territory for ratification or rejection.”⁷⁷

It was the responsibility of Iowa’s legislature to debate and advise their delegates to Congress on how to vote on the issue of Lecompton. The Senate resolved that “our Senators in Congress be instructed, and our Representatives be requested to oppose the admission of Kansas as one of the States of our Union under the so-called Lecompton Constitution.” The file detailed further the reason for these instructions to be the “said Constitution was not submitted by the Convention which framed it, to a fair and honest vote of the people...” Lecompton was not the only item berated in the reading of Senate File No. 10 President Buchanan and the supporters of Lecompton were condemned for their authority to allow such a constitution.⁷⁸

Upon passage of Senate File No. 10, the House took up the legislation with more debate. Due to control of the legislature by Republicans, it was necessary for Democrats to stand united, whether pro-Douglas or pro-Buchanan. Democrats had one goal, political control. However, Democrats in Iowa could not put their political squabbles aside. Lincoln Clark, the leader of the pro-Douglas faction in the House protested Senate File No. 10. Clark called attention to the second part of the Republican resolution, berating the President of the United States. Clark argued that “this General Assembly had has no jurisdiction in Law over the President of the United States, to arraign him and condemn him,” nor did should the legislature “pass judgment of moral condemnation upon the President.”⁷⁹

⁷⁷ *Journal of the Senate*, 7th Senate 1858, 82.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁷⁹ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 311-312.

The pro-Douglas wing of the Iowa legislature defended the office of the President, but not President Buchanan himself. In fact, Clark and his supporters agreed that “when a territory presents her Constitution, and asks for admission under into the family of States, Congress has the right to enquire whether such Constitution is sanctioned by the will of the people” He followed up his protest by agreeing with Republicans that it was true that the people of Kansas did not get to pass their judgment upon the Constitution. Finishing his rebuttal to Republicans, Clark argued that no state could be admitted unless the constitution was accepted by the people of the territory.⁸⁰ Clark’s defense of the office of the President aside, he and his followers made their position clear on the Lecompton Constitution. The Iowa Democratic Party was splitting down the middle.

In the wake of Clark’s speech to the General Assembly, George W. Jones, Democratic Senator and leader of the pro-Buchanan faction in Iowa wrote a letter to Laurel Summer, bitterly slighting Clark and his followers. The letter read:

I rejoice to think that Lincoln Clark, the Wilson’s, Hall, Coolbaugh & the other fools of that ilk went off at a tangent against us on the Lecompton Kansas question. I hope they will follow Douglas into the ranks of the Black Republicans, for like him they are corrupt, ambitious, and cowardly liars and disorganizers.⁸¹

The letter from Jones detailed the betrayal that the pro-Buchanan Democrats felt in the Iowa legislature. It was the job of Jones, a United States Senator in Congress, to present the Republican resolutions. Jones reported the resolution although he strongly favored the Buchanan administration for their support of the Lecompton Constitution. After submitting

⁸⁰ Ibid., 311-313.

⁸¹ George W. Jones to Laurel Summers March 6, 1858. Laurel Summers Papers, Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA.

the resolution, Jones addressed Congress and made his intentions clear. Jones stated “I present these resolutions as a matter of respect to the State Legislature of Iowa, which has sent them to me; but not because I intend, or have the most remote idea that I shall hereafter obey these instructions.”⁸²

Jones continued his speech, stating his intention to drag his feet. Jones argued that the people of Kansas had their time to vote and that they chose to not participate. Jones argued that most of those who chose to not participate were Republicans. Jones then stated his support for the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton Constitution, unless new substantial arguments could be made to persuade him otherwise. Jones’s final segment of his speech called attention to the politics of Lecompton. Every Democrat in Iowa voted against the resolution while every Republican voted for it. Jones believed that if Iowans understood fully the issue of Lecompton as Jones did they would support the admission of Kansas immediately.⁸³

George W. Jones’s aggressive stance on the issue of Lecompton did not bode well for him upon his return to Iowa. The speech Jones gave called out the Iowa populace, arguing that they did not understand the issue, for if they understood it as he did then they would agree with him. The press in Iowa immediately went on the attack against Jones. The *Iowa State Weekly Citizen* printed a scathing article attacking Jones for his support of Buchanan. The article believed that Jones’s refusal to resign was due to political patronage or other incentives promised by President Buchanan. The article attacked his character, believing Jones represented a “wretched and beggarly minority; and with the prospect of important

⁸² Congressional Globe, 35th Congress, 566.

⁸³ Ibid., 566.

Presidential favors glittering in the perspective he stands pledged to assist by his vote a fraud more daring and audacious than any other recorded in the history of the Republic.”⁸⁴ His devotion to this issue eventually led to his defeat in the re-election for his Senate seat.

Jones’s sentiments, however, were of that of a politician in Washington and not on the local scene. Democrat Dennis Mahoney gave the rebuttal to both the Republicans and the Clark resolutions in the General Assembly. Mahoney’s protest started out with fellow Democrats arguing that “it is neither the right of this House to dictate to Congress that a Constitution so framed is not legitimate, nor that a new State applying for admission into the Union should be rejected because the people of the State...have not required such a Constitution to be submitted to them for ratification or rejection.” Mahoney projected his dissent from the Clark protest by arguing that the Iowa legislature could not circumvent the Constitution in regards to admission of new states.⁸⁵

The three different speeches given in Iowa legislature show the political dynamics the Lecompton Constitution was causing. Republicans united against the President as well as the State convention of Kansas. Twenty-two Democrats supported Clark’s protest of the Republican resolutions. Only five Democrats favored Buchanan in the legislature and they were stuck in a political corner.⁸⁶ The political struggles continued as Senator Jones’s seat was up for election, in which a Republican was sure to win. Democrats were split into two factions, were about to lose their last Senate seat, and were about to run back into the man responsible for the political surge of Republicans.

⁸⁴ *Iowa State Weekly Citizen*, February 10, 1858.

⁸⁵ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 322-325.

⁸⁶ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 313, 325.

In the 1858 Senatorial election, where one stood on the issue of Lecompton, could determine his electability. The warring factions of Democrats were fighting themselves as Republicans watched, waiting in the wings for their political opponent. In Iowa, Thomas S. Wilson lead the pro-Douglas faction. Wilson and Jones were old time rivals in state politics. Both men being from Dubuque, their political battles were well-covered in the local newspapers. A Republican editor of the *Dubuque Daily Times* wrote, “They are exerting every power to secure the mastery over the other.”⁸⁷ The outcome of the political struggle was not certain. What was becoming certain in the eyes of most Democrats and Republicans was that neither Jones nor Wilson would win the Senate seat.

