“United in Interest and Feeling:” The Political Culture of Union in the Virginia Borderland, 1850 – 1861

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This thesis explores the role of political culture in the secession of two Virginia counties: Augusta and Rockbridge. These two counties, which in 1850 were staunchly loyal to the Union, shifted loyalties late in the secession crisis of 1860 and 1861. Comparing local reactions to national politics with local views on the nature and unity of political communities more generally moves the decision to secede in April 1861 into clearer focus. Specifically, comparing regional attitudes towards the sectional controversies surrounding Virginia’s constitution with the national debates on slavery in the territories reveals a general concern with the unity of political communities, and the common interests and values needed to sustain such communities. In the context of cross-cutting borderlands between eastern and western Virginia and the northern and southern United States, these sectional questions took on important significance. Political decision-making in this region emerged from a combination of widely-circulating views on the nature of government in this borderland setting. By placing the Valley’s secession within these contexts, this thesis argues that Augusta and Rockbridge seceded when they did because events in the North persuaded them that the moral and political character of white northerners had become suspect relative to the question of slavery.
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Introduction

On July 4, 1850, Judge John W. Brockenbrough of Lexington, Virginia spoke to an assembly of local citizens to commemorate the independence of the United States, and to mark the laying of a cornerstone for a new barracks building at the Virginia Military Institute. That summer, two political crises seized the attention of Virginia’s public. Within Virginia, western counties were disadvantaged by the state’s “mixed basis” formula of representation that counted property alongside population and that put them at odds with the wealthier eastern counties that benefitted from the existing system. Nationally, the controversy surrounding the status of slavery in the territories newly acquired from Mexico strained the relationship between free and slave states. Like many of his neighbors, Brockenbrough dreaded the possibility that the Union forged by the Revolution might disintegrate in the face of sectional disagreements. Brockenbrough spoke for many of his neighbors when he said that “The Union is dear to the hearts of our people, not only because of the historic glories that cluster around it, but because it is identified in their convictions and judgment with their freedom and happiness.” Brockenbrough, like most of the political community in his home county of Rockbridge and in neighboring Augusta, held the Union in high esteem, and believed it required nothing less than preservation at all costs. Unionism in this part of the Valley was no mere idle attachment, it was perhaps the highest of all values.1

Ten years later, in December 1860, a correspondent from the Richmond Daily Dispatch reported on a Union meeting in the Rockbridge County seat of Lexington, where Judge Brockenbrough then “contended that the rights of the South must be maintained and kept inviolate – that South Carolina had just cause for her present secession or revolutionary

proceedings, and that Virginia ought to unite with her and her sister slave States in forming a Southern Confederacy.” Brockenbrough, like other generally moderate Unionists of Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley, faced a troubling dilemma. Both pro-Union and pro-slavery, they had to choose between repudiating the heritage of the founding generation, and casting their lot with the free states of the North. When the southern Confederacy opened fire on federal forces occupying Ft. Sumter, President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to end the rebellion in the southern states. On April 17, 1861, Virginia’s constitutional convention chose secession over Union. The Shenandoah Valley counties of Augusta and Rockbridge thereafter ratified the decision by overwhelming margins the following May.

Brockenbrough’s statements on both occasions, while taking opposing positions, were both products of a political culture of Union that had emerged in Augusta and Rockbridge counties by the late antebellum period. This political culture included both a republican concern with the necessity of shared moral and political values and a liberal emphasis on the importance of interest in politics. This political culture tapped into values that had currency throughout the nation, but it evolved as it did in no small measure due to its position along two geographic borderlands. These two counties sit at the southern extreme of the Shenandoah Valley, and its residents found themselves caught between different sets of competing interests and identities. In one sense, mixed cultural affinities and commercial ties gave this region close connections with both the North and the South. In another, the region’s place in between the Blue Ridge and Alleghany mountains put it near the dividing line between Virginia’s eastern and western sections. Though west of the traditional dividing line that demarcated eastern Virginia from the west, the Valley still stood in between very different regions. The competing interests and

2 “Correspondence of the Richmond Dispatch, public meeting in Rockbridge,” Richmond Daily Dispatch, December 6, 1860.
sentiments on both sides of either divide gave unique meaning to the sectional struggles that seized both Virginia and the nation. In light of these cross-cutting cleavages, Unionism in this region encompassed a broader range of ideas than just the preservation of the national Union. Union meant the preservation of political unity and affinity more broadly, whether at the national level, or at the state level.\textsuperscript{3}

At the state level, the Valley stood in between the conservative “mixed basis” factions in the east, and the “white basis” reformers in the western counties. These terms referred to beliefs about the proper means of apportioning votes in the state legislature. Proponents of the white basis advocated white manhood suffrage and the allocation of legislative seats according to each county’s population. Those who favored the mixed basis sought to limit the franchise, and to include assessed property values in the apportionment process. Voters in western counties, which tended to have higher populations and lower property values, tended to favor the white basis, whereas the political class of the east preferred the mixed basis, since the region’s large slave population far increased local property values.\textsuperscript{4}

The mixed basis system in place in 1850 was itself the result of a compromise between the east and the west. Virginia’s 1776 constitution had originally apportioned legislative seats arbitrarily, and did so in ways that benefitted the smaller and more numerous eastern counties at the expense of the geographically larger western counties. The constitutional convention of 1830 devised the mixed basis as means of placating some western concerns in a manner amenable to the east. By the 1840s, even this compromise ceased to ameliorate western concerns. At the end of the decade, westerners demanded white basis representation in addition to a host of other

\textsuperscript{3} Michael David Lesperance, “Fighting for the Union: The Political Culture of Anti-Sectionalism in Augusta County, Virginia 1850 – 1861” (M.A. thesis, University of Virginia, 1993).
reforms that included reforming the antiquated county court system, direct election of statewide officers, and a government-run common school system. By 1849, the General Assembly began considering convention bills to deal with the issue.

In the middle of the struggle stood the Shenandoah Valley, and the Valley’s middling position proved critical to its political orientation during the controversy. Voters in Augusta and Rockbridge counties believed they could play a deciding role in the controversy. Public opinion in this region trended strongly in favor of the white basis, but those who advocated for it did not typically promote it at the expense of all other opportunities for reform. Unlike some of the transmontane and tidewater counties, voters in this borderland proved open to compromise on the basis issue. They thus found themselves not just in the geographic middle of the state, but also the political middle. As the basis debate continued into the convention itself, political notables began to debate the future of the Commonwealth itself, with some westerners even entertaining an outright division of the state. In the Valley counties of Augusta and Rockbridge, the debate on constitutional reform addressed many of the concerns that would vex them through the remainder of the decade: what did it mean to be part of a political community? How ought members of a political community relate to one another, and under what circumstances ought a political community dissolve? The reform debate in 1850 and 1851 in this way anticipated the sectional crisis that precipitated the Civil War.5

The same values that undergirded the Valley Unionists’ decision-making during the reform debate influenced their responses to the contemporaneous Crisis of 1850. The Valley’s geography was such that its commercial ties proved more complex than they might initially appear. Though closer to Richmond and many of the settlements in central Virginia, this region’s local markets interacted very closely with merchants in Baltimore and Philadelphia. Because the

5 Gaines Jr., “The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850 – 51.”
Blue Ridge made travel eastward difficult, Valley residents often transacted much of their business with traders further North. Many Valley residents had personal connections in the North, and some local notables, including President of Washington College George Junkin, had been born there. Despite these strong commercial and personal connections North of Mason-Dixon, the area remained southern in its disposition. Though the great plantations of the tidewater and other southern coastal regions were uncommon, slavery persisted and showed few signs of vanishing. In 1850, slaves constituted one fifth of the population in Augusta, and over a quarter in Rockbridge. By 1860, the proportion of slaves in the population had declined, but the institution remained firmly in place. Local colonization movements, which grew in popularity following Virginia’s slavery debate in the 1830s and continued through the publication of the antislavery Ruffner Pamphlet in 1847, attracted less support by the end of the decade. Henry Ruffner’s antislavery tract, delivered at Lexington’s Franklin Society, attracted support from local notables such as John Letcher, James Baldwin Dorman, and Samuel McDowell Moore, but was so controversial that it effectively ended Ruffner’s career as president of Washington College. Some Valley Unionists who had once spoken out in favor of even gradual abolition by the end of the 1850s had become more pro-slavery. Local whites, in Rockbridge at least, actively feared slave rebellions. Whites in both counties viewed the free black minority with deep mistrust, and some in Augusta complained of disobedience on the part of slaves.  

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Slavery thus retained some importance to local society even if white farmers did not engage in the large-scale plantation agriculture common elsewhere. Local politics, therefore, emphasized the need to protect it. As in most of the South, the protection of slavery, the South’s “peculiar institution,” constituted an important thrust of the region’s orientation toward national politics. Yet, Valley voters had other priorities as well. In addition to slavery, white Virginians in the Valley expressed a deep commitment to the Union. When these men spoke of Union, they did not refer to the nation-state writ large in opposition to states and localities. In referring to Union, they denoted a transcendent entity that encompassed the shared interests and heritage of all Americans. The Union was a political entity, a patrimony, and a description of shared values. Such a unique bond was not something a good citizen threatened to sunder lightly.  

At the national level, Valley voters valued two things over all: slavery and the Union. A threat to one was a threat to the other. Standing on a borderland between the North and the South, residents of Augusta and Rockbridge discerned an unpleasant position in national politics. Looking northward, they saw fanatical abolitionists bent on the destruction of slavery and with it every worthwhile aspect of southern domestic life. In threatening slavery, abolitionists implicitly threatened the greatest of all political evils: disunion. Valley voters saw this evil when they looked southward as well. In the Lower South, they saw radical southern “fire-eaters” demanding the reopening of the slave trade, and southern interests above all others. These extremists even threatened southern secession on multiple occasions. Like Americans in other border region, Valley Unionists “despised extremism from both abolitionists and secessionists.

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and viewed each force as equally culpable for the war.” The possibility of the Union’s dissolution frightened many Valley Unionists, for disunion symbolized the erasure of common American heritage between North and South, and some believed that southern secession would threaten slavery in Virginia. Their only choice, so far as they could see, was to take the middle ground. Throughout the national sectional crises of late antebellum period, Valley Unionists assumed the compromise position, and believed that only compromise between conservative elements in both the North and South could keep the Union intact. This North-South borderland was both geographic and political.8

With these factors in view, the Valley’s rapid shift from Unionism to Secessionism in the spring of 1861 moves into clearer focus as a product of political culture. This is not to say that the response to Lincoln’s Proclamation was not an expression of solidarity with the South or a reaction to traditional fears of executive power, for it was those things. Rather, examining this region’s response from the standpoint of political culture reveals some of the values which undergirded these reactions. By treating Unionism as a political value that includes state rather than just national politics, the roots of the Valley’s, and of Virginia’s secession, appear rooted in deeply held beliefs that both encompassed and extended beyond immediate material interests. While the specific values expressed in this region were to some degree parochial in nature, they existed within the context of much larger national political ideologies and political cultures.

The Valley’s political culture, despite the transformation of life in Virginia over many years, retained some of its republican character. Some scholars have emphasized the liberalization of Virginia’s politics as demonstrated in the constitutional reform debates and the rise of organized political parties during the Jacksonian period. While Virginia’s politics in the

mid-nineteenth century exhibited a strong divergence from decades prior, the emphasis on liberalization has perhaps unintentionally underestimated the resiliency of republicanism. Even up to the eve of the Civil War, Valley Unionists extolled the virtues of the disinterested statesman, chided the selfish factionalist, and emphasized the common good above all else. While republican elements persisted, politics had nonetheless changed markedly by the late antebellum period. According to Harry L. Watson, “Using the rhetoric of republicanism to justify their actions, Democrats and Whigs had altered many aspects of the tradition almost beyond recognition.” William E. Gienapp similarly noted how late antebellum republicanism differed from its early national counterpart, but the idea of public virtue still held some sway. Valley politics combined certain liberal views of interest with a lingering republican emphasis on public virtue. Politics in Augusta and its seat, Staunton, in particular seems to have retained much of its old republican flavor; the dominant Whig party even into the 1850s remained under the influence of a set of elite families to a degree not exhibited elsewhere during this period. Despite the spread of liberal ideas, the political culture of the late antebellum Shenandoah Valley evinced a concern with the public virtue and the general character of politicians and political society writ large.9

This republican concern with the moral character of the body politic extended into local conceptions of the Union. What precisely the Union was, why it existed, and what held it together were issues that antebellum and early national Americans continually negotiated before the Civil War. According to political scientist Rogan Kersh, “The idea of union was the chief rhetorical means by which Americans sought to express shared ideals and a common identity, without invoking strong nationalism or centralized governance.” Kersh has characterized the

antebellum conception of Union as “a balance between conflicting interests, or a combination of separate elements” that existed over and above the national state. Kersh particularly emphasized the affective nature of the bonds between the citizens of the Union. This idea that when antebellum Americans referred to Union they meant something that both included and transcended the nation-state is of critical importance.10

It is to similar ideas that historian Paul Nagel appealed in describing Union as “a confused and apprehensive America’s answer to the questions of order and security, purpose and achievement, glory and honor.” Nagel identified several overlapping and conflicting definitions of Union Americans debated until the Civil War. Some believed it to have little meaning beyond the polity. Others believed the Union existed more in spirit than anything else, and still others believed that the Union embodied a national mission and common destiny. Nagel also argued that Americans generally perceived the prospect of disunion as a grave threat to established social order. Debates about Union and disunion, Nagel argued, “stemmed not from uncertainty whether Union could in fact survive, but from the question as to how Union should survive.” These debates dealt not only with the proper relationship between states and the federal government, but with questions as the nature of the American Union itself. More recently, Elizabeth Varon has identified disunion as the overriding political concern of the antebellum period. The rhetorical device of disunion, Varon argues, “contained, and stimulated, [American] fears of extreme political factionalism, tyranny, regionalism, economic decline, foreign intervention, class conflict, gender disorder, racial strife, widespread violence and anarchy, and civil war.” As the end of the cherished Union, disunion posed grave political and social dangers in the antebellum mind. Much of antebellum politics, therefore, centered on avoiding disunion.11

10 Kersh, Dreams of a More Perfect Union, 2 – 6, 10, 12.  
11 Nagel, One Nation Indivisible, 9, 279; Varon, Disunion!, 1.
So important was the need to prevent disunion, Peter Knupfer has argued, that antebellum and early national politics employed compromise as a means of avoiding disunion and fostering national unity. Knupfer specifically identified an antebellum “constitutional unionism” dedicated to compromise as the hallmark of political moderates. Compromise, he argued, “was the expected outcome of republican political action: the reconciliation of principles and interests.” Secession and disunion, on this view at least, occurred in a time and place when such reconciliation could no longer occur. Importantly, Knupfer considered compromise itself, alongside political moderation more generally, a critical component of American political thought within the context of the sectional controversy of the antebellum period. These discussions about the nature of the Union and the place of compromise within Unionist thought, however, form only one part of larger conversations on the roots of the Civil War.12

Within these conversations, the political-cultural implications of slavery plaed a dominant role. Slavery lay at the core of the disputes that spurred the South’s secession in 1860 and 1861, but it also proved foundational to many earlier disputes that did not result in secession. John Ashworth in *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics* attributed the coming of the Civil War to black resistance to slavery, and portrayed the conflict between North and South as one between conflicting labor systems. According to Ashworth, “The values generated by each labor system, by each set of relations of production, proved increasingly difficult and finally impossible to reconcile.” For Ashworth, the decision to secede was intimately connected to the material interest of the slaveholding class in the perpetuation of slavery. James L. Huston has also placed material interests at the center of secession, but unlike Ashworth, does not emphasize the role of slave resistance. Huston instead focuses on southern slaveholders’ immediate concern with the