The Democrats, although they had no chance of winning the seat, still fought for the nomination. Though Jones lacked support in the legislature, he had political clout with the local newspapers. The Democrats split into two factions, sending one man from each. Jones, planning on re-nomination, headed one side. The other side campaigned for Ben Samuels, considered one of the leaders along with Lincoln Clark on the anti-Buchanan wing of the Democratic Party. In the end, the pro-Douglas Democrats had more numbers; therefore, they had more political power. Reluctantly, Jones conceded the nomination to Samuels. Jones lost the nomination by a vote of 26-10. Jones’s stance on Lecompton was believed to be the reason for his downfall.⁸⁸

After Jones’s defeat by Samuels, an article appeared in the in the *Davenport Daily Gazette* in which friends of Jones expressed their outrage that he did not win re-nomination.

⁸⁷ *Daily Dubuque Times*, Vol. 1, No. 82, September 17, 1857, Quoted in *Senatorial Elections of Iowa*, 105.

⁸⁸ Robert Robinson to Laurel Summers, Jan 28, 1858. Laurel Summers Papers, Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA.

The article claimed Samuels, “Having defeated Gen. Jones for the nomination of re-election an honor to which, not only his past services to the state, but his position as a Democrat fully entitled him, we presume his enemies are satisfied.” The article further stated that Jones’s constituents will never forget his service to Iowa and that the outcome of the nomination went against the majority of Iowan’s wishes.⁸⁹

The election for Jones’s Senate seat pitted James Grimes, returning to politics, against Frederick E. Bissell who was supported by the railroad lines on the Republican side. In the election held by Republicans, Grimes won the nomination against Bissell by receiving 39 of 63 votes. In a letter written to his wife after winning the nomination, Grimes assured his wife in confidence that his victory was a foregone conclusion. Grimes wrote, “I received the nomination on the first ballot, by five majority. My vote would have been much larger, and nearly unanimous, on the second ballot-as many voted for persons in their own counties on the first ballot, by way of compliment, who would have voted for me on the second ballot, and for me on the first ballot has their votes been necessary.”⁹⁰

In the election for the Senate seat, Grimes defeated Samuels by a vote of 64 to 41. In the Iowa legislature on January 26th, 1858, the House certified Grime’s victory stating “James W. Grimes, having received a majority of all the votes cast for said office, was declared duly elected Senator to represent the State of Iowa in the Senate of the United States for a term of six years.”⁹¹ The Democrats, for the first time since Iowa became a territory, lost all political control of the state of Iowa. James W. Grimes orchestrated a Republican

⁸⁹ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, February 16, 1858.

⁹⁰ James W. Grimes to Sarah Grimes, January 23, 1858, quoted in *Salter’s life of Grimes*, 113.

⁹¹ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 134.

victory in 1854 and again in 1858. The Democrats were without political leverage of any kind and were still reeling from the schism caused by the Lecompton Constitution.

The Republican control of Iowa was complete. However, the victories of the Republicans were due to specific events in the mind of James Grimes. In two very telling letters, one written before his nomination for the Senate seat and one written just after he won the election to Senator, he detailed how Republicans very nearly lost control of the state. In a letter written just after Governor Ralph Lowe's tumultuous start and the Panic of 1857, Grimes felt that Republican control was in jeopardy. Grimes wrote a fellow politician in Iowa regarding the news of the Lecompton Constitution. In his pessimistic letter Grimes claimed, "I think that after the winters work at Des Moines, the passage of the Lecompton bill will be the only thing that can save our party. If I believed, therefore, that the end justified the means, I think I should pray for its adoption."⁹²

Just after his victory in the race for Iowa's vacant Senate seat, Grimes wrote a letter to leading Republican figure and the man who advised Grimes on his political ascent, Salmon P. Chase. In his letter, Grimes offered his gratitude to Chase for all the advice and help on his campaign for Governor. Grimes acknowledged his own nomination was without his own consent, but that he ran with the hopes of educating the populace on the issue of slavery. Grimes's admission of the importance of the Free-Soil vote and Chase's influence in his race for Governor illustrates that without these two aspects the Democrats would have re-taken the state in 1854 and that Dodge would have been returned to the Senate.⁹³

⁹² James W. Grimes to Samuel J. Kirkwood, March 11, 1858, "Letters of James W. Grimes," *Annals of Iowa*, 3rd ser., Vol. XXII (1940), 494.

⁹³ James W. Grimes to Salmon P. Chase, February, 20, 1858, quoted in *Salter's life of Grimes*, 116.

In April, the Lecompton Constitution was defeated in the United States Congress. The elections held in Kansas for office holders under the new state constitution were favorable to anti-slavery men. Learning their lesson for not participating in the vote for the constitution, Kansas antislavery men packed the polls to vote for their own office holders. They were successful in electing the newly formed Kansas government full of anti-slavery men. These men issued a referendum to the people of Kansas once more and they turned down Lecompton. They issued their own constitution once more, the Topeka Constitution, but it was also voted down in Congress.⁹⁴

The April defeat of the Lecompton Constitution in Congress rang out in newspapers in Iowa. Republicans just scored a political victory over their Democratic rivals and defeated the issue of Lecompton. In the *Weekly Hawk Eye and Telegraph*, numerous articles appeared congratulating Washington for voting down the fraud that was Lecompton. One article read, “Inasmuch as the Administration has made the Lecompton swindle a test of democracy, the people have also concluded to make it a test. The only difference between old Buck and the people is that while his test works one way, the people’s works another way.”⁹⁵

Republicans held both seats in the Senate, both chambers in the General Assembly, and had one of their own as Governor. The Democrats looked to the state elections in 1858, but the horizon did not hold much optimism. The 1858 elections would be for local state offices and Iowa’s two congressional seats. It was time for conventions and both parties called their own to map out plans for winning the upcoming elections. The Republicans held their convention first and stuck to the tried and true political strategies. Criticisms of the

⁹⁴ Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 164.

⁹⁵ *Weekly Hawk Eye and Telegraph*, April 13, 1858.