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12 Peter Knupfer, *The Union as it is: Constitutional Unionism and Sectional Compromise, 1787 – 1861* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), x.
right to hold property in slaves. Material interpretations of the beginning of the Civil War are not universally excepted, however.¹³

William W. Freehling, for example, has acknowledged the centrality of slavery as most modern scholars do, but argues extensively that trying to abstract the history of secession makes history too impersonal. According to Freehling, “widening southern divisions between regions, races, and classes frustrated attempts to forge a single civilization.” During the Secession Crisis, “personal emotions exploded past impersonal drives, often uniting otherwise divided southern whites in rage against Yankees’ condemnations.” Freehling’s view of secession attributed great importance to cultural and political drivers beyond the immediate interest in slavery. Like Eric Walther, he placed great importance on the influence of radical southern nationalist “fire-eaters.” Michael Holt, however, has relocated the question from why secession occurred, to why it did not occur at any other time. Choosing not to focus on sectional politics for their own sake, Holt attributed great importance to the collapse of the Second Party System. Holt contended that this system’s breakdown precipitated a crisis of republicanism in the South. In his view, “sectional extremism flourished in the Deep South precisely because no new framework of two-party competition had appeared there.” Secession is here almost entirely a political question.¹⁴

Scholars of the Lower South, including Kenneth Greenberg, Lacy Ford, Stephanie McCurry, Manisha Sinha, and Christopher Olsen, have placed the threat to slavery at the center of that region’s secession. They acknowledge, however, that these areas also had their own local political cultures that proved highly influential and resilient. Because the Upper South states of

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Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas did not secede until much later, it is inadvisable to suppose that voters there subscribed to congruent political values. Daniel W. Crofts, the preeminent scholar of Upper South secession, has emphasized the moderate tendencies of Upper South Unionists, arguing “Moderates both North and South outnumbered the antagonistic minorities in each section who fed on each other, gradually eroding the center. An undoubted majority of Americans preferred that the center hold and expected it to do so.” While much substantial scholarship on the secession of the Upper South exists, very little of it aims to describe local attitudes towards the concept of Union. If slavery lay at the center of mid-nineteenth century political disputes, and if this debate ultimately resulted in the end of the Union at different times in different places, it seems improbable that the Union and its dissolution meant the same thing throughout the South.15

Within discussions of secession in the Upper South, Virginia’s secession itself remains a topic of ongoing conversation. As a subject of scholarly research, Virginia’s secession has received comparatively little attention. One of the earliest studies, Henry Shanks’s 1934 book *The Secession Movement in Virginia*, remains important by virtue of the synthesis it provides for understanding the Commonwealth’s antebellum politics. Shanks concluded that “Virginia’s leaders were guided by economic and social interests as well as by the traditions and bonds which held their state to the respective sections.” Insofar as Shanks was concerned, Virginians opted to secede after “radicals had convinced the majority of her people that their interests were

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more closely connected with those of the South than with those of the North.” Shanks’s accounting of Virginia’s secession is predominantly a general survey of the political, economic, and social landscape of the state; the idea of the Union itself does not figure in his analysis to any great extent.\(^\text{16}\)

The most recent scholarship on Virginia’s secession, however, has treated the topic with greater nuance. Daniel W. Crofts, for example, has argued that Virginia, in spite of becoming more like the rest of the nation, seceded when it did because secessionists successfully exaggerated the state’s connections with the South. Secession forms only an epilogue to William G. Shade’s \textit{Democratizing the Old Dominion}, which focuses on the Second Party system. Centering his analysis on political liberalization, Shade considered Virginia’s secession an outgrowth of the same liberalizing impulses that compelled the state’s political class to adopt the white basis in 1851. William A. Link, however, discussed Virginia’s secession as the dominant theme of \textit{Roots of Secession}. Link specifically tied Virginia’s secession to the politics of slavery, and even more specifically to the politics underlying master-slave relations. Unlike previous studies Link attributes great significance to Virginia’s dynamic political culture in explaining the Commonwealth’s comparatively late secession. Nonetheless, \textit{Roots of Secession} was intended to be a state-level analysis, and thus does not detail all of the complexities that produced secessionist sentiment in various sections of the state.\(^\text{17}\)

Among these sections, the Shenandoah Valley has received its share of study, both published and unpublished. Most recently, Edward Ayers’s \textit{In the Presence of Mine Enemies

\(^\text{16}\) Shanks, \textit{The Secession Movement in Virginia}, 1, 213

specifically discussed developments in Augusta county that shifted its citizens’ loyalty from Union to secession. In discussing the origins of secession, Ayers focused specifically on slavery’s importance in this region rather than the political principles that underlay local commitments to the Union. Andrew Torget, meanwhile, has argued that secession in the Upper Valley counties of Augusta, Rockbridge, and Rockingham occurred as a response to threats against slavery. Other unpublished works have approached the subject from economic and social standpoints, as well as through the analytic lens of nationalism. Few, if any, have dealt in detail with local attitudes towards the concept of Union as something that had meaning over and above American nationality.¹⁸

Specifically, understanding Unionism as a political culture helps identify the origins of the shift to secessionism in Virginia’s Valley counties. The concept of political culture itself, however, has numerous definitions. Historian Keith Michael Baker described it as “the set of discourses and practices characterizing [politics] in any given community,” whereas political scientist Gabriel Almond characterized it as “a particular pattern of orientations to political action.” Daniel Elazar also defined it as “the particular pattern of orientation to political action in which each political system is embedded.” More recently, Christopher Olsen prefaced his study of secession in Mississippi by identifying political culture as “attitudes about politics and more tangible aspects of the political system.” The operating definition of political culture in this study

deviates somewhat from these descriptions. Political culture, for my purposes, refers to the value or values under which people participate in a political system. It is the set of political ideas shared within a community regarding the nature of politics and of the political community. Defining political culture in this manner avoids eliding or synthesizing diverse political viewpoints in ways that imply that everyone agreed about everything. Unlike much of the Lower South, Virginia and the Valley exhibited a robust two-party system well into the late antebellum period. Democrats and Whigs disagreed with one another on political questions of every type, but in the Valley, they did so in the context of a common political culture that emphasized the unity of the political community. Different parties and different people took diverging views on the same issues, but they did so in reference to the same fundamental value: Union.19

Because Unionism most fundamentally tied the subjects of this study together, I describe them here as Valley Unionists. I chose this term for the same reason I employ political culture as a framework. This term, while imperfect, lessens the impression that the people it describes constituted the entirety of Valley society. As Brent Tarter has noted, the world of antebellum Virginia politics was exclusively white and overwhelmingly male. While white women in Virginia did participate in the political activities of the anti-liquor and colonization movements, rarely did they directly participate in the male universe of electoral and Unionist politics. Some recorded their private thoughts in their journals and in their letters, and where possible, I have included them in this narrative. Large parts of Valley society, however, remain almost completely beyond the historian’s reach in terms of their view of the Union and the sectional crisis. Slaves, who constituted roughly a fifth of the region’s population by the time of the Civil

War, left behind few if any descriptions of their perceptions of political communities. The opinions of the area’s small free black population are similarly difficult to identify.  

This definition is also largely a generational one. Many, though by no means all, of the Valley Unionists who took part in these debates had reached maturity before the sectional crises of the 1850s. Virginia men of the younger generation, as Peter Carmichael has observed, often exhibited a much stronger tendency towards secessionism. Determining the values that guided the participants in the secession debates in their decisions, however, is more feasible by emphasizing the role of politicians and newspaper editors. As Michael F. Holt has argued, regardless of the agency of members of other layers of society, it was these men who were uniquely placed to persuade the public and take public action. While the term as I employ it here might suggest greater uniformity of background and opinion than appropriate, I use it because it most precisely locates the political values held most in common across as many sections of Valley society as possible.

Analyzing the political cultural values of these Valley Unionists reveals the importance conceptions of Union had in the decision to secede. Local views of the Union that emphasized the common values of white northerners and southerners help explain what Valley Unionists needed to persuade them of secession’s utility. Their position along cross-cutting borderlands, however, made this question exceptionally poignant. In defending the Union, Valley Unionists called upon political values that could be found across the nation, but their position on these particular borderlands made sectional politics particularly poignant. Conflicting ties to North and

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South, east and west, meant that any dissolution of political bonds threatened to make foreigners out of those who had once been neighbors. Taken together, these political values placed in this borderland context help explain why Valley Unionists agreed to secession when they did. As Aaron Astor has noted, this type of conservative Unionism suspicious of both extremes was not uncommon in the antebellum border regions. Borderland perspectives lend new and important meaning to the secession of certain regions of the Upper South. Unionism in this region was far from superficial; in referring to Union, Valley Unionists conjured images of a Revolutionary past that united North and South in the cause of republican government. They compared it to a bond between brothers, and a sacred temple. Such commitments do not break lightly. Valley Unionists chose to secede when they did not only because Lincoln’s proclamation inspired fears of executive tyranny, but because it suggested something about the virtue of the northern public. If the South could no longer rely upon virtuous white northerners to stand up for southern interests, then no meaningful Union could have or ought to have existed. Valley secessionism was therefore the natural byproduct of a form of antebellum Unionism that included aspects of both state and national-level politics.  

22 William W. Freehling has also noted the importance of the Valley’s position on cross-cutting borderlands in Virginia’s politics in *Road to Disunion*, 1:165 – 166; For other borderland studies of the Civil War era, see: Aaron Astor, *Rebels on the Border*, 8; Barbara Jeanne Fields, *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground: Maryland During the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Brian Dallas McKnight, *Contested Borderland: The Civil War in Appalachian Kentucky and Virginia* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2006).
Chapter I. “A Position of Entire Independence:” Virginia’s Political Borderland

More than a decade before the state’s secession in 1861, Virginia experienced two sectional crises involving the nature of political communities. First, Virginia’s constitutional settlement of the 1830s began to show signs of strain by the 1840s. The mixed-basis system of representation, largely a compromise measure to satiate wealthy eastern counties with high concentrations of slaves, no longer satisfied reformers in the western counties. Many in western Virginia, where populations were growing and showing few signs of stopping, resented the disproportionate influence of the eastern counties with smaller white populations. From the west also came clamor for other reforms, including placing more power in the hands of the governor, providing public education to all citizens, and the institution of popular elections for judges and local government officers. By 1850, the state legislature had agreed to call a convention to settle these questions. When the convention finally met in 1851, it pitted the state’s sections against one another. In the east, traditionalist planters argued in favor of keeping the mixed-basis system so as to preserve government by the “majority of interests.” In the west, farmers, lawyers, and other professionals in counties such as Augusta and Rockbridge argued that political power properly belonged equally to all white male citizens. At this convention, issues of sectionalism and Union closely intertwined with differences of opinion on questions of governance. Debates on these issues in these counties evince distinct concerns not just with the reform of the state constitution, but with the preservation of political union within the state. What began as a question of representational basis soon transformed into a debate regarding whether the diverging interests and sentiments of eastern and western Virginia could form a unified political community.¹

¹ William G. Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, 269 – 283.
Discussion of the representational basis question dominated the convention. Those in favor of constitutional reform argued “that the fundamental principle of democratic government was majority rule. Society had been formed to protect not only property but also life and liberty; the right to own property was a concession from society.” To the reform faction, which predominated in the west, republican government had to be founded on the will of the majority. Debates regarding the proper definition of majoritarianism came to define many of the intersectional disputes within Virginia at that time. Neither side of the basis debate made any claim to oppose the principle of majoritarian rule. Disagreement did arise, however, relative to who truly constituted the Commonwealth’s political majority, and how the majority ought to govern. Within these debates, convention delegates expressed important political cultural views on how governments and statesmen ought to relate to the societies they managed.²

Existing scholarship on Virginia’s 1851 convention is quite limited. Francis P. Gaines Jr.’s unpublished 1950 dissertation studied it mainly as an example of sectionalism, as the political disputes at this convention generally took on a sectional character. William Freehling’s treatment of the convention in Road to Disunion dealt with it mainly as a conflict over slavery and ideology in Virginia politics. Brent Tarter’s more recent study, meanwhile, discussed the convention mainly within the context of a broader struggle for democratization. William Shade, however, placed this sectionalism within the context of the national trend towards democratization and liberalization. Neither study offers a fully persuasive account of the political values Virginians associated with the unity of their state, a unity that the sectional debates at this convention threatened. Investigation of Unionism in the Valley reveals that Valley Unionists believed certain bonds of interest and values had to exist to preserve a political community. They

² Gaines, Jr., “The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850-51;” Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, 276.
viewed the unity of their state as resting on principles similar to those on which they based the unity of their nation.\(^3\)

While these sectional controversies within Virginia stirred controversy in their own right, events on the national stage also captured much public attention. By the early 1850s, Virginia also found itself embroiled in the sectional conflict that that had been festering at least since the Jackson administration, and which threatened to tear the nation apart in 1850 and 1851. Northern and southern states disputed the status of slavery in the western territories, and the power of the federal government to compel free states to return fugitive slaves. Tempers then flared over disputes on federal policy towards territory recently acquired from Mexico under the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Proslavery southern nationalists fought with antislavery factions in the North over the status of slavery in these lands, particularly after the California territory petitioned for statehood under a constitution prohibiting slavery. This debate became closely tied to other disputes on the legality of the slave trade in the nation’s capital, and the perceived inadequacy of exiting fugitive slave statutes. In the midst of these political fights, Southern states sent delegates to Nashville to discuss the possibility of the slave states leaving the Union. The Nashville Convention, which marked one of the earliest steps toward coordinated southern secession, ultimately adjourned without taking any decisive action.

Caught in the middle were states such as Virginia, which while strongly supportive of the rights of slaveholders, were politically far too moderate to rush into secession at that stage. Virginia’s internal heterogeneity and close ties with nearby free states, particularly Pennsylvania and Ohio, made the possibility of secession far more complex than for other southern states. While the state had its moderates, Virginia had its own share of advocates of southern rights; the

Commonwealth’s two senators, James M. Mason and Robert M. T. Hunter, together with David Rice Atchison of Missouri and Andrew P. Butler of South Carolina formed the so-called “F Street Mess,” a cabal of senators opposed to federal restrictions on slavery in the territories. The southern nationalist element within Virginia proved powerful enough that the state’s legislature eventually approved the dispatch of delegates to Nashville.⁴

Unlike Virginia’s contemporaneous constitutional crisis, the national Crisis of 1850 has generated a great deal of scholarship. Regardless of approach, historians recognize that the Crisis of 1850 resulted from the complex interplay of sectional and partisan political forces. They differ mainly in their emphases. John Ashworth emphasized slave resistance, which necessitated the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, as the driving force behind the continued need to produce compromises. James McPherson, Michael Holt, and Sean Wilentz directed most of their attention to the partisan political dynamics. William Freehling, however, specifically argued that the 1850 crisis was more important for the divisions it created within the South itself than for its effects on the nation. There exists wide agreement that the resulting compromise came about due to the agreements of moderates in both sections against more ideologically extreme elements.