Democrats for the expansion of slavery, the Lecompton Constitution, and the Dred Scott decision all made their way into the Republican Party's platform. The Republicans also noted a land grant for railroad construction and wanted improvements for rivers and harbors in Iowa.⁹⁶

The Democratic Convention convened a week later. The Democratic press in Iowa had been calling for unity all week long, noting that only Republicans gained when the Democrats were split. The Democrats tried to distance themselves from the national issues. The party's platform called for the federal government to stay out of the affairs of states and territories. The Democrats accused the Republicans of corruption, stemming from the scandals during Lowe's reign as Governor. The platform made no mention Lecompton nor any endorsement or support for President Buchanan. The Democratic Party's platform continued to split the local party. The pro-Buchanan Democrats wanted to hold their own convention since the current platform was pro-Douglas.⁹⁷

The Democrats chances of winning the two congressional seats in the upcoming elections were slim. In the First District, the Republicans renominated current Representative Curtis. The Democrats nominated a Henry Trimble, a Douglas Democrat. In the Second District, the Democrats nominated William Leffingwell also a Douglas Democrats. The Republicans nominated William Vandever, since the current Representative was not seeking re-election. Both Vandever and Leffingwell agreed to a series of debates.

⁹⁶ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 173.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

On August 3, 1858, the *Davenport Daily Gazette* announced the Republican nominations for the second Congressional seat. The paper proclaimed the nomination of William Vandever on the front page. Directly below his nomination, an article appeared detailing the creation of the Republicans of Lyons, Iowa, Lyons being the hometown of Leffingwell. The article claimed, “We hold up the Republicans of Lyons as an example to the Republicans of the whole district...we not only want to beat Leffingwell, but by a rousing majority, and at the same time triumphantly elect the whole Republican state ticket.”⁹⁸

The outlook for either Trimble or Leffingwell was bleak. Chances of Trimble’s election seemed slim because he was running against an incumbent Republican in a Republican dominated state. Leffingwell, however, had a better chance. The seat for which he campaigned for was open and he had scheduled debates with Vandever. In order to win, Leffingwell had to bring all Democrats together regardless of their stance on Lecompton. The Jones faction in the Senate was not in favor of Leffingwell, but they considered him a safe choice amongst other pro-Douglas Democrats.⁹⁹

Jones and other members of his Democrat faction met with Leffingwell to discuss the upcoming elections. In this meeting, Leffingwell declared that “he had never differed with Mr. Buchanan on any save the Lecompton issue-that if elected he would go to Congress as the friend & supporter of Mr. Buchanan’s administration.” Other Democrats wrote to Jones offering their opinion on Leffingwell. Thomas Sargent, a Jones supporter, wrote of Leffingwell’s belief on the Lecompton Constitution stating, “he formulates or carries out the idea that Kansas has the same right to come into the Union now, as before the vote was taken

⁹⁸ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, August 3, 1858.

⁹⁹ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 176.

on the English Compromise Bill.” William Williams wrote to Jones offering his assurance that he, as well as, others could support Leffingwell. Williams said, “I am very glad to hear from you that Mr. Leffingwell has given the necessary pledge and assurance required by the National Democrats thereby enabling us to support him.”¹⁰⁰

The Democrats seemed to be reconciling their differences in an attempt to secure the Congressional seat in the Second District. From his distant post as Ambassador to Madrid, former Senator from Iowa, Augustus C. Dodge wrote to Jones expressing his hopes that Jones and his followers would be willing to support both Leffingwell and Trimble in the upcoming elections. Dodge’s letter also rang a reminiscent tone as he regaled Jones with memories of them supporting one and other for the greater good during their time serving together. Dodge concluded his letter with the sentiment that the worst Democrat was still a better choice than the best Black Republican.¹⁰¹

Even with Dodge’s advice to support Leffingwell and the Democratic press urging reconciliation, it would be difficult to overcome the political animosity the two factions built up. Jones did not just go on the attack against local pro-Douglas politicians; he went on the attack against Douglas himself. In the *Davenport Daily Gazette* a letter Jones wrote to Douglas attacking him was reprinted. This letter was just a portion of their correspondence. The *Daily Gazette* called the exchange as venomous as rattlesnakes. In the letter Jones wrote,

¹⁰⁰ George W. Jones to Laurel Summers, September 2, 1858. Laurel Summers Papers at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA; Thomas Sargent to George W. Jones, August 30, 1858, in the George W. Jones Papers at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA; William Williams to George W. Jones, September 8, 1858, in the George W. Jones Papers at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA.

¹⁰¹ Augustus C. Dodge to George W. Jones, September 30, 1858, in the George W. Jones Papers at the Iowa State Historical Society in Des Moines, IA.

This, sir is the third time that you have made false accusations against me, and that I have been compelled to fasten the lie upon you. Though you may, at the sacrifice of the Democratic organization, have effected a triumph in your own state...I can but look with contempt upon any fame or position you may have acquired by a union with...Black Republicans.¹⁰²

Douglas defended himself in two letters he wrote in the summer leading to the elections of Iowa's congressional seats. Douglas detailed an attempt by Jones to discredit Douglas in the eyes of his own constituents. In the letter, Douglas asserted "there is a rumor in circulation in Galena, supposed to have come from Jones, of Iowa, that pending the Illinois Central Railroad Grant in the Senate of the United States, an arrangement was made between him and me, by which the interests of Galena were sacrificed to those of Dubuque."¹⁰³

Douglas denied these accusations and again defended himself in a letter written almost six months later. In the second letter Douglas mentioned Jones had been electioneering for the opponents of Douglas. Douglas, again, heard rumor of Jones using the Central Railroad grant to illustrate Douglas supported the interests of the city of Dubuque, located in Iowa over the interests of Galena, in Illinois. Douglas went on in the letter to call Jones's attempt to discredit him as childish and that he would have nothing to say to Jones or any of his followers.¹⁰⁴

The Republicans countered the Democratic reconciliation by going on the attack. Issues like Dred Scott, Lecompton, and the Buchanan administration were once again attacked during speeches given in the Iowa legislature. In regards to the Dred Scott decision, the Governor claimed, "The theory of popular sovereignty has been over thrown by the decision of the Supreme Court." The Governor further argued that "freedom is no longer

¹⁰² *Davenport Daily Gazette*, December 18, 1858.

¹⁰³ Douglas to H.G. Crouch, August 7, 1858, in *The Letters of Stephen A Douglas*, 425.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Douglas, January 1859, in *The Letters of Stephen A. Douglas*, 431.

national, and slavery local; and that the logical result of the decision is, that it carries slavery into every State in this Union.”¹⁰⁵ The Democrats were coming together; the Republicans campaigned on the same issues that made them successful in the past. Now the voters had to make their choice in Iowa. On election day, once again the Republicans were successful. The Republicans won all state offices, but most importantly they won both Congressional seats.

The Democrats needed to stay relevant, and Republicans needed to capitalize on their political gains the last few years. The Lecompton Constitution was defeated in Congress. The Lecompton Constitution, however, continued to reverberate throughout Iowa as political ruptures continued to drive the Democratic Party apart. The Republican Party of Iowa, once a hodgepodge of political parties, became the dominant force. The Democrats were becoming irrelevant in Iowa, and some of those still holding allegiance would jump ship to third party candidates in the upcoming Presidential election. The Lecompton Constitution had torn apart the Democratic Party beyond repair.

The Democrats had lost complete control of Iowa by the end of 1858. The Republicans looked to continue their political dominance in 1859 by holding onto the office of Governor. The Republican Party, both locally and nationally, were eyeing the Presidential election of 1860. The Republicans had never held the Presidency. The Republicans in Iowa sent all their delegates in 1856 to support Republican candidate John C. Fremont, and they hoped to return all their delegates for the Republican nominee again. The Democrats looked to rebound. They needed to regroup politically and unite their devastated party. Senator Douglas was now the de facto head of the Democrats from the North. Buchanan, most likely

¹⁰⁵ *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 7th General Assembly of Iowa, 1858, 800-805.

would not return in 1860. The Democrats would have to unite North and South to achieve a political success. The year 1859 would be crucial to both parties.

Chapter 3

The Lasting Effects of the Lecompton Constitution

This chapter will focus on the lingering effects of the Lecompton Constitution on Iowa politics. Although it was defeated in Congress, Republicans continued to wield the Lecompton Constitution as a political tool against the Democrats in elections. This chapter will focus on the coming political election for Governor. The Lecompton Constitution, no longer the main factor, still appeared in debates throughout the state. The Lecompton Constitution's effects continued to be detrimental to the Democratic Party of Iowa as they continued to lose election after election. The split within the party was too divisive for their political resurgence in Iowa.

The Republicans at the start of 1859 were in complete control of Iowa politics. They held virtually all states offices, the General Assembly, the national Senate and Congressional seats as well as the Governorship. The year of 1859 looked promising for the Republican Party as a whole. In reality however, the only real battle-tested Republican in the state was Grimes. The Democrats showed signs of reconciliation, and the election for the Presidency was coming up, a position the Republicans had yet to win. Political scandals, slow economic recovery from the Panic of 1857 and the affairs of Kansas starting to fade into memory all pointed to a possible resurgence of the Democratic Party if they could find one person to unite the warring factions.¹⁰⁶

The Republican press in early 1859 still broadcasted the conflict between Douglas and Jones, as well as continued to draw attention to Democratic divisions over sectional

¹⁰⁶Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 180.

issues. An article appearing in the *Hawk-Eye Telegraph* in early February of 1859 stated that their battle was not over the Lecompton Constitution but over Jones's attempts to keep Douglas from being re-elected. The article read, "The quarrel between Douglas and Jones arose from the efforts of the latter to prevent the former from being re-elected to the United States Senate. Mr. Jones did so to please Mr. Buchanan." The article concluded, arguing its doubt that the conflict could have developed over Lecompton because "if he should have opposed Douglas on account of the Lecompton Bill, he would have had the very interesting discovery that, in his own state, not one hundred democrats could be found to back him."¹⁰⁷

The Democratic convention was approaching and Democrats were starting to contemplate who from their party would be the next candidate for Governor. As the Convention approached, former Senator Augustus C. Dodge's name circulated as a possibility. Dodge, who had not even returned to Iowa yet, sent a notice to the *Weekly Iowa State Reporter*, refusing to accept the Party's nomination.¹⁰⁸ Despite his refusal to accept the nomination, the convention convened before his return and nominated him anyway. Republican Governor Lowe did not seek re-election. Although the Republicans were successful in elections, Lowe's years spent in office were not considered successful due to scandals and economic downturns in the economy. Therefore, some envisioned the gubernatorial election of 1860 being a close battle. The Democrats were building a strong coalition. With Dodge the nominee for Governor of Iowa and Democratic stalwart Douglas eyeing the Presidency, the Democrats were primed for a political comeback.

¹⁰⁷ *Hawk-Eye Telegraph*, February 8, 1859.

¹⁰⁸ *Waterloo Iowa State Reporter*, May 25, 1859, quoted in Pelzer, *Augustus Caesar Dodge*, 236.

Senator Dodge, who had been absent from Iowa politics since his defeat for re-election in 1854, returned to Iowa. Dodge biographer Louis Pelzer described the consequences of Dodge's political actions, explaining "The Doctrine of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill for which Dodge had given his voice and vote in 1854 had been tested and had created crime, carnage, and border warfare in Kansas Territory and had produced Republicans in the State of Iowa."¹⁰⁹ Dodge used his time spent as ambassador to Spain to lick the political wounds he suffered in his 1854 defeat. He managed stay out of the inter-party battles Iowa Democrats were currently facing. Many Democrats considered Dodge to be the man to unite the factions and deliver Iowa once again to the Democrats.

The Republican Party followed up their political victories in recent elections with bitter in-fighting and political embarrassments of its own. Republican leader William Penn Clarke had wanted the party's nomination since being passed over for the Senate seat by Grimes. Grimes, the de facto leader of the Republican Party in Iowa, favored his ally Samuel Kirkwood. In a letter written to Samuel Kirkwood on March 11, 1858, Grimes complained that Clarke and his supporters "Were it not for Penn Clarke and Morris, there would be no opposition to you anywhere to amount to anything, but they are resolved, as I learn, to stir up the strife that may be possible."¹¹⁰

The Democrats seemed to be the one party united at this time. Although they were struggling politically, they had optimism that their party had now reunited. Meanwhile, Republican leaders were competing for power. Their party's structure had to be solidified for

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 235.