While the Crisis of 1850 has drawn much attention as an exercise in national-level sectionalism, it has less often served as a vehicle to examine state or local-level attitudes. Scholarship also generally has not addressed the question of what the Crisis reveals about the nature of the Union itself. Examining the viewpoints of Unionists in this one segment of the Shenandoah Valley reveals a view of the Union very much in accord with perceptions of state and local unity.⁵

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Unionists in these counties stood in an important middling position, one from which they believed they could claim the status of political mediators. On the cross cutting fault-lines that divided North from South, and the eastern counties from the western, the Valley found itself on not just a geographic, but a political middle ground. Valley Unionists played an important role at the 1851 Reform Convention as a force in favor of the new constitution, and saw themselves as a mediating force between the eastern plantations and the western yeomen. Similarly, the Valley lay along a critical route between the slave states of the Lower South, and the free states of the North. With ties to either side of these two conflicts the Valley sat on cross-cutting borderlands. Within this borderland emerged a political culture of Union that emphasized the importance of sectional harmony, whether the warring sections were within the state or within the Union. This political culture expected and required citizens and statesmen to uphold certain values in order for such a Union to hold together. Under this culture, government had to be run in the interest of the Union, not just a particular set of interests. This culture emphasized qualities such as “disinterestedness” and compromise, qualities that promoted the harmony of sectional Union by protecting pluralistic interests.6

The questions Virginians dealt with in the 1850s were closely connected to broader concerns of social and political harmony that colored much of southern and broader American political culture of the antebellum period. There existed within social and political thought a set of ideas historians have subsumed under the label of republicanism. Writ large, republican ideology as a family of ideas emphasized the importance of a free commonwealth governed by independent freeholders. Republicanism combined a belief in the need for a robust system of social order coupled with an almost paranoid fear of concentrated power, whether such power came in the form of government or private interest. According to Gordon S. Wood, “The

6 Lesperance, “Fighting for the Union;” Gaines, Jr., “The Virginia Constitutional Convention of 1850-51.”
sacrifice of individual interests to the greater good of the whole formed the essence of republicanism and comprehended for Americans the idealistic goal of their Revolution.” In a republican society, individual interests had to be subsumed to the benefit of the commonwealth. The public interest was an interest all its own; it was not the mere coagulation of individual interests, but “an entity in itself, prior to and distinct from the various private interests of groups and individuals.” Republicanism also emphasized the importance of the moral caliber of the citizenry, and the entrenchment of private interest against the body politic was itself a form of moral depravity. According to historian J. William Harris, “Republicans thought that men were always liable to corruption and decadence and that liberty was always threatened by the loss of equipoise.” The republican political project, Harris argued, depended on balancing out the human propensity for corruption.7

Historians still dispute the extent to which the brand of republican thought Wood identified guided American politics during the early republic, and the importance of these ideas to the antebellum era remains even less clear. Nonetheless, generalized notions of a need for a free society to balance individual liberty with the needs of the commonwealth were still readily apparent in the political thought and rhetoric of the antebellum south. Republican ideals to a great extent influenced the framing of Virginia’s 1830 Constitution, which at the time some thought a major reform.8

From the end of the Revolution through the middle of the nineteenth century, however, political values evolved. Republicanism increasingly had to share room in the public mind with

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the liberal values brought on alongside the market revolution. Over time, the individualistic and competitive politics of liberalism began to compete with and even overtake traditional republicanism. Politics, which had once been a highly personal affair in which political parties did not organize large numbers of voters, became increasingly organized in the nineteenth century. According to Joyce O. Appleby, “the once-tight braid of social, economic, and political authority came untwined, leaving the separate strands exposed and weakened.” Organized political parties began to emerge, and large numbers of voters came to participate in mass politics as restrictions on the franchise loosened. During the era of Jefferson and Jackson, the magisterial and orderly political world of the founding generation gradually gave way to a politics of personal participation.9

American politics after liberalization became generally more individualized. The political world became less a realm in which the commonwealth required the subjugation of all individual interests, and more a forum in which individuals could expect the consideration of their interests. As historian Charles Sellers observed, “The inherent dynamic was toward competition between two heterogeneous coalitions or parties, and this two-party system came to encompass every kind of state and local rivalry and division.” These parties contained within themselves rival elements, which further complicated the liberal political landscape. With the rise of the Second Party System in the 1820s and 1830s, voters and public figures became less suspicious of political parties, which prior generations had viewed with suspicion as engines of factionalism. Within this context, Virginia’s sectional and constitutional controversies took their form.10

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Politics in early Virginia before liberalization was the realm of the “gentleman freeholder.” Voters made their views known at the polls, but political affairs remained in the hands of the local gentry who dominated the county courts and who comprised the ranks of most of the state’s legislators. Smallholders could choose their representatives on Election Day, but it remained generally understood that politics was best left to the upper orders of society. By the late 1820s, Virginians came to feel the full force of political liberalization. Voters in the western counties protested the representational formula contained in the 1776 constitution that gave the east power at the expense of the west. The mixed basis system that westerners lobbied against in 1850 came out of the 1830 constitutional convention intended to address western grievances in the first instance. By the 1840s, many viewed the 1830 Constitution with suspicion, and believed it unfair and anti-republican. Political parties had also come to take clearer form. Shade writes, “As the social order hypothesized by republican ideologues failed to materialize, voluntary associations filled the functional void. These extraconstitutional structures provided a mechanism for the translation of the will of the majority expressed through periodic elections into the basis for legitimate government between elections without the necessity of separate referenda on each and every issue.” Thus the wave of democratization that characterized the Jacksonian era made itself known in Virginia through the rise of political liberalism.¹¹

Like most of the country, the Upper South, and with it Virginia, developed organized political parties. According to Shade, “In contrast to their republican predecessors, these democratic politicians were more willing to claim publicly that they represented the self-interest of their constituents.” This political climate was one in which the individual voter came to see himself as both a stakeholder and an active participant. Though Democrats held sway in most of

the state, the Whig maintained a robust opposition movement, especially in Augusta and Rockbridge. The rise of liberal political values in Virginia lent new acceptability to individual interests and political parties as acceptable agents of political activity.\textsuperscript{12}

This particular section of the Valley exhibited political ideas and practices consistent with certain republican and liberal values. They accepted the existence of competing influences vying for control of the government, but remained dedicated to the idea of a common good. While seemingly contradictory, Harry Watson points out that the republicanism of the Second Party System retained similar language despite the substance of politics having changed. Valley arguments in favor of white basis representation proposed both that such an arrangement would be in the interest of the west, but also that it was in the best interest of the entire Commonwealth. Local rhetoric suggested republican thought, but their actions sometimes indicated an inclination towards liberalism, as the white basis certainly would have benefitted them. They also wrestled with issues such as the power of the governor and the tenure of judges, political debates that matched the republican politics of ordered liberty and trusteeship against the liberal values of individual interest and partisan identity. In a certain sense, they thought like republicans, but behaved like liberals.\textsuperscript{13}

Understanding the Valley’s political culture thus requires understanding local views of the nature of political communities. During the late antebellum period, many in the Upper Valley struggled to work out the best way to mediate competing interests within society. Much of the period’s political discourse thus dealt with the concept of interest, and its proper application to political affairs. Virginians of this period lived in an age when “interest” referred both to the common good of a civil society, and to the self-invested, atomized concerns of individuals and

\textsuperscript{12} Sellers, \textit{The Market Revolution}, 38; Shade, \textit{Democratizing the Old Dominion} 9, 109.  
\textsuperscript{13} Watson, \textit{Liberty and Power}, 250 – 252.
Editorialists and polemicists generally praised the former and decried the latter, but in a world that complicated ideals of the common good, these definitions competed with one another in the context of debates about constitutional reform and the values associated with good statesmanship and citizenship. Writers and orators of the period actually praised politicians who evinced the values of “disinterestedness” and denounced “party spirit,” but also called upon voters to be loyal to their political parties. How these conflicting ideals related to one another figured prominently in the Valley’s political culture of union. Both the constitutional reform debates and the controversy surrounding the 1850 crisis reveal that to Valley Unionists, the health of a political community rested on certain shared interests and values.

From the very beginning of the debate surrounding the 1851 constitution, Valley representatives claimed for themselves the middle ground between the interests of east and west. Controversy arose as soon as the General Assembly passed the bill to call the convention because the bill apportioned the delegates’ seats based on a mixed basis formula. To voters in the transmontane western section of the state – which now constitutes the state of West Virginia – this was unacceptable. Western voters demanded a convention apportioned on the white basis, or no convention at all. Valley representatives, despite considering themselves westerners, argued that even if the formulation was unfair, it was not worthwhile to scuttle all efforts at reform based on this disagreement. In this controversy between east and west, Cornelius C. Baldwin, editor of the Whig *Lexington Gazette* asserted for the Valley a mediating position. He believed that “Should the East go for [the convention bill]…and the trans-Alleghany country against it, its success will depend upon the support given to in in the Valley.” Baldwin clearly identified the Valley as both the political and geographic middle of the Commonwealth; sitting in between the mixed basis East and the hard-line reformers of the far West, Valley Unionists stood poised to
offer a compromise. “A White Basis Whig” of Augusta County wrote to Joseph Addison and Lyttleton Waddell’s Whig Staunton Spectator to argue that “there are great reforms which the people demand, and they are willing, in order to secure them, that the Basis question should be compromised.” He reasoned, “If the West and East are alike uncompromising, can we ever have a convention?” Reformers promoted numerous changes to the state constitution aside from the white basis. Though the basis held great significance, the Valley reformers did not wish sacrifice their other reform proposals in the name of the basis.

Others took the same position. “A Reform Man” also wrote to the Spectator, asking, “Is it not clear that the practical effect of the course of those who seem to have but one single idea (the white basis) on the subject of reform, is to keep us out of the Convention entirely? Do our representatives and those who act with them, expect the Eastern people tamely to surrender the power they hold?” In October 1850, the Waddells voiced grave fears that Virginia might split along sectional lines. “We are unwilling to sacrifice her past glories to a narrow spirit of sectional or party interest,” they wrote. Assuming a middle position, “A White Basis Whig” declared that “Neither of the great Divisions of the State should aim at a triumph over the other. Their interests are by no means incompatible.” The Valley reformers thus had certain objectives in mind, but were willing to compromise them in the name of expediency and harmony within the community. They saw themselves in between two extreme positions and believed that it fell to them to resolve the crisis.


Valley Unionists seized upon their position between the two extremes in the name of “disinterestedness,” referring to the ability to engage in politics without reference to individual preference, and thus the capacity to act on behalf of the common good. In May of 1851, the Gazette decreed that it was the Valley, rather than the Tidewater or the transmontane West, that was truly capable of approaching the representational basis question objectively. Baldwin argued that “the disinterested position of the Valley district with regard to the question of power enables her to act the part of an impartial umpire between the extreme Eastern and Western portions of the State.” Baldwin clearly placed the Valley at the political center in the reform debate. By asserting a disinterested position, the Gazette claimed for the Valley the moral authority to determine what solution would most benefit the Commonwealth, not just the western or eastern sections. Lexington politician James B. Dorman similarly asserted that Rockbridge stood in a disinterested position. On the white-basis issue, Dorman declared that “Upon this question [of the basis] moreover Rockbridge occupies a position of entire independence.” Rockbridge could stand independent, Dorman contended, because the county’s number of representatives would not change under any other representative system. Dorman asserted that “in standing up for the West as we have done, we have been influenced solely by the conviction that we occupy the true republican ground.” By staking a moral claim rather than proposing a power grab, Dorman and Baldwin framed the issue as one of principle. They took the position of republican statesmen standing on sound public morals for the good of the Commonwealth.16

Similarly, others expressed the view that the white basis served a greater common interest. A reader of the Gazette writing under the name of “A Rockbridge Voter” reminded his compatriots “that a Constitution is designed, not for the advantage of one party or one set of

people, or even for the present generation of people alone, but for the benefit of the whole people and their posterity.” The white basis may have served the interests of the growing population of western Virginia, but the people of the western counties rarely framed the issue in these terms. Western reformers argued for reform from the position that the white basis would benefit the whole state. Some local politicians espoused similar views. “[A]ll power is vested in the people” argued Augusta politician Thomas J. Michie. “[T]he object of good government is to secure to the community the largest amount of happiness and prosperity, by securing to each and every citizen the full enjoyment of all his rights.” Alexander H. H. Stuart, a Whig politician who later served as Secretary of the Interior under the Fillmore administration, specifically feared that any convention might fail if it could not adequately consider the interests of the whole. Stuart particularly feared that political interests would be atomized within legislative districts. “If all the members go there pledged to support the particular views of their constituencies,” he reasoned, “there can be no concession on either side, and consequently no compact.” Again, the argument was that the interest of the whole Commonwealth would be served by the white basis, not just the interest of one particular section. John Letcher, a Democratic member of the House of Delegates from Lexington, supported the white basis precisely because he believed the mixed basis harmed the interests of the whole. In Letcher’s view, “The effect of the mixed basis fairly and legitimately carried out, was not only to put the government of the State in the hands of the minority in opposition to the wishes of the overwhelming majority of the people – but it subjected that political majority of the State to the will of the political minority.” The idea that a political community had to be founded on some sense of common interest was thus well established within the Valley’s political vocabulary by the early 1850s.17

The Waddells put the matter in bolder terms. They believed “that if all [the Convention’s] members were free to act according to their convictions of duty to the whole people of Virginia, the White Basis would be adopted without delay.” German immigrant Frederick J. Alfred published a similar claim in the Democratic Vindicator when an anonymous letter-writer launched into criticism of the Virginia Messenger, another Staunton-based journal. The author suspected the Virginia Messenger’s editors of being involved with a nefarious scheme to undermine republicanism. “Who are these men?” The Vindicator demanded. “Are they the enlightened farmers and Merchants, and Mechanics of your country – the fathers of families, respected for their age, their experience. Their acquirements, their deep and permanent interest in the welfare and peace of our society?” The white basis was so obviously the correct representational formula in their eyes that only the influence of factionalism could derail it. The argument appeared not in the form of promoting the best interests of Augusta or even the Valley, but of the whole of the Commonwealth of Virginia.18

These editors did not show the greatest consistency on matters of public interest, however. At times they speculated that perhaps not just anyone could serve as a representative of the public interest. The Spectator cautioned that “A body of wealthy representatives in the State Legislature are not the men qualified to legislate for poor people, who form a large proportion of every community.” Even if the Waddells espoused the importance of electing men to work in the interest of the public, they did not express the greatest confidence that individual interest would

not seep its way into the process. Samuel Gillock’s Democratic *Valley Star* voiced similar concerns with the personal background of politicians. In 1851, the *Valley Star* promoted the Democratic slate of candidates to their readers on the grounds that these candidates were “farmers fully identified with you in feeling and interest.” This appeal also appears to have been calculated to resonate with a remnant Jeffersonian agrarian element of political culture. Among both Whigs and Democrats there thus existed some anxiety about the character of representatives. Alongside their avowed commitment to the common good, political commentators in the Valley also expressed worry about the specific interests to which representatives tied themselves. The injection of private interests against the common good raised republican fears of corruption.19

Concerns about the proper expression of values in politics appeared also in fears of disreputable politicians and demagogues. This particularly appears to have been the case within Augusta County. Alfred’s *Vindicator* asserted that a convention delegate should be “No time-serving sycophant or ranting demagogue” and “The man who schemes for his own election is not fit to be trusted.” The *Spectator* too cautioned against the influence of self-interested politicians. A society could not govern itself well under the influence of such men. The Waddells specifically attacked the demagogue’s fixation on his own preferment, asserting that “The demagogue ignores patriotism and deifies self.” The fear of demagogues was two-fold, and bears some similarity to older republican fears of tyranny. In one sense, demagoguery represented everything that could go wrong with a democratic political system. Rule by the unwashed mob could lead to tyranny at the hands of a skillful politician. In another sense, demagoguery stood as the precise opposite of what a statesman ought to be. A proper statesman, according to this

political culture, stood above his own narrow interests, or the interests of the mob which he sought to inspire. A statesman furthered the good of society even against the intentions of the voters. The Spectator declared that a good statesman “Having the interests of the people at heart he is ever ready to breast the strongest current of public sentiment when it threatens to sweep away the safeguards of popular liberty.” The good of the body politic, on this view, existed entirely apart from the will of the majority. According to this value system, politicians ought to act in the best interests of the voters whether the voters want them to or not. The whole, in this respect, is greater than its parts. Anxiety regarding demagogues represented the precarious compromises of the political culture of Union: the existence of interest in politics proved unavoidable, and the task of the citizenry was to maintain the proper balance between the interest of the whole and the preference of the individual.  