¹¹⁰ James W. Grimes to Samuel J. Kirkwood, March 11, 1858, "Letters of James W. Grimes," *Annals of Iowa*, 3rd ser., Vol. XXII (1940): 497.

the coming election. With Jones no longer in political power, many in the party were optimistic that the Democrats would be victorious once again. A paper politically backing Buchanan urged reconciliation. The *Anamosa Gazette* described the coming election as one of the most important to ever took place in Iowa,

The coming fall election is one of the most important that ever took place since Iowa has been a state, and it is of the greatest importance to Democrats that there should be a perfect harmony of feeling and a unity of action in all matters which pertain either to the nominations or to the convention. One thing is sure; if there is any factitious feelings introduced into the State Convention, all our hopes of carrying any portion of the election in October will come to nought.¹¹¹

The Democrats, looking to reconcile their differences within the party, faced prominent members defecting due to the national party's stance on the Lecompton Constitution. These defections were offset with the return of Dodge. Many Democrats bolted due to the Lecompton issue; others were leaving due to the Buchanan Administration's handling of the acquisition of Cuba. Some of the prominent Democrats who departed were former Democratic Chairman Enoch Eastman, who some believed was in line for nominations in upcoming elections, as well as Henry Scholte who carried the weight of the Dutch vote in Iowa. These departures nonetheless hurt the Democrats, but they were about to get political ammunition to use against their counterparts thanks to Republican political legislation in Massachusetts.¹¹²

In 1859, the Massachusetts Republican-controlled legislature passed an amendment to their constitution which read, "No person of foreign birth shall be entitled to vote, or shall be

¹¹¹ *Anamosa Gazette*, April 22, 1859, quoted in Morton Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press,) 182.

¹¹² *The Vinton Eagle*, March 3, 1859, quoted in Morton Rosenberg, *Iowa on Eve of Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press), 182.

eligible to office, unless he shall have resided within the jurisdiction of the United States for two years subsequent to his naturalization.”¹¹³ This amendment caused the German population to cry out in protest in Iowa. They believed if such a sentiment made its way to Iowa, that the Republican Party here would implement such an amendment. This legislation undoubtedly caused problems for the local Republicans, and the Democrats had found a new issue to campaign on.

The Democratic press in Michigan condemned the Massachusetts Legislature, the amendment they passed, and the entire Republican Party. According to the paper, “Every State in the Union controlled by the Republicans, either by its press, its leading public men, or its State Central Committees has counseled Massachusetts not to take the action and protect against it.” The article then stated Michigan’s stance on the issue and that is, “Michigan again washes her hands of it. She is for political equality and no prospective dogmas, as she has ever been.”¹¹⁴

The German Iowans responded in the *Weekly Republican*. They asked three questions to the Iowa Republican Party. The three questions were:

Are you in favor of the naturalization laws as they now stand and particularly against all and every extension of the probation time?

Do you regard it as a duty of the Republican party as well as the party of equal rights to oppose and war upon each and every discrimination that may be attempted to be made between native born and adopted citizens as to the right of suffrage?

¹¹³ “Amendment to the Massachusetts State Constitution,” *New York Times*, May 11, 1859.

¹¹⁴ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, May 16, 1859.

Do you condemn the late action of the Republicans in the Massachusetts Legislature for attempting to exclude the adopted citizens for two years from the ballot box as unjust and uncalled for?¹¹⁵

The Germans made up a significant section of the Republican constituency; therefore, the Republicans took notice. James Grimes responded first to the German populace, being the head of the Republican Party in Iowa. In response to their questions, Grimes answered, “To each of these interrogations, I respond unhesitatingly in the affirmative.” Grimes expressed his beliefs that the Massachusetts legislation was purely a local matter and that he was confident it would not extend to Iowa. Grimes asserted that he did not believe it in his power, or his responsibility to interfere with the sovereignty of any state. He believed that the legislation was dangerous and passed with ill judgment.¹¹⁶

The Democrats looked on with optimism to the coming election. The blunder of the Republican Party in Massachusetts forced the Republican Party in Iowa to step back. The Democratic Party in the North began uniting nationally under the banner of Stephen Douglas. In Iowa, the party united around Dodge whose absence from politics for the last five years kept him out of the political squabbles. The Buchanan faction, lead by Jones, held power no longer and they pledged to throw its support behind the Democratic nominee regardless of affiliation. The Republicans, still holding control of Iowa politics at every level, were now facing political infighting between two party leaders, and were forced to answer for legislation enacted in other parts of the Union.

The Democrats had political advantage over the Republican Party due to the Massachusetts law. This political advantage would be short lived thanks to the Democratic

¹¹⁵ Letter Grimes to Germans Citizens, 30 April 1859, in William Salter, *Life of Grimes* (New York: D. Appleton Press), 119.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

Secretary of State Lewis Cass. Cass wrote a letter to Felix Le Clerc of Memphis, Tennessee. The letter became a national political blunder which distracted Iowans from the mistakes of the Republican Party in Massachusetts. Cass's letter, reprinted in the Burlington Weekly *Hawk Eye and Telegraph* read, "it is understood that the French Government claims military service from all natives of France who may be found within its jurisdiction. Your naturalization in this country will not exempt you from that claim, should you voluntarily repair thither."¹¹⁷ This letter caused much outrage at the Democratic Party. Many citizens believed that the American government under the Buchanan Administration would not protect its own citizens.

The condemnation came from both sides of the aisle against Cass's letter. Both Republicans and Democrats spoke out against the policy. The Republicans for the time being were granted a reprieve in the minds of the people. The Democrats were now in the political spotlight once more. The letter by Cass represented a policy of the National Democratic Party, or at least the faction that held the office of the executive. The Massachusetts law was forgiven due to the actions of a local government. National politics once again hurt the political capital gained by the Iowa Democratic Party. The Republicans once again looked to the coming election for governor with a renewed optimism.

The issue of Lecompton had now passed. The consequences however were devastating to the Democratic Party, but especially in Iowa. Many Democratic leaders fled the party. The Party split into two warring factions that had yet to prove they could reunite under one banner. The Lecompton Constitution, although overturned, still caused great

¹¹⁷ *Burlington Weekly Hawk Eye and Telegraph*, July 5, 1859.

damage to Iowa. The Democratic Party controlled the state in 1850 and was hailed as the party that saved the Union. In 1854 they were popular for their focus on railroads and expansion westward. In less than ten years the state went from complete control under a Democratic banner to complete control under a Republican banner. The Democrats were becoming an insignificant political party in the state. The Democrats needed a strong showing in the upcoming election for Governor. They believed they had the best man for the job. If they could not engineer a political comeback the Democrat Party would lose all hope.

In the *Davenport Daily Gazette* on May 16, 1859, a printing appeared for the upcoming Republican Convention for office of the Governor. Below the Republican Convention notice, an article appeared lamenting the outlook for the National Democratic Party. The article said the outlook was dismal due to the schism in the party. Whether it was the split in Pennsylvania, the rebellion in Virginia, or the fire-eaters in the south, the party needed to re-capture the Presidency or it could be the end of the great Democracy. The article further singled out Iowa in their effort to support the Democratic Party. According to the paper, “A strong effort is now being made to get the Democracy of Iowa to exercise their good sense by rallying around the Administration, but with what result may be better known after the State Convention next month.”¹¹⁸

The pro-Buchanan article that appeared in the *Daily Gazette* complimented those in the state that supported the Buchanan Administration, but acknowledged that the majority of Democrats in the state supported Senator Douglas. The article debated whether the Iowa populace would have the shrewdness not to be bullied by the pro-Douglas faction and help

¹¹⁸ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, May 16, 1859.

prevent their party from “going to the dogs” in the next election. In a final appeal to the Iowa Democratic Party, the article asked that the pro-Administration faction be allowed to construct the party platform at the convention and omit “popular sovereignty “from their platform.”¹¹⁹ This last plea to the Democrats of Iowa was a reference to the Lecompton Constitution that caused so many problems for the party on a national and state level.

The political campaigning started in July of 1859. The campaigning entailed Kirkwood and Dodge engaging in debate of the issues that mattered to Iowans. The month of August chronicled some of the debates that took place during the campaign season. The Burlington *Daily Hawk Eye* on August 3, 1859 issued excerpts of the first debate. The article illustrated Kirkwood speaking very plainly with regards to the Dred Scott decision and the general policy of the sham-democracy Democrats tried to create. This last mention undoubtedly referred to the Lecompton Constitution. Dodge spoke fondly of the admission of Kansas under the Lecompton *Constitution*, declaring, “His sympathies were all in favor of a slave state.”¹²⁰ Dodge’s insistence on Kansas’s admission to the Union under the Lecompton Constitution was at odds with all Republicans and most Democrats within the state.

The first debate raged on with both men engaging each other on the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Law. During the debate, Dodge asked Kirkwood if he obeyed the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850. Kirkwood said he would obey the law, but that he would face the penalty of the law before he personally went out to catch run-away slaves. Kirkwood then asked Dodge if he supported the Fugitive Slave Law, and Dodge responded with a firm “yes.” The debate continued on with a few other issues ranging from homestead land grants

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye*, August 3, 1859.

and moral institutions like an asylum for the insane. By debates end, Kirkwood had undoubtedly gotten the best of Dodge. Kirkwood came off as calm and mature, where Dodge came off as ill-tempered and angry when the debate turned to the Fugitive Slave Act.¹²¹

The tone of the race for Governor was set. The Republican Kirkwood stood strong with a lot of support from Iowans. Dodge came off as rusty and was on the wrong side of the public opinion in the first debate. Though they engaged in many other debates throughout the state, the outcome always seemed to favor Kirkwood. The *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye* detailed Dodge's continued poor debate performances. Dodge, "again had the worst of it. His eulogies of slavery, his expression of willingness to turn out and help catch runaway n*****," was not going over well in the crowds in attendance.¹²²

The debates kept getting worse and worse for Dodge. He dug himself a hole every time he engaged Kirkwood in a debate. The debate in Chariton, Iowa ended in disaster for Dodge. A weekly *Hawk-Eye* article stated, "In the discussion which took place here on yesterday between Kirkwood and Dodge. Dodge got used up so bad that his friends talk of advising him not to follow the gallant Kirkwood further." Dodge asked Kirkwood to confine the issues of this debate to Iowa and not mention national issues. Kirkwood did not agree, arguing that Dodge was trying to cover up the political calamities of the National Democratic Party.

Kirkwood detailed Dodge's part in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a role which resulted in a Republican surge and Dodge's political exile. Dodge tried to salvage this debate once again

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

by standing firm in his support of the Dred Scott decision and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He also expressed his support for the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.¹²³ The debates continued through September. The Republican *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye* printed an article recapping the debates in the campaign for Governor. The article declared, “The Democracy is desperate. The state is as thoroughly Republican as it ever was.” The article continued on stating that Kirkwood led off the campaign inviting Dodge to join him in debates, and the “boasted champion of the Lecompton Democracy was routed at the first onset. He lost his temper and damaged his own chances by his absurd positions and demonic ravings.”¹²⁴

The Democratic Party and Republican Party offered two distinct party platforms for voters in 1859. The Republican platform of 1859 reaffirmed their loyalty to the national party platform of 1856. The Republican Party supported the prohibition of slavery and took a strong stance in favor of Congress’s ability to intervene in the affairs of territories acquired by the United States. The Republicans looked to enfranchise every citizen and that they believed in universal suffrage for citizens, including African Americans. They would protect any and all immigrants who lived in the United States. This last section condemned the Massachusetts law and Lewis Cass’s letter. In condemning legislation similar to the Lecompton Constitution, the Republican Party condemned slavery in all territories.¹²⁵

The Iowa Democratic Party platform stated its loyalty to the national party platform of 1856 as well. They firmly advocated non-intervention by the federal government. The party reaffirmed its loyalty to the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions passed by former

¹²³ *Burlington Hawk-Eye Telegraph*, August 13, 1859.

¹²⁴ *Burlington Daily Hawk Eye*, September 9, 1859.

¹²⁵ *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye*, October 11, 1859.

founding father James Madison. The platform declared that the United States Constitution, not the states, should have the final say in governance. The lack of support for the Buchanan Administration was indicative of the split between the small Buchanan faction and the Douglas majority that made up the Iowa Democratic Party.¹²⁶

The lack of Democratic unity appeared in *The Davenport Daily Gazette* on July 6, 1859 which illustrated the refusal of Dodge to line up with the Buchanan administration's platform. The article stated, "Dodge neglects to say one word as to where its candidate for Governor stands on political issues of the day." The article further argues that Dodge in debates with Kirkwood always stood firmly in his belief in the Kansas-Nebraska Act which contained popular sovereignty as the key component. The Buchanan administration's attempt to force the Lecompton Constitution on the people of Kansas was a direct repudiation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.¹²⁷

The month of October brought Election Day to the citizens of Iowa. October 11, 1859 came and the citizens went to the polls to cast their votes. The Republicans had to feel a sense of calm after Kirkwood's string of debate victories against Dodge. The election returns were printed in the *Cedar Valley Times* county by county. The election results illustrated a Republican victory. Republican nominee Samuel Kirkwood won the election of 1859 for Governor by a vote of 3,170 votes. Although not a significant landslide, Kirkwood beat out the Democrats best chance at winning back the Governor's seat.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ *Dubuque Weekly Times*, August 8, 1859.

¹²⁷ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, July 6, 1859.