This wariness of interest in politics at least partially explains public pronouncements in Valley papers in opposition to political parties. To many in the Valley, parties simply operated as vehicles that served selfish interests. This fear of parties to some degree stemmed from the strength of the Whig party in the Upper Valley, which by 1850 started to show signs of weakness and had more or less collapsed by 1855. Anti-party rhetoric formed a hallmark of Whig rhetoric of the era, and was hardly unique to the Valley. This fear of parties stemmed from both a fear a traditional republican fear of factionalism, and anxiety about what could happen to the Commonwealth should its governance fall in the wrong hands. Contemporary writers described political parties in different terms depending on context. This greatly depended on the party loyalty of a particular writer – Whig writers tended to extoll the virtues of their own party while disparaging “party spirit” in the abstract. In February 1850, the Gazette attacked Virginia

Democrats for systematically removing Whig officeholders. To the editors, this was ample proof that Democrats only sought office to reap the spoils. Democrats too leveled the charge of spoilsmanship against their Whig foes.\(^{21}\)

Many viewed the concept of political parties in certain cases with mistrust. This was particularly the case when it came to local and state affairs. Baldwin’s *Gazette* in particular expressed consternation at the idea that partisan politics could or should seep its way into elections for local offices. In 1852, after the 1851 Constitution had allowed for the election of most local offices, an alarmed reader of the *Gazette* inquired, “Is yours to be the first of the Whig counties of the State, to raise the slogan of party? Are you prepared to take the responsibility of infusing this baleful element into our local elections[?]” While parties could be appropriate in certain contexts, Valley Unionists seemed to perceive party politics as something too unseemly to bring into local affairs. A group of citizens met at Natural Bridge in Rockbridge County to declare their refusal to support candidates nominated by political parties for local offices “involving as they do no political principle whatever.” The very notion of the importance of parties suggested that there could be a relevant interest aside from that of the common good. The *Spectator* offered a similar view, declaring that “Partialities and prejudices should alike be sacrificed and a conscientious regard to the interests of the County be taken as the guide in the assignment of the important offices.” In 1853, the *Spectator* again argued against the use of party loyalty as a criterion for candidacy for local office: “when [party spirit] is brought to bear upon offices which have no political relations whatever, and its influence is admitted into our most ordinary occupations it becomes dangerous and corrupting in its tendencies and practices.” The Whig community of the Valley, therefore, feared the influence of political factions within their own community. They acknowledged the importance of parties for certain purposes, but believed

\(^{21}\) *Lexington Gazette*, February 21, 1850.
that they had no place governing communities. As parties implicitly entrenched certain interests against the commonwealth, they represented a threat to republican values.22

The place of political parties within a republican polity was itself heavily contested. Many distinguished “parties” from “factions.” According to historian Joel Silbey, “Parties were supposed to be coalitions of like-minded men acting together on behalf of clearly articulated common goals. They were not engaged in politics simply to win office or heighten an individual’s status or power.” Factions, however, were groups of men who participated in the political process for their own gain. To Valley Unionists, one’s own faction was a party, while another man’s party was a faction. They saw disinterestedness within their own ranks, but unrestrained spoilsmsanship among their opponents. Valley Unionists therefore did not oppose political parties per se, but feared their potential to harm the public interest. Their political system accommodated a certain degree of organization, while retaining a republican skepticism of that organization. In later debates, parties emerged as conservators of the Union, provided that they were not sectional in character.23

This question of political character that cast suspicion on political parties manifested itself publicly in the debates at the state constitutional convention in Richmond. John Letcher and Hugh W. Sheffey, both delegates to the convention from a district that comprised the counties of Augusta, Highland, and Rockbridge, gave lengthy speeches on the convention floor arguing for white basis and attacking the mixed basis. Letcher in particular accused the eastern delegates of not acting in the interest of the whole Commonwealth. In his view, easterners “took themselves this majority, they adopted this arbitrary rule, and why did they adopt it? The answer

has been given in this debate. It is their ‘interest’ to retain the power they now hold, and they
adopted this rule for that reason.” Letcher did not simply make a negative case against action
from interest. He also positively asserted the need to govern in the interest of the commonwealth.
In addressing the purpose of calling the convention in the first place, Letcher asked “Is it not to
prepare a constitution for the people of Virginia? And, if it is, ought not the constitution to be
prepared for the whole people of Virginia, or at least a majority of the people of Virginia?”
Letcher believed that if Virginians were one people, then they ought to be governed as one
people. The great irony of Letcher’s speech on the white basis is that he defended majoritarian,
white basis rule by comparing it to the preservation of southern rights under the existing federal
constitution. That northerners, despite being a numerical majority, had not stamped out slavery
served as sufficient proof to Letcher that the white basis could still protect interests in property.24

Augusta politician Hugh W. Sheffey similarly believed that the strength and stability of
government rested in governing for the benefit of the whole. Sheffey argued vigorously against
the mixed basis as an aristocratic attack on republican liberty. Like Letcher, Sheffey believed
that if white Virginians were to be one people, their constitution ought to govern them as such.
Sheffey argued “that if [Virginians], as a people, be homogeneous, and possess identity of
interests, representation should be based as to give equal power to equal numbers of voters – I
wish to show that we may safely and properly adopt the suffrage basis.” To Sheffey, the whole
purpose of government lay in its tendency to protect the whole rather than specific interests;
government could allow that the weak “by might, by union, become strong to resist the ruthless
and the violent.” The convention floor speeches of the Upper Valley delegates demonstrate that
their political culture emphasized the importance of unity of interest in government.

24 Speech of John Letcher, esq. of Rockbridge, on the Basis Question: Delivered in Committee of the Whole
Convention (Richmond: Richies and Dunnvant, 1851), 5 – 6, 9, 31 – 32.
Government, according to this view, did not simply give the majority unlimited right to rule, but the right to rule in the interest of the greater good.\textsuperscript{25}

The basis debate also demonstrated the importance of a sense of common interests and values in holding a political union together. Newspaper editors and politicians in the western counties began to threaten to leave Virginia and form a new state if Virginia’s ruling class did not accede to western demands. None other than John Letcher staked this position on the floor of the convention itself. In his speech on the white basis, Letcher declared “If we [westerners] are united with a people of such character, and if we are to be the victims of their unjust claim to exercise power, because it is in their ‘interest’ to assert such claim, then there can be no common bond of union between us. There can be no common bond of union between people so diametrically opposite as I hold the people of Eastern and Western Virginia to be.” Sheffey made no similar declarations, but the idea of splitting off of Virginia gained new cultural and political currency at the 1851 Convention.\textsuperscript{26}

Letcher’s floor speech also illustrated the complex intersection of interest with public virtue. By questioning western Virginia’s association with “people of such character,” Letcher raised important contemporary concerns about the moral caliber of the citizenry. Gordon Wood has noted that public morals have had an important place in American political imagination because “A republic was such a delicate polity precisely because it demanded an extraordinary moral character in the people.” Though the political values of the mid-nineteenth century certainly differed from their antecedents in the early republic, the moral condition of the body politic had an important place in political discourse in the Upper Valley during this period.

\textsuperscript{25} Speech of Hugh W. Sheffey, Esq. of Augusta, in the Committee of the Whole on the Basis Question, Delivered in the Virginia Reform Convention on Tuesday, February 18, Wednesday, February 19, Thursday, February 29 (Richmond: R.H. Gallaher, 1851).

\textsuperscript{26} Speech of John Letcher, esq. of Rockbridge, on the Basis Question, 5 – 6.
nonetheless. Letcher inquired of his colleagues: “Do gentlemen believe that honor, justice, patriotism, candor and conscience, are stifled by interest? Are all the nobler and higher qualities that adorn and elevate the character of man, rooted out and destroyed, and the selfish and vicious qualities only left?” Letcher’s view of the unity of Virginia thus rested on a sense of shared values and moral conditions. If the people of western Virginia could not see the same values in the east that they valued in themselves, there could be no common bond between the sections. If there could be no common bond between the sections, there could be no Union of the sections, and if there could be no unity between the sections, there could be no commonwealth.27

Outside the convention proceedings in Richmond, at least one of the editors of the Valley papers began making similar pronouncements. Baldwin’s Gazette declared “It is for the East to say whether we remain one State, or whether the Blue Ridge of mountains is to sever us as a State, as it has hitherto done, in interest and feeling.” Drawing on the same arguments as Letcher, the Gazette rebutted eastern claims that the west would dominate the state should white basis supplant mixed basis, the Gazette argued “there is now an identity of interest between the Valley and the East, that is a safe protection to them, even should the West ever be disposed to take such advantage.” In the early 1850s, at least, many in the Upper Valley believed their polity could be safe because of this common interest. The state division threats of 1851 demonstrate that in the minds of Valley voters, common government required common interest. If there could be no interest common with the east, they wanted no part in a common government with them. This episode also shows that secession as a political weapon had some currency in the Valley at that time. That the political community in this part of Virginia could deploy departure from the state as a tool to demonstrate their dissatisfaction is quite telling. It means that for all of their

27 Speech of John Letcher, esq. of Rockbridge, on the Basis Question, 5 – 6; Wood, Creation of the American Republic, 68.
commitment to commonwealth and Union, the people of the Upper Valley could imagine circumstances under which separation from a greater political whole was not only justifiable, but perhaps prudent and beneficial. If the political system could not mediate competing sectional interests, then political union would cease to be viable.\(^\text{28}\)

The constitutional reform debates demonstrated how the political concepts of interest and public morals intersected with sectionalism, one of the greatest political sins of the age. Sectional feeling in different parts of the state, so it was said, led different regions to promote their own local interests above those of the commonwealth. This fear appeared almost as acutely with regards to local politics as it did in state and national politics. In an undated letter probably written in the 1840s, Robert S. Brooke, who represented Augusta County in the House of Delegates multiple times over the course of the 1830s and 1840s, wrote to an unknown acquaintance to address a political controversy stewing in Rockbridge. Augusta and Rockbridge had shared the same state senate district for some time, and for many years, the senator from this district had been a native of Augusta. In this letter, Brooke indicated that some in Rockbridge had grown weary of this state of affairs, and publicly expressed their displeasure. Brooke specifically addressed a notice published by General Charles Dorman in the *Spectator* to the effect that Rockbridge deserved to have one of their own in the state senate. In Brooke’s words, “the tendency of this sheet was such as I thought and felt it to have…appeal to the sectional feelings of Rockbridge in the sense that she had never had a Senator.” Furthermore, Brooke charged that Dorman intended this notice “to create a County feeling founded upon a sense of injustice.” The extent to which such anti-sectionalist rhetoric was applied in discussions of local politics is not clear. What is clear is that fears of sectionalism were not absolutely confined to

\(^{28}\) “The Basis Trouble Again,” *Lexington Gazette*, July 10, 1851; *Lexington Gazette*, January 31, 1851; *Speech of John Letcher, esq. of Rockbridge, on the Basis Question*. 39
discussions of national or even state politics. Local political culture frowned upon atomized political interests to that great a degree.\textsuperscript{29}

The political values that governed the Valley Unionists’ attitudes towards the constitutional reform debate also informed their view of the contemporaneous national sectional crisis in 1850 and 1851. The Valley papers decried sectionalism in national politics with more fervor than they did in state politics. Baldwin’s \textit{Gazette} feared that sectionalism would overrun the bonds that held North and South together. Baldwin worried that “Sectional feeling is becoming stronger and stronger every day and the citizens of the two geographical divisions of a great republic, who should dwell together in harmony like a band of brothers, are becoming embittered against each other as hostile enemies.” The “sectional feeling” so often decried when it manifested itself in state politics was just as great if not an even greater evil in national affairs. Maintaining the political community of the national Union required the persistence of certain shared interests and values.\textsuperscript{30}

Critically, the Valley Unionists perceived themselves as the middle players in a contest between extremists both in the North and in the South. While acknowledging the grievances of the Lower South, the Waddells asked, “Is there neither fanaticism nor faction, South? Have our wrongs reached the point, when disunion, instead of treason to the country and humanity, would be a virtue?” Fanaticism, they believed, existed in both sections. Unlike some southerners, the editors of the \textit{Spectator} did not identify it as a uniquely northern problem. Furthermore, they specifically addressed public character as an important basis for Union with the North, inquiring “Has the spirit of justice forsaken the masses at the North – is it ‘clean gone forever’?” After Congress banned the slave trade in the District of Columbia, the \textit{Spectator} determined “Did we

\textsuperscript{29} Robert S. Brooke, Papers of Robert S. Brooke, 1831 – 1863, MSS 38-137, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia Libraries.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Lexington Gazette}, January 31, 1850.
believe that the mass of the Northern people encouraged and sustained these men in their efforts, we would desire as ardently as any to be severed from all connexion with them.” On this view of Union, the temperament of the northern public, not the actions of their political leaders, was the relevant unit of analysis insofar as disunion was concerned. During the sectional crisis of the early 1850s, at least, the Waddells’ Spectator held to the traditional southern Unionist position: anti-southern, anti-slavery feeling in the North extended little beyond intriguing extremists. The bulk of the northern people remained conservative. In characterizing political or social views as “conservative,” Valley Unionists, like many Americans, had in mind a particular temperament. Conservatism at this time was less a coherent set of policy positions and more a way of approaching political action. Conservatism meant deliberation, caution, and moderation, and Valley Unionists placed it in opposition to fanaticism and radicalism. To Valley Unionists, a conservative was one who participated in politics in ways consistent with republican virtue.31

Augusta County voters reaffirmed some of these principles at a county-wide Union meeting held in March 1850 to address the question of whether Virginia should send delegates to the Nashville Convention. None of the Augusta papers recorded the size or partisan makeup of this meeting, but the Spectator reported that the Augusta Unionists adopted the proposed resolutions by a vote of more than ten to one. The officers at this meeting included Alexander H. H. Stuart and John B. Baldwin, as well Thomas J. Michie, who would later be associated with the Democratic Vindicator. Acknowledging themselves influenced by “the prejudices of the South,” the Augusta Unionists nonetheless entrusted the Union to the “patriotism and sober-minded and reflecting men of the North.” They believed that the solution to the sectional controversy rested with “the men of the Union, assembled in the councils of the Union - under

the Constitution of the Union.” Contrary to the opinions of “fanatics at the North, and factionists at the South,” they believed that “the Heart of the Nation is for the Union.” They placed no faith in the motivations of the Nashville Convention on the grounds that it did not meet under the auspices of the Constitution, and that it seemed too sectional in its character.32

The Spectator also published a set of minority resolutions. Mainly endorsed by Augusta Democrats, these resolutions were not passed, and attracted little support. Nonetheless, they illustrate the importance of Union to local political culture. This set of resolutions, unlike the majority, supported the Nashville Convention. Despite its support for this body, the minority delegates still professed their loyalty to the Union. The minority resolutions, unlike the majority, reads like a list of demands upon the North, presenting a list of conditions under which they could accept California’s admission as a free state. They expressed alarm at the “efforts which have been, and are now being made by our Northern brethren and their Representatives in Congress assembled, to abolish Slavery in the District of Columbia.” By drawing a distinction between their “Northern brethren” and “their representatives,” the minority delegates demonstrated that the safety of the Union in some sense rested with the character of the northern public. Though they disagreed about the precise solution to the sectional crisis, Augustans generally agreed that the shared public values between sections formed an important basis for the Union.33

Because they placed such importance on shared interests and shared values, Valley Unionists looked to compromise as the remedy for sectional ills. Compromise held an important place in local political culture because it served the interest of maintaining local autonomy while

33 “Union Meeting,” Staunton Spectator, March 27, 1850.
at the same time holding the Union together. It served as a realization of the republican ideal of common government. Compromise was the key, but had its limits. In discussions of the controversy surrounding the 1850 Compromise, contemporaries cast the dispute as a struggle between “interested” parties in either section of the Union. Virginia and the Valley they perceived as sitting in the unhappy, yet disinterested, middle. They grew anxious as compromise proposals in congress continued to fail. According to Baldwin’s *Gazette*: “[The Compromise’s] defeat has been accomplished by a singular combination of discordant spirits, by a union of extremes as wide apart as the poles.” The *Gazette* also insisted this was not a partisan issue: “On it we know no party bias, but are actuated by the motives ‘to preserve the Union if we can, if not, to preserve ourselves.’” The preservation of the Union sat above all other political concerns, and required that reasonable, conservative men come together to create a reasonable compromise.\(^3^4\)

This spirit of compromise held great currency throughout Valley politics in both parties. Gillock’s *Valley Star*, which had attacked earlier versions of the 1850 compromise as unfair to the South, eventually embraced it. In October of 1850, the editors staked their claim as the true moderates in the sectional crisis by invoking their position within a political borderland. The compromise, the *Valley Star* said, “has given satisfaction to all except the Northern and Southern ultras, who can not and will not be satisfied with anything less than a dissolution of the Union.” Like the Whig journals, the *Valley Star* positioned itself between two radicalisms, and postured as a conservative voice within a debate that appeared to be spinning out of control. The compromise principle also seems to have been important to the voting public. In August of 1851, Absalom Koiner, a Democratic politician from Staunton, wrote to John Letcher encouraging him to run for a seat in the United States House of Representatives on the grounds that his support for

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the compromise made him a viable candidate. Koiner believed “A candidate opposed to the compromise will not take well in the district.” In this region, compromise was important enough that there was some thought that opposition to it could be problematic.  

So important was compromise that the Valley Unionists expressed much relief when the resolutions constituting the Compromise of 1850 finally passed congress. Cornelius C. Baldwin believed that the 1850 Compromise came to be only by the efforts of the political middle. Congress produced the Compromise only “with votes of patriotic, union loving men of both the great political parties” over the objections of “miserable factionists of the North and of the South” and “men who regard as worthless all else save the realization of their own petty schemes of low sectional ambition.” The forces of compromise, Baldwin claimed, found themselves uncomfortably situated “between Northern fanaticism, on the one side, and Southern ultraism, on the other.” Only the conservative forces in the middle, unsullied by sectional passions, were capable of binding the Union together. Whatever platitudes of conservative nationalism Unionist editors pronounced, however, the question of Union or disunion remained an inescapably political one that assumed partisan characteristics.  

The Valley Unionists publicly expressed strong suspicions regarding party politics insofar as the Union was concerned. In practice, this nominally anti-party rhetoric functioned as an attack on members of the opposing party. During the sectional crisis of the early 1850s, some proposed the formation of a “Union Party” that would unite around preserving the Union. The Spectator argued against such a move on the grounds that it would make the Union dependent on political affairs. Such a party would splinter into factions based on other issues. The Waddells declared “we are unwilling to suspend the fate of the Union, unnecessarily, upon the success of a

35 “The Compromise,” Valley Star, October 3, 1850; Absalom Koiner to John Letcher, August 27, 1851, John Letcher Papers, Mss1L5684aFA2, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.
36 Lexington Gazette, September 19, 1850.
presidential canvass.” Much like local affairs, the Union was far too important to become the centerpiece of factional politics. The editors of the Valley Star voiced the same concern, attributing calls for a Union party to “Men of loose principles and impatient ambition” who sought the destruction of the Democratic Party. Valley Unionists disliked the prospect of the Union becoming a specifically partisan issue, attributing such calls to dishonest political intriguing.37

This did not mean, however, that Unionists did not drag the Union into partisan political fights. The Waddells explicitly blamed the Democrats for the failure of early versions of what eventually became the 1850 compromise. They observed that “in almost every state the Whigs are enlisted under the banner of the Union while the Democrats are in arms against the Compromise, and doing battle under the black flag of Secession and Disunion.” Valley Unionists evinced a strong concern about the dangers parties could pose if they came to act in their own interest rather than seek the common good. During the 1850 sectional crisis, and indeed, throughout the 1850s, Valley editors feared the influence of the partisan element might destroy the Union. This depended on the party affiliation of the particular editor, however; Democratic editors argued that Whigs were destroying the Union, while Whig editors cast the Democrats as the party of disunion. In the face of competing interests, there had to be some process by which Union-minded people could preserve their common bond, and compromise filled that role. “Madison,” writing in the Vindicator, took the same view, but instead lambasted the Whigs as the anti-compromise party as distinguished from the Democrats. He opined, “In no Northern State is the whig party the Union party upon the principles of the compromise.” The Whigs, supposedly, under the guise of the “no-party party,” sought the spoils of office at the expense of

37 “The Union Party Again,” Staunton Spectator, January 29, 1851; “A Party on the Basis of the Compromise,” Valley Star, December 1, 1853.
patriotic Americans. The reasoning was somewhat different, but the principle was the same: the issue of Union could not become the tool of designing men. If it did, the Valley Unionists feared the most calamitous of conceivable outcomes: disunion.38

Like many contemporaries across the United States, Whig Unionists in the Valley condemned disunion and those who advocated it. In the midst of the sectional crisis of the early 1850s, the Gazette lambasted southern radicals in the cotton states for their perceived disunionism. In fact, the Gazette used the word “disunionist” as a political slur against almost any public figure they sought to criticize. Democrats generally, and tidewater Democrats in particular, found themselves the target of this attack numerous times. The Spectator too raised the specter of disunion as a rhetorical cudgel with which to bludgeon Democrats and northerners. The Spectator particularly attacked a proposal for commercial non-intercourse with the North, which it condemned as a means for “the actual rupture of all the ties that keep us together.” Like many antebellum Americans, the Waddells thought of the Union in terms that both included and transcended immediate material interests. Democratic sources from the early 1850s are too sparse to conclude how widely Democrats used this attack, but fears of disunion do appear in the majority resolutions from the March 1850 Union Meeting, to which it seems at least some Democrats agreed. The minority resolutions, which appear to have been supported mainly by Democrats, also express anxiety about the possibility of a “dissolution of the Union.” The sectional debates of the early 1850s show to what extent many in the Valley maintained confidence in the strength of the Union. The events of the ensuing decade would gradually change their minds, but for the moment, disunion seemed unlikely.39

The congressional debates that precipitated the 1850 crisis, however, lent disunion new credibility, and raised new fears among the Valley Unionists. They began to question the strength of the shared interests and political values held across sections. In a July 4th address given a cornerstone ceremony at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, local judge John W. Brockenbrough issued a dire warning that foreshadowed the tumultuous sectional conflict that would engulf the nation ten years later. Speaking of the contemporary disputes that later produced the Compromise of 1850, Brockenbrough asserted that “Sectional parties, the bane of confederated states, have arisen; and now, in the mere wantonness of power, the dominant party in Congress seem fatally bent on forcing on the country measures deeply obnoxious, to the last degree insulting, to the minority.” Like Letcher, Brockenbrough also called into question the public virtues of his opponents, whom he characterized as “fanatics,” a not uncommon charge leveled against politicians of both parties in this region. In fact, the idea of common values held special importance to the continued harmony of a free state. According to Brockenbrough, “It were vain to deny that a fanatical majority in Congress may effectually subvert the Constitution while its forms may be studiously preserved. Its potency for good will then be destroyed, its efficacy for evil only will survive.” Maintaining the institutions of a constitutional republic alone could not preserve the union. A union with those of impeachable character, Brockenbrough seemed to say, was not a union worth preserving.40

Like Brockenbrough, none of the Augusta or Rockbridge papers advocated immediate separation during the sectional crisis of 1850 – 1851. They did, however, express grave doubts about how long the Union could be preserved in language quite similar Brockenbrough’s. Valley editors voiced uncertainty about how long they could remain in political union with men of

certain temperaments and political persuasions. These editors increasingly saw themselves beset on both sides by Free Soilers and abolitionists from the North and by fire-eater disunionists from the South. The Valley Unionists trusted neither of them. In November 1851, Baldwin’s *Gazette* announced that they could put their faith in neither the cotton South nor the North because both the “ultras of the South” and the “fanatics of the North” were working to destroy the 1850 compromise. Furthermore, the *Gazette* openly questioned the moral firmness of both northerners and southerners, believing them plagued by “blind delusion and fanaticism.” If extremists in both sections were to gain more power, the *Gazette* feared that the constitutional union would be no more.41

The Waddells viewed national politics similarly. In March 1850, they attributed any disunionist sentiment in the South to “a few wild politicians in their mad schemes.” They also expressed anxiety about the “fanatics” at work in both sections of the Union. They did not seriously fear a dissolution of the Union at this point. Others were certainly aware of Virginia and the Valley’s position in between two extremes. “All our danger,” a *Spectator* reader writing as “Hampden” argued, “has arisen from Northern aversion to slavery, on the one hand, and the towering pride of Southern chivalry on the other. But disunion can neither diminish the one nor appease the other.” They did not go as far as others did in his denunciations of his opponents’ public morality. Like many commentators of the age, though, they did not shrink from lambasting fanaticism where they saw it, for this directly related to the character of the political citizen.42

It was precisely this issue of the moral caliber of the citizenry that allowed the Valley Unionists to maintain their cooler heads and preserve the Union of their forefathers. Throughout

the sectional crisis of 1850 – 1851, and indeed throughout the late antebellum era, Valley Unionists expressed their assurances that the great majority of northerners could hold free soilers and abolitionists in check much as southerners had been able to hold the reins on the fire eaters. In August 1850, the Waddells declared “so long as the authorities and the more virtuous classes of the people at the North are with us, there can be nothing to fear.” To the Waddells, at least, the future of the Union rested on the continued interests and values of the North and South. So long as the South could rely on the conservative character of northern politics, there was no need for talk of disunion. Preserving the Union was a matter of utmost public concern. The Spectator said of the Union “we are unwilling to sacrifice her past glories to a narrow spirit of sectional or party interest.” Much like the contemporaneous intra-state political conflict, Valley commentators framed the debate on national sectionalism in terms of competing interests.43

In January of 1851, the Spectator openly feared that the Union itself might dissolve. In voicing this concern, the Spectator explicitly noted the Valley’s position on the literal geographic middle ground: “we would find ourselves inconveniently near the point of fracture… but we are inclined to the opinion that this country is strongest in the middle.” At around the same time, the Spectator also placed itself specifically in political middle as well as the geographic middle. As a Whig paper, the Spectator prided itself on being allegedly above petty politics, and open to compromise. In 1851, the paper promoted the idea that within the political arena, conservatism and radicalism should coexist to balance each other out. The Spectator argued that conservatism “would arrest the wheels of improvement,” but that radicalism “would soon break up the

43 “Fugitive Slave Law,” Staunton Spectator, October 9, 1850; Staunton Spectator, October 16, 1850; “Movements at the North,” Staunton Spectator, November 13, 1850.
foundations of society itself.” To some in the Valley, therefore, their position was one of a borderland, both in the geographic sense and a political sense. 44

Despite this fear of disunion, the possibility that it might one day be necessary lurked in the backs of the minds of those who thought about the issue. In September of 1850, the Spectator dismissed the idea that secession was necessary in the short term, but alluded to the possibility of an eventual necessity. The Spectator decreed “that no flag of sectional treason will ever float over these mountain battlements, till some holier cause than Texas inspires our devotion.” Clearly the editors did not believe that the issues Congress debated in the early 1850s merited the extreme measure of outright secession, but they did not discard secession outright; they viewed it as a measure of last resort. “When all has been done that can be done among brethren, and without success, we are prepared to rush into revolution.” Secession, no matter how repugnant, remained an option of last resort. They maintained it as an option, but only under the proper circumstances. The Valley Unionist concern in 1850 and 1851 was less opposition to disunion outright than it was concern regarding the proper basis for disunion. “Hampden,” writing to the Spectator, worried that the basis for disunion proposed at Nashville was far too narrow. He inquired to know the motivations for disunion: “Is it the increased value of slave property, or the promotion of the cotton interest? Is it to gratify the personal ambition of those who advocate disunion?” 45

Baldwin’s Gazette, while denouncing secession in the strongest of terms, nonetheless argued that secession might be justified “When the North, regardless of the rights of the South and her own plighted faith, repeals the Fugitive Slave Bill or obstructs its faithful execution, it is

time enough for Southern states, to assemble together, take councel with each other, deliberate upon the mode and measure or redress and weigh the value of this Union with injuries too heavy and grievous to bear.” The circumstances presented, the Gazette agreed, were far too narrow to merit any serious consideration of disunion. They contended the Nashville Convention was little more than the project of “Carolina fanatics” and disunionists demanding redress for “imaginary grievances.” Common government required common interest. If compromise could not temper competing private interests, then any Union, whether at the state or national level, would have to dissolve.46

The specific political questions that engaged Valley Unionists during the constitutional reform debates in 1850 and 1851 were distinct from those of the national sectional crisis that occurred around the same time, as well as those that gripped the nation on the eve of the Civil War. The core commonality that makes the reform debate relevant to the crisis of the late 1850s and early 1860s is one of political culture. The reform debates, like the sectional debates, dealt with the importance of interests in politics and the political and moral values needed to sustain a political community. Valley Unionists saw the similar problems plaguing both their state and their nation: the entrenchment of private interests and poor morals against the commonwealth. Just as the reform debate required consideration both of the interests of the commonwealth and of the outlying counties, the sectional debate of the same period required some means of compromising the interests both of the northern and southern states with the interests of the Union. These same basic principles of political culture guided the Valley through the 1850s. The Valley and the rest of the nation ducked the fundamental problems the Union faced with the Compromise of 1850, but the trials of the middle of the decade forced them to face the same core

problems. The mid-1850s would demonstrate how the Valley’s political culture of Union reacted to state and national level tensions during the rise of the Know Nothing movement, and with the founding of the Republican Party.
Chapter II. Nativism and Unionism in the Valley of Virginia: 1855 - 1856

On July 1, 1856, George Junkin, the President of Washington College in Lexington, delivered an address to the literary societies of Rutgers College in New Jersey. Junkin prepared this address “with the expectation of delivery within three days before two different audiences – one North, one South. It was designed,” Junkin wrote, “to feel the public pulse on the great public question.” Junkin believed that he could find an audience receptive to his message in both sections of the Union. Junkin told his audience that “The master idea in an American head is Union. The dominant feeling in every American heart is Union.” He would not hear of disunion, for “The American mind and heart cannot and will not discuss it. We are divided, yet ONE.” A Presbyterian minister, Junkin held to a providential view of a divinely-ordained American Union that would bring Christian morality and order to the western hemisphere. He did not despair for the Union even in the face of “the griping lust of avarice, and the lazy love of ease, and the rage of fanatical ignorance and stupidity.” Even against “the malignant plottings and schemings of corrupt president-making demagogues,” Junkin believed God would guide the American people to greatness. He did not believe the Union would be gripped by civil war, for according to Junkin, “the mighty CHRISTIAN PEOPLE will stay the sword, and say with one glad voice…‘Ye are brethren, marching on toward the conquest of the world for its glorious master.’” To Junkin, the Union was God’s tool to propagate the gospel, and did not believe that a divinely sanctioned American nation could fail.1

While few other Valley Unionists framed Unionism and the sectional controversy in quite the same terms as Junkin did, this address nonetheless captured some of the critical elements of

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Valley Unionism during the 1850s. Like Junkin, many Valley Unionists believed that the Union and common values tied Americans together. Junkin specifically identified these common values with protestant Christianity, which not all Valley Unionists did quite so explicitly. Also like many Valley Unionists, Junkin greatly feared moral degradation in national politics. Their great political concerns of the mid-1850s, therefore, to a great extent centered not just on the shared interests throughout the Union, but on these shared values.