¹²⁸ Glashan, *American Governors and Gubernatorial Elections*, 92; Cedar Rapids *Cedar Valley Times*, November 3, 1859.

The election of Samuel Kirkwood for Governor can be attributed to a few specific reasons in some historian's minds. Louis Pelzer, who wrote the definitive biography on Augustus C. Dodge, attributes his loss to his four-year absence from Iowa politics. Dodge's stances on issues like squatter sovereignty and the Lecompton Constitution were clearly at odds with the majority of Iowans. Another historian attributes Samuel Kirkwood's victory brilliant political organization of campaigns by James Grimes. Kirkwood's debates undoubtedly showed him in a better light with Iowan voters, as he was more in tune with Iowans on issues that bothered them on a local front.¹²⁹

The raid on Harper's Ferry by John Brown rang throughout the start of 1860. National attention turned to the events in Virginia by Brown and his abolitionist followers. The 8th General Assembly of Iowa kicked off their new session by certifying Kirkwood's victory in the race for the Governor. Kirkwood gave his first inaugural address to the Iowa General Assembly. In his message, Kirkwood commented on John Brown and the events at Harper's Ferry, as well as other issues related to slavery. The General Assembly received Governor Samuel Kirkwood's inaugural address on January 11, 1860. Kirkwood's speech declared that "not only is it highly important that the voice of our people, as expressed through the ballot box, shall be enlightened and intelligent, but it is imperatively necessary that the uttering's of the voice be correctly reported." This section of his address rang of criticism against the Democratic Party over the Lecompton Constitution. Kirkwood declared,

it is my deliberate conviction, that on the day on which the opponents of this new and most unfortunate measure, aided by a few of its original friends, defeated its

¹²⁹ Pelzer, *Augustus Caesar Dodge*, 248; Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 206.

legitimate consummation by defeating the passage of the so-called Lecompton Bill, which sought to enforce upon the people of Kansas a Constitution they abhorred...¹³⁰

The Lecompton Constitution's appearance in Kirkwood's speech lends credibility to the importance the bill had on Iowans even after its defeat in Congress. The speech was mostly remembered for Kirkwood's comments on John Brown and his raid on Harper's Ferry. Kirkwood condemned Brown's actions, yet his comments rang through the General Assembly as a false condemnation. Kirkwood expressed that

While the great mass of our northern people utterly condemn the act of John Brown, they feel and they express admiration and sympathy for the disinterestedness of purpose by which they believe he was governed, and for the unflinching courage and calm cheerfulness with which he met the consequences of his failure.¹³¹

Kirkwood's speech brought much criticism by the Democratic minority in the House and Senate of Iowa's General Assembly. In the Iowa Senate, the Democrats protested against the publication of Kirkwood's message for it would be divisive to states within the Union. The message, they believed, would hinder relations between Virginia and Iowa. Democrats believed that Kirkwood should have confined his statements to the conditions of the state of Iowa. Democrats throughout the nation also believed that Kirkwood stepped over his executive boundaries with his inaugural address.¹³²

The year progressed as Harper's Ferry kept the newspapers alive with new stories. Attention, however, turned to the upcoming Presidential election. It was a foregone conclusion that President Buchanan would not be returning to office as most of his political

¹³⁰ *Iowa House Journal* 8th Congress, January 11, 1860, 50-62.

¹³¹ *Iowa House Journal* 8th Congress, January 11, 1860, 50-62.

¹³² *Iowa House Journal* 8th Congress 184-186; *Iowa Senate Journal* 8th Senate 169-171.

base had turned their support to Douglas. The time for convention and newly stated political platforms was coming. The Republican National Platform appeared in the *Dubuque Weekly Times* on May 24, 1860. The platform again mentioned the infamous Lecompton Constitution twice. The first mention condemned the current administration's position on interfering with territorial governments and their governing of their own people. The second appearance of the Lecompton Constitution was listed on the fifth plank of the platform. The fifth plank condemned that "the present Democratic Administration far exceeded our worst apprehensions, in its measureless subservience to the exactions of a special interest...to force the Lecompton Constitution upon the protesting people of Kansas."¹³³

The Republican Party continued to wield the Lecompton Constitution against their Democratic counterparts. The Democrats at every turn faced criticisms of their party's role in the embarrassing affair. Although most northern Democrats condemned the actions of the Buchanan Administration, they were still Democrats themselves. The coming Presidential election would either bolster their party as they could empower a new Democrat to lead the fractioned party, or they would lose their first Presidential election to the Republican Party. The election of 1860 did not just include candidates from the Republican and Democrat parties, but a host of third party candidates entered the race as well. The third party candidates further fractioned the Democratic Party on a national scale. In Iowa, many Democrats continued to support the new nominee, but a few chose to support the Constitutional Unionist Party.

¹³³ *Dubuque Weekly Times*, May 24, 1860.

The election year started off with just two political parties: the Republicans and the Democrats. The two parties met in two different states to hold their conventions. The Democrats met in South Carolina and the Republicans met in Illinois. The Democratic convention quickly found out the irreparable damage done to their party. The interests of the South were predominant throughout the convention. Jefferson Davis, a Senator from Mississippi, demanded the party's platform demand slavery in all territories. The split within the Democratic Party no longer could be confined to North and South. The South was unified in their interests but the North split into two factions. The Northwest was unified, while the Northeast could not decide on whom to support for their nomination. The fighting prohibited their selection of a nominee. The Democratic Party would have to meet again to choose their candidate. In the meantime, a third party sprang up which consisted of ex-Whigs and ex-Know-Nothings. These men supported John Bell of Tennessee. John Bell and his supporters made up the Constitutional Union Party which campaigned for the Union and the United States Constitution.¹³⁴

Northern and Southern Democrats met once more in Baltimore to select its candidate. The Democrats once again could not agree on a nominee that represented the interests of both sections. The delegates from the South walked out of the Baltimore Convention and refused to participate in the proceedings. The remaining delegates from the North elected Douglas as their nominee. Those who walked out of the Baltimore Convention reconvened in their own Convention and elected John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. The split

¹³⁴ Sage, *History of Iowa*, 144.

in the Democratic Party in the convention rang out as a huge political advantage for the Republicans.¹³⁵

The Republican convention convened in Chicago to nominate their candidate. The nomination of Lincoln was not a foregone conclusion. There were a few possible Republican candidates who had support among the Republican base. Those men were Salmon P. Chase and William Seward. However, Lincoln came out on top during the convention. A contributor to the *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye* detailed the support for Lincoln over his two Republican peers. The editor claimed, “I have found many friends of Abe Lincoln, who would pass over Mr. Seward, the acknowledged head and father of the Republican Party, and disregarding the claims of Mr. Chase of their own state, nominate Mr. Lincoln for President...”¹³⁶ The father of Iowa’s Republican Party wrote to his wife enthusiastic over Lincoln’s nomination. Grimes exclaimed “The nomination of Lincoln strikes the mass of the people with great favor. He is universally regarded as a scrupulously honest man, and a genuine man of the people.”¹³⁷

The candidates were named and the election of 1860 could commence. The Republicans had Abraham Lincoln, the Democrats in the North had Stephen A. Douglas, the Democrats in the South had John C. Breckinridge, and the Constitutional Union Party had John Bell. The four nominees gave Iowans a diverse selection of men to choose for their President. The Republicans in Iowa undoubtedly went for Lincoln. The bigger question became who the Democrats would vote for.