Debates on these shared values in the context of the Valley’s political culture of Union occurred in discussions of both state and national politics during the early part of the 1850s. While national political crises continued through the middle of the decade, no state-level sectional issue in the 1850s captured Virginians’ public attention as strongly and for as long as the 1851 convention. The sectional tensions between east and west remained, but without any strife that demanded the immediate action of the Commonwealth’s statesmen, these tensions did not command public attention for any length of time. The disharmony of local interests remained, but with less to fight over, it produced little sustained political debate.

The importance of shared interest and values remained in Virginia’s state level politics even with few clear sectional quarrels. In 1854 and 1855, the nascent Know-Nothing movement, which organized itself as the American Party, expanded from its base in northern cities and made inroads into the South. The nativist Know-Nothings found a willing audience among southern Whigs disaffected from the northern wing of their own party, as well as some Democrats. The immigration issue tapped into Anglo-Protestant anxieties regarding Catholics as a means of uniting northern and southern conservatives around an issue distinct from slavery. Know-Nothings saw their party as the solution to the sectional trials of the day, as well as to the traditional republican fears regarding corruption and public virtue. In the American Party’s brief
passage on the stage of national politics, it failed to create a new national coalition. While the end of the Second Party System in Virginia adjusted partisan politics in the Valley, it did not meaningfully alter local political culture. Valley Unionists approached the issues the Know-Nothings raised through the prism of their political culture of Union.  

In scholarly terms, studying the Know-Nothing movement presents great challenges. The movement was highly secretive, and much knowledge about it has been passed down by its critics. Known-Nothing-ism throughout its brief existence also remained confined largely to the North. American Party candidates won elections in a few northern states, but never gained much sustained traction in the South. There thus exists comparatively little scholarly study on the American Party. Historians generally agree that the movement was predominantly a nativist one, and that it rose to prominence as a means of organizing opposition to the Democratic Party, thus filling the void left by the largely defunct Whig Party. Michael Holt argued that “the Know-Nothings benefited from preexisting apprehensions that republicanism was ailing, but they offered a different diagnosis of the debilitating disease and prescribed a different remedy to cure it.” He characterizes it as a version of American republicanism that identified the Catholic church as the enemy of free society, and points out that it drew much of its support from former Whigs. Sean Wilentz, likewise, identified the Know Nothings as essentially a vehicle for former Whigs to oppose the Democracy. While many historians have examined the Know-Nothings as a means of understanding antebellum politics, fewer have looked specifically at the South.

Despite the movement’s largely northern orientation, scholarly studies of Upper South Know-Nothings do exist. American Party organizations formed in some Upper South states such as Virginia, but it had few adherents in the South outside these middle and border regions. Many

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scholars examining the southern branch of the movement from a national perspective, however, have concluded that it was mainly a movement of disaffected Whigs that fractured because of an inability to agree on the slavery issue. W. Darrell Overdyke, in one of few general scholarly investigations of the southern Know-Nothings, cast them primarily as an anti-immigrant movement. He also specifically argued against the contention that the Know-Nothings constituted nothing more than a reorganized Whig Party, noting that Know-Nothing values also appealed to some Democrats. John David Bladek, in his analysis of Virginia’s 1855 gubernatorial election in which the Know-Nothings played an important role, concluded that southern Know-Nothings “would think of the United States as one entity, devoid of sectional issues and allied in a battle to prevent foreign influence over American political and social institutions.” Varon has also noted the close connection between the southern Know Nothings and the old Whig Party. Scholars generally agree that Know-Nothingism both North and South grew out of existing republican ideas about the nature of the American nation and American nationality.4

The precise roots and consequences of the Know-Nothing movement aside, they served as an outlet for many Valley Unionists who had no great desire to align with a Democratic Party they had spent the better part of their careers opposing. The Valley Know-Nothings, for purposes here, serve the interest of illuminating the ways in which local Unionists perceived themselves and others within their political community. Though other scholars have used republicanism to understand the Know-Nothings, studying their politics sheds light not just on republicanism but on the state of political affairs generally. Understanding the Valley Know-Nothings as something beyond a nativist movement, but as a means by which some Valley Unionists understood their

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4 Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South, 56; John David Bladek, “‘Virginia is Middle Ground:’ the Know Nothing Party and the Virginia Gubernatorial Election of 1855,” The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 83 (1975): 70; Varon, Disunion!, 258 – 259.
political world, puts Unionist ideas into clearer focus. Doing so, however, requires comprehending local reactions to political events outside of Virginia.

In broad perspective, the dynamics of American politics had adjusted in the early 1850s, but many of the fundamentals of the issues facing the nation had not. The 1850 Compromise that so rankled both northern abolitionists and southern fire-eaters did not hold as a lasting settlement. Congress had still left the status of slavery in vast swathes of the west uncertain, and other aspects of the compromise intended to hold the Union together had had the opposite effect. Northern resentment at being forced to police the “peculiar institution” of slavery by means of the federal Fugitive Slave Act led to the passage of several state “personal liberty laws” effectively abrogating the enforcement of the act within certain states. These acts in turn fueled southern anger at northern refusal to honor the free states’ commitment not to interfere with slavery where it already existed. Politicians North and South worked to ease the tensions, but the sectional divide had grown so deep that bridging it proved difficult.5

The decisive break came during the mid-1850s with Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act. This proposal to introduce the popular sovereignty principle into the Kansas and Nebraska territories only exacerbated the sectional politics that had made the 1850 Compromise necessary. The popular sovereignty principle angered both supporters of slavery extension who insisted on the absolute permissibility of slavery in the territories, and free soilers who insisted on the absolute exclusion of slavery from the territories. The act’s unpopularity stemmed from the deeper problem of the lack of a political common ground on which North and South could meet.6

This lack of a common ground stifled attempts at creating a national coalition to challenge the seemingly ascendant Democratic Party. After the failure of the Know-Nothings to

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5 McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 120.
transcend the sectional divide, unified opposition to the Democratic Party began to take form in the North as a new Republican Party. Cobbled together from disparate movements including northern Whigs, anti-slavery Democrats, and remnants of the Know-Nothings and Free Soilers, this party based itself in large part on its position on slavery. The new Republican Party promoted itself as a moderate antislavery force dedicated to keeping slavery out of the western territories. Drawing its support almost exclusively from northern and western states, the party made few meaningful efforts to draw support from slave states. This party made no pretense of being willing to compromise on the issue of slavery in the territories.  

In this new partisan landscape, the Valley Unionists occupied an uneasy middle ground. Threatened on either side by southern radicals who seemed eager to break up the Union at the first sign of trouble, and northern abolitionists uncompromising in their opposition to slavery, Valley Unionists formed part of the ever shrinking faction of southern moderates during the mid-1850s. During the debates over nativism and the rise of the Republican Party, both Whigs and Democrats in Augusta and Rockbridge found themselves facing competing interests in different parts of the Union. Committed to preserving slavery in Virginia, the pro-compromise elements in the Valley urged caution. While less hostile to the cotton states than towards the North, the Valley Unionists feared the implications of a sectional party governing in its own interest. Alarmed by the internal fracturing of the Democratic Party on sectional lines and the coalescence of antislavery forces around the Republicans, the Valley tried to maintain governance in the interest of the Union.

As the late antebellum period dragged on, Valley Unionists came to see themselves on a political borderland between North and South. Valley Whigs, whose national party had all but


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ceased to exist by the middle of the decade, sensed their place in between two warring sections most acutely of all. With northern Whigs having abandoned their willingness to defend southern slavery, and with southern Democrats becoming increasingly prone to disunionism, these southern Whigs came to see themselves as the lone voice of reason on the sectional questions of the age. Democrats held this view far less consistently, if at all, before 1860. Valley Democrats, in their own imaginations even if not necessarily in reality, stood as members of the only truly national party remaining in the Union. Valley Democrats believed they still had common ground in all parts of the Union, and that their party and their party alone could cure the nation’s sectional ailments. Members of both parties, however, maintained faith in their political culture of Union. Both Whigs and Democrats in these counties stood opposed to sectionalism. Both believed in the fundamental goodness of the Union as a means of preserving the bonds between North and South, and both believed there could be some common interest and values between the two. Valley Whigs and Democrats also feared the prospect of disunion, but maintained secession as a political option in the event of the breaking of the bonds between the two sections. Whigs, however, believed they occupied a borderland that was both geographic and political. Democrats, who were more than willing to attack antislavery northern members of their party, demonstrated more reluctance to speak ill of southern radicals within their own party.

Valley politics in the mid-1850s fixated heavily on the activities and beliefs of political parties. Before 1854, the two major parties – the Democrats and the Whigs - battled each other for control of Virginia’s government while simultaneously denying that “party spirit” had any legitimate place in government. This reveals the complexity of the role of political parties in Valley political culture. Parties were both a blessing and a curse. Valley Unionists maintained the old republican fear of parties governing in their own selfish interests, but they were also
keenly aware of the benefits of parties. Paradoxically, parties were both agents of and guards against sectionalism. The Democrat-Whig divide proved far preferable to a North-South divide. As long as two political parties could compete in both sections of the Union, some sort of compromise remained possible. The Second Party system that had persisted since the Jackson era, however, deteriorated from the late 1840s through the mid-1850s as voters no longer believed in the efficacy of the two parties.

The precarious balance between the two parties that had already been dissolving finally collapsed when the controversy surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act entrenched sectional loyalties at the expense of the national parties. In the eyes of many northern Whigs, Douglas’s proposal to introduce popular sovereignty into western territories amounted to nothing less than the abrogation of the Missouri Compromise of 1820. In the interest of protecting slavery, southern Whigs led by Alexander Stephens of Georgia voted in favor of the measure. Having reached an impasse on the slavery question, the northern and southern Whigs ceased to be a unified party. The Kansas-Nebraska Act also threatened the unity of the Democratic Party. Antislavery northern Democrats such as David Wilmot and some Jacksonians such as Francis P. Blair increasingly came to see the Democratic Party as a sectional party operated for the interests of southern slaveholders. They no longer saw it as a truly national party, and many joined the new and growing Republican Party. By 1855, it was no longer apparent that there were two competing national political parties as section came to take precedence over party.8

This lack of clearly national parties disturbed the Valley Unionists. The idea of no national party system placed any hope of future compromise in jeopardy. An end to compromise, they believed, would lead to the entrenchment of sectional interests, and the dissolution of the Union. Even though Valley Unionists at various points condemned partisan sentiment, parties

brought with them a certain security. Politics without major national parties lacked the relative factional clarity of earlier years. Parties no longer functioned as guardrails against a unified North opposing a unified South. The mid-1850s in the Valley were a period of political transition as the Whig majority of voters in Augusta and Rockbridge tried in vain to fit into a new national opposition party to prevent sectional interests from dissolving the Union.

This state of flux in national affairs raised old Valley Unionist concerns about the relationship between parties, interest, and values. The collapse of the Whig party destabilized the old political order, and many questioned the role of parties in politics through the framework of local political culture. Troubled by the chaotic state of partisan uncertainty they found themselves in, the editors of the Whig *Spectator* observed that “Old parties are virtually broken up by internal dissensions, and new organizations are struggling to evolve themselves. Every patriot must ardently wish that the latter may prove national and conservative, and that all occasion for sectionalism and disunion may be prevented.” The *Spectator* also stated the matter rather more starkly, observing that “we find a tendency in political organization to assume a sectional and threatening aspect, or, at least, to discord and divisions.” The atomized interest of party, as seen in the sectional and constitutional debates of the earlier part of the decade, did not lend itself to harmony and was to be avoided. Summarizing a speech of Augusta Whig politician Alexander H. H. Stuart, the *Spectator* also noted that “So long as this party spirit is confined within its legitimate limits, it is productive of good, but unfortunately it often happens that party over-rides patriotism and men in their devotion to party, forget their duty to the country.” Some Valley Whigs thus explicitly expressed the old republican fear that political factionalism could dominate and even harm grander interests. This former organ of the Whig party thus found itself wondering aloud whether political parties served the best interests of the Union. Even in
defending some of the characteristics of parties, Valley Unionists appealed to their capacity to protect the Union.9

This fear was one that Valley commentators had expressed before, albeit in different forms. In 1855, a writer with the pseudonym “Reform” bemoaned the injection of partisan politics into seemingly everything. He asked, “Why are party considerations so much mixed up with every bill brought before Congress, or our State Assemblies, that the public weal is overlooked entirely, in action upon it, or at best, regarded as but secondary to more selfish interests?” The answer to this question, said Reform, was because suffrage was being extended to “foreigners…blind and misled instruments in the control of factionists and demagogues.” Some writers within the Spectator’s circle of influence thus openly acknowledged its fear that the rise in immigration would usher in an age of unchecked democracy.10

As in the earlier part of the decade, Valley Unionists in the middle of the 1850s perceived parties as both threats and as mediating forces. While Whig papers often decried party influence in politics, they also viewed them, paradoxically enough, as checks on sectionalism. In June 1854, the Gazette, by this point edited by Whig schoolteacher Alphonso Smith, warned of what would befall the nation if the political parties disintegrated. Smith admonished that “If the North as a section of the country sees fit to blot out all party lines, and seriously attempts to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law, then the Whigs and Democrats of the South will be forced to coalesce, that they may protect themselves, and their common rights and interests.” Parties, though they often received criticism as vehicles of interest, could also operate as a check on interest. Later that

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9 “State of Parties,” Staunton Spectator, June 20, 1855; “Mr. Stuart’s Speech,” Staunton Spectator, May 9, 1855.
year, the *Gazette* would criticize the Democrats for not doing enough to protect southern interests.\(^{11}\)

Valley Whigs acutely sensed the disintegration of the old party lines that had prevailed since the Jackson administration. The tensions that had brought about the Wilmot Proviso and necessitated the 1850 compromise proved so powerful that the old political parties could no longer sustain themselves. The staunchly Whig *Gazette* had by 1854 repudiated the northern remnant of the Whig party as hostile to slavery. Southern Whigs, Smith claimed, would do better to make common cause with men of their own section than to adhere to a party no longer representative of their interests. For southern Whigs to remain alongside northern Whigs “would be playing false to themselves, to think of acting in concert a moment longer with men, who have proved themselves renegades from principle and who are at open war with our institutions.” The northern Whigs, Smith said, were “renegades from principle,” no longer trustworthy as conservators of public order. The Waddells’ *Spectator* as well stood against its own “national” party during these years. In 1855, the *Spectator* boldly announced its allegiance to the South ahead of any political party. The Waddells announced that “If the Union is to be saved only at the expense of Southern rights, interests and honor, it is assuredly gone and that without remedy. No alliance with the Democratic party, or any other party, can save it.” By the middle of the 1850s, then, Valley Unionists voiced little confidence that statesmen could assemble a compromise capable of mending the sectional divide.\(^{12}\)

By the middle of the 1850s, the Whig party of the Valley had effectively cut itself off from its former compatriots in the North. This development in itself was of immense importance. The Valley Whigs had prided themselves on putting the general welfare over the individual...

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\(^{11}\) “Condition of Parties,” *Lexington Gazette*, June 29, 1854; Rittenburg, *Compelled to Fight*, 50; “Lexington Gazette,” *Chronicling America*.

interest, and compromise over party. By announcing a break with the northern Whigs, the organs of the Valley Whigs in effect declared their lack of common values or interest with their former colleagues. Where they had once looked to the forces of Union to protect the rights of the South, these Valley Whigs increasingly saw the South as having to defend itself. They began to rally around their identity as southerners rather than as Whigs. In fact, these editors maintained their opposition to the Democratic Party on these grounds. Even after severing ties with the northern party, Smith’s Gazette attacked the Democrats on the grounds that “the democratic party South has done more to weaken the strength of the South and increase the power of the North.” The relationships of parties to the political culture of Union was thus extremely complex. Parties could be either an aid or a hindrance to sectionalism. In this case, Valley Unionists saw the lack of a stable party system as immensely threatening to the order of the Union.13

Looking for stable opposition to Democratic rule, some Virginia Whigs went into the comparatively new American Party, the political organization of the nativist Know-Nothing movement. The rise and fall of the American Party in Virginia demonstrated the complexity of parties in the Valley political culture. These issues came into the foreground during the 1855 governor’s election. This election pitted Democrat Henry A. Wise against Know-Nothing Thomas Fluornoy. The campaign itself illustrated some of the key aspects of local political culture. Locating a uniquely Know-Nothing political culture in the Valley remains difficult in no small part because of the inherently secretive nature of the movement and its very short life span. While the Valley Know-Nothings drew from many of the same voting blocs as the Whigs party, the two groups were not coterminous. Nonetheless, the Know-Nothings found themselves facing new waves of foreign migrants they perceived as a threat. A combination of a series of bad potato harvests in Ireland with the political tumult of 1848 brought a sharp influx of Irish and

13 “Southern Locofocoism,” Lexington Gazette, November 2, 1854.
German immigrants, many of whom were Roman Catholic. Many German immigrants also held to classical liberal or even socialist philosophies that stood at odds with the slave culture of the American South, and many southern nativists feared rising immigration because they worried that these new arrivals would threaten southern institutions.¹⁴

Many Valley Whigs therefore cleaved to the American Party as a means of bringing partisan balance to politics. The extent to which the American Party in Virginia merely served as a stalking horse for the old Whigs remains a subject of disagreement, but there is no denying the substantial overlap between the southern Know-Nothings and the old southern Whigs. The Know-Nothing movement, like other political movements in the Valley, tapped into long-extant Anglo-protestant paranoia regarding the political influence of Catholicism. “A Friend of the Know Nothings” opposed Catholics because they were “unaccustomed to republicanism, unacquainted with our institutions, and illiterate; and now as things stand they are mere automatons in the hands of demagogues and politicians.” At least some Valley Whigs cast their lot with the Know Nothings, therefore, out of fear that immigrant voters could form an easily manipulated democratic mass that demagogues could manipulate. Such a state of affairs would disrupt government in the common interest in favor of dangerous demagogues. Valley Know Nothings also feared the anti-slavery implications of these new immigrant populations. In promoting the American Party, Smith’s Gazette praised because they pledged to stand “against the corrupting influences of foreignism, and scout from their embrace the abolition agrarians and infidels of Germany.” Likewise, the Staunton True American, which billed itself as the official statewide organ for the American Party, favored restrictions on admitting new immigrants because “all are opposed by the prejudices of education and the motives of individual interest to the institutions of the South.” If the influx of anti-slavery immigrants could continue, they

contended, the population of the North could no longer be counted upon to allow the institution to persist.15

Among the most prominent of Valley exponents of these beliefs was Augusta Whig Alexander H. H. Stuart, who in 1856 published a series of letters in the Richmond Whig under the name “Madison.” In these letters, Stuart voiced the republican anxieties of many Valley Whigs. According to Stuart, the American system of government rested upon “the virtue, intelligence , and patriotism of the people.” These foreign immigrants, however, desired little more than “to drink all the whiskey they can get, and to indulge in the luxury of riots and the gratification of provincial animosities.” These immigrants, Stuart intimated, were “infidels, atheists, socialists, and agrarians, and by their wild and demoralizing ideas corrupt the very foundations of liberty.” He even compared the values of foreigners to Mormonism, “the most disgusting exhibition that the civilized world has ever witnessed of imposture, irreligion, and beastly licentiousness.” Stuart argued that these new arrivals would injure the health of the body politic. He believed that their allegedly lesser character would pollute the political process, and only inspire the worst among office-seekers. Under foreign influence, Stuart said, “the candidates become prostitutes, and the representatives become corrupt.” On Stuart’s view, the health of any political community worth preserving lay in the fundamental moral characteristics of that community’s members.16

These republican fears for the health of the body politic, which bore great resemblance to Valley political values during the sectional debates of 1850 and 1851, also appeared during the

Virginia gubernatorial election of 1855. In expressing support for Fluornoy, the Waddells’ *Spectator* praised him as a worthy statesman to govern Virginia because he “can scarcely be called a politician in the common acceptation of the word. Certainly he has never been an office-seeker.” The *Spectator* also promoted the American Party on the grounds that it lacked a “sectional [character].” The same values that Valley Unionists expressed in their discussions of statesmanship had clearly not died out in so short a time. “Reform” viewed Know Nothings as an antidote to the rank sectionalism and rampant partisanship he believed was destroying the tranquility of the Union. “Reform” observed that the “strife of factions” was tearing the government apart, and “that the public weal is overlooked entirely, in action upon it, or at best, regarded as but secondary to more selfish interests.” Wills de Hass, editor of the *True American*, placed the American Party in direct opposition to avaricious interests and designing parties. He believed that the people could save the republic by “killing off the politicians – the bane of any country – and infusing freshness, vigor, purity, into the administration of public affairs.” If the American Party took power, said the Know-Nothings, men inspired by the national interest could advance the goals of the Union, and eliminate the North’s perceived advantages over the South.17

While former Whigs in the Valley did not necessarily agree with the new party on every issue, they at the very least believed the American Party could be a national party capable of healing the sectional divide. Smith’s *Gazette* also defended the American Party, and in the same terms as they praised Whig statesmen such as Millard Fillmore. In the American Party Smith placed his hope for “the very highest guarantee of conservatism and devotion to the constitutional rights of the South.” By highlighting the conservatism of the Know-Nothings, the *Gazette* appealed to the sense that this party could be entrusted with certain values that held the

Union together. According to historian John David Bladek, these were essentially the same principles Know Nothings articulated throughout Virginia. Bladek argued that the Virginia Know-Nothings tried to take a position they thought friendly to the North: “Motivated by a republican ideology, they would think of the United States as one entity, devoid of sectional issues and allied in a battle to prevent foreign influence over American political and social institutions.” The American Party promoted itself as a “non-sectional alignment” behind which both northerners and southerners could rally.18

Democratic papers expressed suspicion and open hostility towards Fluornoy and the Know-Nothing movement generally by calling upon republican fears of the moral caliber of the political community. They attacked the Know-Nothings not just because this new movement served as an outlet for many Whigs who still opposed the Democrats, but because of the organization’s highly secretive nature. Calling Democratic voters to action, Gillock’s Democratic Valley Star praised many Valley Whigs who “refused to strike unholy hands with a midnight cabal.” By comparison, they praised their own readers who “understand far too well the principles of our government and the character of our noble institutions to be seduced into affiliation with a secret oath-bound society.” While Gillock did not address the concept of interest explicitly in their denunciations of the Know Nothings, the implication was still quite clear. Republican citizens could not trust secret societies because the very nature of the organizations was such that they could not be accountable to the citizenry; nothing could stop them from behaving in their own interests.19

Of the two Democratic papers in this part of the Valley, the Democratic Vindicator held Fluornoy and the Know Nothings in perhaps the greatest contempt. This in large part stemmed

19 Shade, Democratizing the Old Dominion, 138 – 139; “Attention Democrats!,” Valley Star, March 1, 1855.
from the demographics of Augusta County’s Democratic population. Augusta Democrats largely, though not exclusively, descended from German migrants. Nonetheless, the Vindicator’s criticisms of the Know-Nothings reflected the rhetoric of the Valley’s political culture. The Vindicator warned that should the Know-Nothings triumph in the 1855 canvass, the Commonwealth’s politics would descend into rampant factionalism: “Factions, different in aims, incongruous in elements, and hostile in feelings, will spot the whole face of the country, and instead of an united people we will be a nation of factions.” Here, the Vindicator clearly expressed fears of a body politic divided by atomized interests. The Know-Nothings, in this view, had “no purity of purpose – no patriotism of motive – to hold them together” save mercenary objects – striving for possession of the spoils.” Contrasting the Know-Nothings to their own Democratic Party, the Vindicator insisted they desired “no sectarian, or sectional warfare… We rather want to carry the great principles of freedom.” While the paper’s managers doubtless had their own personal reasons to oppose the Know-Nothings, to say nothing of their status as prominent Democrats, the Vindicator’s attacks on the movement elucidates the importance of worthy, patriotic, and moral interest in the political realm.20

Democrats also appealed to these values by contrasting Wise’s qualities with what they saw as the growing radicalism of the northern states. The Valley Star praised Wise as “a true patriot, faithful to his principles uninfluenced by considerations of personal advantage.” The Valley Star also denounced “Know-Nothingism” as the “hybrid projeny of northern Abolitionism and Whiggery.” Gillock furthermore complained that “the south has nothing to expect from the rampant fanaticism of northern abolitionist and Know Nothings…except repeated outrages and insults.” The Vindicator drew the same conclusion, declaring the Know Nothings an

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“abomination which has been hatched by Federalism and abolitionism.” Democratic rhetoric in the Valley thus explicitly linked the American Party with the dangerous sectionalism of the North. Democratic editors explicitly linked the Know-Nothing movement with every perceived problem in the North. Valley Democrats generally seem to have associated the American Party with every example of northern fanaticism they could think of.\textsuperscript{21}

At the end of the canvass, Wise defeated Fluornoy by a comfortable margin. The Virginia Know-Nothing movement proved unable to rally enough support to overthrow Democratic rule. While Wise prevailed in the state as a whole, Fluornoy carried Rockbridge County by a narrow margin of less than a hundred votes. In Augusta, meanwhile, Fluornoy trounced Wise by a margin of more than a thousand votes. The defeat of the American Party in Virginia signaled the end of the movement’s meaningful efforts to take power in Virginia, but it did not end the organization’s efforts at the national level. Following Wise’s victory, discussion of the national sectional controversies surrounding fugitive slave laws and the future of slavery in the territories continued.\textsuperscript{22}

Relative to national politics, Valley Unionists continued to assert that only “conservative” and “national” men could save the Union. They also believed that this was not only desirable, but likely. In the summer of 1856, the Valley’s old Whig papers that had thrown themselves behind Fluornoy’s candidacy then supported former president Millard Fillmore, who had accepted the Know-Nothing nomination, in the upcoming presidential election. In February of 1857, shortly before James Buchanan’s inauguration, the Spectator argued that “Those who have some stake in the community – the law-loving, law-abiding people – the men of morals and conservatism, must

\textsuperscript{21} “Mr. Wise: His Policy,” Staunton Vindicator, February 24, 1855 [reprinted from the Valley Star]; “Know-Nothings,” Valley Star, January 4, 1855; Staunton Vindicator, October 2, 1854.

set their face against the prevailing tendency of the age to wink at vice and call the blackest of crimes by the prettiest names.” Even before Buchanan’s victory, however, the Waddells had framed the 1856 election in terms of the political values of the Union and what was at stake in terms of the future of that Union. Their commentary contained their usual admonitions against partisan scheming, but they also appealed to the compromise tradition. The *Spectator* exhorted its readers to “offer this last compromise to the descendants of those Northern patriots who fought by the side of our fathers, not only at Brandywine and Saratoga, but at Guilford and Yorktown, that our constitutional rights shall be preserved to the letter of the law, and their interests and institutions equally secured [emphasis original].” The Waddells clearly believed that a moment of sectional crisis was approaching, and appealed to the old bonds of common values binding the two sections as a last resort to saving the Union. The Union faced a moral and political crisis, and only conservative compromisers could save it.23

Other papers also promoted the American Party and the Fillmore candidacy using language reminiscent of the years of the old Whig Party, language which was more than familiar to Valley Unionists. The American Party, said Smith’s *Gazette*, demonstrated “an unselfish patriotism that regards the good of the country as above all other considerations and scorns to employ such demoralizing shifts to gain party success.” Similarly, the *Gazette* praised former President Fillmore for his “high patriotic resolve” that “trampled under foot his early prejudices against the South.” The *Gazette* also declared that Fillmore would “be elected by the united conservatism of the country over both the blatant abolitionism of the Black Republicans and the insidious squatter sovereignty freesoilism of the swindling democracy.” George Gilmer and Richard Mauzy’s *True American* likewise lauded Fillmore for keeping the nation away from the

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“the Charybdis of Abolitionism on the one hand and the Scylla of Southern ultraism upon the other.” In supporting Fillmore, Whigs in both counties proclaimed the values of moderation, patriotism, and Union, much as they had done in the past. The American Party’s supporters, in the interest promoting a movement capable of uniting the sections, identified it with traditional republican political values.24

Papers supporting Democratic candidates made similar claims to conservatism and nationalism. In the summer of the previous year, the Valley Star proclaimed “The democratic party has ever been conservative and is now the only reliable and national party in this country.” The Valley Star reasserted this claim later that fall by reminding their readers that a national party was in the best interests of the South. Gillock’s Valley Star claimed “The only national party in the Free States is the Democratic party, and it behooves the people of the South to bear this fact in mind, and act in such manner, as will be best calculated to strengthen their hands and encourage them to maintain the position they now occupy.” While the Valley Star did not here rail against sectionalism as was so common in 1850 and 1851, the anti-sectionalism component of the political culture union still appeared: it was in the best interests of all sections to allow the South to maintain slavery. The Vindicator also proclaimed the Democratic Party as the true guardians of the Union, declaring “It is a source of just pride, while the Whig party at the North have united with Abolitionists, anti-Liquorists, Know-Nothingists, et id omne genus, in a crusade against the Constitution and the laws of the country, the Democratic party have been true to themselves, and true to the country.” Editors of both Democratic papers demonstrated great willingness to associate their political opponents with every type of perceived northern overreach, factionalism, or radicalism. This they contrasted with the sturdiness of the national

Democratic Party. As far as these editors were concerned, Virginians acted in their own interests if they adhered to a national party that worked toward the betterment of the entire Union.²⁵

This dedication to national parties explains the Valley Unionists’ open hostility to the Republican Party. Particularly among Whigs, the memory of statesmen such as Millard Fillmore, Daniel Webster, and Henry Clay remained strong. These were men, so the Whigs claimed, who were willing to sacrifice their own interests in furtherance of national aims. This generation of compromisers, however, was rapidly passing into memory. Gone were many of the northern moderates who could be counted upon to compromise with southern slave-holding interests at every turn. In their place rose figures such as Salmon P. Chase, William Seward, and Joshua Giddings. These were men whose vision of national interest did not rest in the pluralist concept of Union. To them, the future of the American union lay with free labor. This generation of politicians showed little inclination toward compromising on slavery in the territories. To the Valley Unionists, this was nothing more than sectionalism run amok. In the Valley, national interest inherently meant the perpetuation of slavery wherever it existed.