¹³⁵ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 213.

¹³⁶ *Burlington Daily Hawk-Eye*, May 12, 1860.

¹³⁷ James Grimes to Mrs. Grimes, June 4, 1860 in Salters, *Life of Grimes*, 128.

The majority of Democrats in Iowa supported and voted for Stephen Douglas. The faction of pro-Buchanan Democrats splintered off to support either Bell or Breckinridge. The followers of George W. Jones convened in Davenport to nominate Breckinridge. They assembled to re-organize the Democratic Party of Iowa. They called for all Democrats to unite under the Breckinridge ticket and support the platform that all Democrats could believe in.¹³⁸ Iowa Democrats who supported Breckinridge supported the Dred Scott Decision as well as the introduction of slavery into all territories and lauded the Buchanan Administration.

Local elections also took place in 1860. On November 6, 1860 Iowans went to the polls to cast their votes. The Republicans swept the congressional, presidential election, and all state offices. Lincoln carried Iowa for the Republicans, winning more votes than his three opponents combined. Lincoln also won the Presidential election. Those that supported Douglas had to be disheartened; their party was completely torn apart now. The Democratic Party that existed before 1860 was destroyed.¹³⁹

The victory of Lincoln in the Presidential election of 1860 was a culmination of efforts by Republicans everywhere. In Iowa, the victory capped off what had been a successful Republican takeover of the state of Iowa. Since James Grimes's victory in 1854 for Governor, Iowa took the first step towards becoming a complete Republican state. The Republican Party, since Grimes's victory, held control of Iowa politics for the next thirty-six

¹³⁸ *Davenport Daily Gazette*, August 16, 1860.

¹³⁹ Rosenberg, *Iowa on the Eve of the Civil War*, 224.

years consecutively. In the next one hundred years, the Democrats would only elect three governors to office.¹⁴⁰

In *Baptism of Fire*, historian Robert Cook examines the extent of Iowa's Republican turn. Cook argues that during their eighty years spanning their first electoral triumph in 1854 and the onset of the Great Depression, Republicans won every gubernatorial contest in the state but two. Between 1854 and 1878, they swept seventy-one congressional races out of seventy-four. Ironically, the only Democratic successes came from combining with third parties. Cook argues that Iowa from the years of 1856 and 1896 was considered the eighth most Republican state in America.¹⁴¹

The importance of Iowa in the 1850's is often overlooked by historians. Iowa was not a prime player in the Compromise of 1850, but its vote on the legislation echoed the sentiment of most of America. Iowa played integral roles in the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, and in the opposition of the Lecompton Constitution. Iowa, like America as a whole, was transforming politically. The rise of a Republican Party changed the landscape of politics. The importance of Iowa should be recognized because in less than fifteen years Iowa went from a territory to being the main focus of national events. Iowa has to be considered one of the three most important states during the 1850's next to Kansas and Nebraska.

The downfall of the Democratic Party is attributed to different issues ranging from slavery, economic policy, and political patronage. The Lecompton Constitution is the most

¹⁴⁰ Glashan, *American Governors and Gubernatorial Elections*, 88.

¹⁴¹ Cook, *Baptism of Fire*, 5.

important of these issues. The Lecompton Constitution started off as a local issue in a growing territory. The Lecompton Constitution turned into a national political controversy as the Democratic Buchanan Administration attempted to force the constitution on the people of Kansas when they were clearly in opposition to the Constitution. The Lecompton Constitution kept the political issue of slavery expansion alive. The United States had compromised through legislation to appease the southern interests of the United States.

The Lecompton Constitution tore the National Democratic Party into two warring factions. The split pitted those who supported the ideal of popular sovereignty and those who supported the Buchanan Administration. Stephen Douglas became the face of opposition to the Buchanan Administration. Douglas represented the interests of almost all Northern Democrats. The Democratic split caused Republican victories in numerous political contests. The inability to reconcile their difference prevented a consolidated Democratic front in the Presidential election of 1860. Northern and Southern Democrats split between two candidates with two very distinctive platforms. This allowed the Republican nominee Abraham Lincoln to capture the Presidency. The elections of Lincoln lead to the eventual secession of South Carolina and other states.

The political effects of the Lecompton Constitution in Iowa were just as severe. The Democratic political dominance that once existed was not all but extinct. The adolescent Republican Party took full control of all state offices, the General Assembly, both Senate and Congressional seats in Congress, and the Governor's seat. The Democratic Party which held prominent politicians like Augustus C. Dodge and George W. Jones, but both had been defeated numerous times and both were now out of political power. Republican politicians

like James Grimes, Samuel Kirkwood, and James Harlan were the preeminent political figures in Iowa.

The Lecompton Constitution split the Iowa Democratic Party beyond repair. George W. Jones and his followers were a minority but if the Democrats ever planned on regaining their political power, the schism had to be fixed. Their inability to unite these two factions not only kept a Republican Party in office that made plenty of political mistakes themselves, but increased their political grasp on the state's political offices. The Gubernatorial election of 1859 offered prominence for the party. The return of Augustus C. Dodge was supposed to reunite both Democratic factions and defeat Republican Samuel Kirkwood in the race for Governor. Dodge's stance on issues like the Lecompton Constitution, the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act were at odds with most Iowans. The defections of prominent Democrats over the Lecompton Constitution allowed Kirkwood to achieve a very narrow victory which any historian could attribute to the schism within the party. The effect of the Lecompton Constitution on the state of Iowa is undeniable. It was the principle reason the Democrats not only lost control, but that the Republicans achieved political success.

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