In order to protect this interest, the Valley papers attacked political extremists both North and South, but saved their most virulent criticism for the North. Appealing to the sense that only unity in political sentiment could save the Union, the Spectator charged that radicals in both sections acted in concert. In criticizing the national Democratic Party the Waddells alleged “The Calhoun wing of that party are laboring hand in hand with the Black Republicans of the North for the accomplishment of the same end, and this they do not hesitate to avow in open day-light, in the teeth of those of their party who pretend to be conservative.” Gilmer and Mauzy, writing in October 1856, argued that during the 1850 crisis, “The disunionists of the South and North

stood shoulder to shoulder, the ultra pro-slavery disunionists of the South, and the fanatical abolition disunionists of the North working unitedly, energetically and lovingly together, cheek-by-jowl, in opposition to [the compromise].” They feared disunion, and accused both factions of working towards this end. The Gazette made similar accusations to the effect that the two factions worked together to undermine the American Party, which the Valley Whig papers promoted as the only national party capable of saving the Union.26

This accusation that extremists North and South, despite opposing each other on the fundamentals of the slavery question, was not an uncommon one among Valley Whigs. The Gazette charged that under Democratic government, the spoils of office had been divided between “the abolition traitor on the one hand and the Southern disunionist on the other.” The Gazette also explicitly attacked James Buchanan as a promoter of the forces of sectionalism in opposition to conservative nationalism. Buchanan, so the Gazette said, was “the advocate of squatter sovereignty for the Sharpe’s rifle free soil democracy of the North: an Ostend manifesto advocate of Cuban land piracy for the filibusters and disunionists of the South: supported by the Van Burens and Wilmot Proviso agitators.” Smith accused Buchanan of operating not in the interest of the Union, but of particular factions within it. The Gazette’s assault against Buchanan speaks more to the internal dissension within the Democratic Party than anything else; the idea that Buchanan was both a freesoiler and a supporter of the acquisition of Caribbean territory was plainly absurd. The attack itself, however, demonstrates the importance of the Valley’s political culture of Union. The Gazette attacked Buchanan on the grounds that he would promote

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sectional interests, regardless of the fact that he seemed to be promoting competing sectional interests.\footnote{27}{“A Glance at Locofocoism,” \textit{Lexington Gazette}, January 5, 1854; “Buchanan not worthy of the Support of Conservatives,” \textit{Lexington Gazette}, September 11, 1856.}

The \textit{Spectator} likewise feared the eventual collapse of the Union due to internal dissension. Observing the state of the presidential contest, the Waddells surmised that “No sane man can doubt that the election of Fremont would decide the South and be the signal for dissolution.” The \textit{Spectator} also concluded that Buchanan’s election would cause the North to secede for similar reasons, as Buchanan was the “\textit{Southern Sectional} candidate.” Buchanan, a Pennsylvanian, was no southerner, but the \textit{Spectator}’s identification of Buchanan with the South refers back to the importance of interest and shared values. Even if Buchanan was no southerner by identity, his affiliation with the Democratic Party, in the minds of Whig editors, aligned him with the interests of southern radicals. The \textit{Spectator} even charged that the slavery question could have been settled had southern radicals not antagonized northern abolitionists. They alleged that “Noisy Southern demagogues have seized upon the slavery question at every election, for the purpose of elevating themselves to office, and by its eternal discussion have encouraged and built up an opposition at the North.” In either case, the election of a sectional candidate posed problems for the future of the Union.\footnote{28}{“The Crisis,” \textit{Staunton Spectator}, August 20, 1856; “Abolitionists! Abolitionists!,” \textit{Staunton Spectator}, February 11, 1855; \textit{Staunton Spectator}, October 22, 1856.}

By comparison, Valley Democrats also feared for the future of the Union, but they demonstrated far less propensity to cast themselves on the political middle ground, or at least not in the same way that the Whigs did. Having seen their own party shattered, Whigs concluded that the sectional crisis would only spin further out of control. Democrats, however, still had a national party of sorts. The \textit{Vindicator} attacked the \textit{Spectator} for voicing such views in 1855:
“We cannot imagine the degree of partisan malignity which could generate as obnoxious sentiments to the South and her every interest.” Both the Vindicator and the Valley Star voiced little if any criticism of the southern wing of their own party. By 1855, they had yet to rebuke the northern wing of their own party. Regardless, both Democratic journals worried about the future of national politics. In August 1855, the Vindicator noted that “The popular mind is rapidly being inflamed, and the feelings of the sections alienated by the renewed assaults upon our right. Every thing portends a rupture of the nominal Union which still exists.” Even if they did not denounce southern radicals to the same extent as Whig editors, the Valley’s Democratic editors were still well aware of the period’s volatile sectional politics. In October 1855, The Vindicator openly opposed Henry Wise as a choice for the national party’s presidential nomination on the grounds that he might instigate sectional trauma. The Vindicator argued “it would be the grossest impolicy in either party to seek to make a sectional issue, and abandon all national and fraternal feeling.” Valley Democrats were capable, even if begrudgingly, of acknowledging that southern Democrats bore at least some of the blame for the sectional controversy of the period.

Democratic editors clearly sensed the national Union was in trouble. They may have diagnosed the issue differently from Whigs at this stage – fanaticism in their minds was more of a northern problem than a southern one – but they still attributed the Union’s problems to sectionalism.29

In light of these developments in the North, the Vindicator argued that Republicans specifically endangered the Union because of their sectional tendencies and public character. “The Black Republicans,” the Vindicator argued, “make no claim to nationality. They are organized upon a sectional idea, and boldly declare their purpose to war upon the rights of the South and the Constitution.” Republican victory in the presidential canvass, therefore, would

have dire ramifications: “If fanaticism triumphs, then the Union of these States cannot longer exist.” A victory for Fremont meant a victory for the lesser virtues of northern fanatics. The Vindicator went so far as to calm northern fears that southerners might try to assassinate Fremont by opining that to do so would be fruitless; Fremont was far too worthless on his own to merit assassination. Rather, a victory for Fremont would be dangerous “in virtue of the bad principles he represents – the like of whom – if he were buried – would spring up by thousands, like mushrooms from the same smoking beds of corruption.” White southerners feared Republican rule both in itself and for what it said about the character of northerners with whom they stood united under the same constitution.30

So far as the Vindicator was concerned, however, the problems facing the Union went beyond just northern fanaticism. Not content to attack abolitionists and Republicans, the Vindicator charged that the Republicans had colluded with the American Party to defeat the Democrats. Even more upsetting, the American Party’s southern adherents, including Augusta’s own Alexander H. H. Stuart, seemed poised to cooperate with the Republicans. Like the Whigs, the Valley Democrats in this region saw themselves in between opposing sectional forces each placing itself above the interests of the Union. The differences lay in where they located these threats. Agreeing that abolitionists threatened the Union, Whig-Americans identified them with the northern Democrats, while Democrats associated them with Know-Nothings. Likewise, they differed in how they described the threat to the Union within the South. Whig-Americans blamed southern Democrats, while Democrats blamed southern Know-Nothings. They did not meaningfully differ as to the nature of the danger, but in where they located that danger.31

Regardless of that perceived danger, many Valley Unionists continued to believe that they shared much in common with the North. This faith in the northern public seemed to have been justified by the outcome of the 1856 presidential election. Former President Fillmore might even have drawn votes from enough anti-slavery northerners to send James Buchanan to the White House with a plurality of the popular vote. Fremont, though he lost the election, still carried enough northern states to provoke anti-sectional hand-wringing in much of the South. Nonetheless, many southern Democrats stood relieved that there remained in the North men such as Buchanan who posed no meaningful threat to slavery. The sectional catastrophe the Valley Unionists feared had not yet materialized. The Valley Star celebrated Buchanan’s victory as a triumph of nationalist conservatism. At Buchanan’s triumph, they said, “Patriots everywhere rejoice, at the signal rebuke which has been given to sectionalism and sectionalisers. Confidence has been restored.” Unlike the controversy surrounding the Know Nothings, however, the debates within the South regarding the Republican Party did not cease following the defeat of a political party. The 1856 election had more or less destroyed the American Party, but the Republicans, having found an issue behind which they might rally disgruntled northerners, grew only more vibrant.32

Some, not content to attack just the political leadership of the North, concluded that northern culture was at its core hostile to slavery and to the South. The Spectator asserted that “The people of the North imbibed anti-slavery sentiments with their mothers’ milk, and we may reasonably doubt the honesty and sincerity of a man reared under such influences.” When the Spectator printed this in 1855, they still maintained that despite northern antagonism towards slavery, they lacked any aggressive intent. The Spectator also attacked “Degenerate Yankees” as having “simultaneously declined into irreligion and fanaticism – a community of free-thinking

Pharisees, whose spiritual pride has disgusted the world.” On similar grounds, the *Spectator* argued against including the Mormons in the Union. The *Spectator* described Mormons as “a people whose principles and practices, under the cloak of religion, sap the very foundation of public morals.” To many Valley Unionists, political Union thus required some sense of shared values. “Viator,” writing in the *Gazette*, agreed. Following Buchanan’s victory, Viator argued that “It is useless to contend that there is any pro-slavery party to be found in the Northern States, as a political party. The great mass of the Northern people of all parties are and ever will be anti-slavery.”

The Democratic papers concurred. The *Valley Star* proclaimed warned that “Abolitionism and fanaticism of every kind, have obtained the ascendancy in the North, and threaten to override the solemn guarantees of the constitution.” The *Vindicator* also stressed this fear of the unreliability of northern sentiment. In June 1854, the *Vindicator* concluded of northerners: “it is their business to hold up to ridicule our Institutions and habits of life, and to manifest the most vicious and unrelenting opposition to Southern people and interests.” By October of that year, the *Vindicator* alleged that most northerners were “ready to sacrifice the Constitution, that sectional interests may be subserved. They have no love for the Union as it is – for equal rights and equal justice to all.” Valley Unionists’ faith in the soundness of the North was clearly deeply shaken. The *Vindicator* also observed that “In the free States a diabolical fanaticism has seized hold of the people. The utter disregard of the Constitution – the compact of partnership between the States – has already weakened, and threatens to burst the bonds of union.” The values of the northern people had become suspect. The corruption of northern culture, so they claimed, arose not just in politics and religion, but in literature. Northern

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literature, the *Vindicator* claimed, “undermines the foundations of morality, religion and social order. The Union, the Constitution, and the Bible are the subjects of its crazy assaults and pedantic criticisms.” The North, they said, was a place “where Fanaticism stalks abroad at noonday and presides in Temples dedicated to Religion and God.”34

Despite this rhetoric, Valley Unionists still maintained faith in the ability of northern moderates to stand alongside them. Even at moments of great abolitionist and antislavery sentiment, Valley Unionists remained convinced that the great majority of northerners stood beside them. “An Old Line Whig” wrote to the *Gazette* that the abolitionist sentiment in the North constituted little more than a radical fringe. He claimed that “The Abolition party will not carry a single State in the interest of Disunion. Black Republicanism composes but a contemptible fragment of the entire people of the North.” This assertion appeared throughout the late antebellum period until shortly before Virginia’s secession in the spring of 1861. The *Gazette* also praised “our Northern brethren who, discarding sectionalism of all shades and of every character, are vigorously waging a just and righteous war against the enemies of the Constitution and the Union.” The *Spectator*, meanwhile, argued that while the many northerners opposed slavery, “it is equally true that all of them are not disposed to be aggressive.” Even the *Vindicator*, which harbored far less charitable views of northern soundness, encouraged its readers to “Draw the true men of the North into your embrace, that the great principle of Democracy may be upheld.” The Valley’s political culture of union meant that despite the difference of sectional opinion on the slavery question, they could coexist within the same Union

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with the understanding that antislavery northerners would not openly attack southern institutions.35

The use of the term “Black Republican” to characterize the Republican Party also reveals local attitudes towards white northerners. While not unique to the Valley, white southerners of all stripes used this term to denigrate the new party. By associating the Republicans with local attitudes towards blacks, Valley Unionists made a direct attack on the moral fiber of the northern public. Despite the lesser importance of slavery compared to the rest of the South, the Valley had its own sizeable slave population. Local whites maintained many of the same racist views regarding black Americans both slave and free as most white northerners and southerners during this period. While there was a small free black minority in this region, they did not enjoy the same range of liberties as whites.

Valley political culture to a certain degree rested on the belief in the fundamental inequality of white and black. When describing “the people” as a political entity, “Reform” made sure he clarified that he meant “to exclude free negroes, minors and females.” In 1857, the Vindicator derided Speaker of the House Nathaniel P. Banks on the grounds that he advocated “equality between the white man and the negro.” George Junkin also removed Francis P. Wayland’s Elements of Moral Science from the curriculum at Washington College because Wayland wished “to establish the monstrous heresy, that it is a sin of the first magnitude to hold the African to service: and who aims to place the negro race on a social and political equality with the white race.” The rise of the Republicans disturbed the Valley Unionists because they associated the new party with social upheaval. Racial equality, to the Valley Unionists, would

have meant the overturning of their whole political order by including as citizens those whom they believed of inferior character.\textsuperscript{36}

The Valley Unionist fear of racial equality becomes clearer when considering commonly held beliefs regarding the moral caliber of black Virginians. These beliefs came to the fore during the push for liquor reform that took hold in Lexington in the mid-1850s. While liquor reform advocates in the North very often targeted their campaigns at immigrant communities, the Lexington liquor reformers directed their activities against the black community. The \textit{Gazette} described the town’s free black population as “[having] no other means of gaining a livelihood than thieving,” and as “dissolute in their habits.” The town attempted, largely in vain, to police black drinking through local ordinances and “Sabbath Patrols.” One “Howard” wrote to the \textit{Gazette} describing free blacks as “One of the most serious evils with which our community is cursed,” who could not subsist except by “theft and prostitution.” While the campaign to regulate liquor sales and consumption in Lexington was largely a failure, it nonetheless revealed one of the major anxieties of local whites. They believed blacks were uniquely susceptible to the lesser influences of alcohol. In February 1856, Gillock’s \textit{Valley Star} also concluded that “The African race is not capable of self-government, and when left to themselves rapidly degenerate to a savage and barbarous state.” When describing their opponents as “Black Republicans,” Valley Unionists tapped into this racial language. They painted a portrait of people who possessed a character that made them unsuitable as participants in a republican society.\textsuperscript{37}

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Despite continued support for the Union, Valley Unionists in the mid-1850s did not wholly eschew the idea of secession. The editor of the Vindicator argued for strict constitutionalism: “whenever [the Constitution’s] provisions are no longer respected, the States fail to realize the objects which the adoption of the Constitution was designed to secure, and they will ultimately refuse to adhere to an union which serves to oppress and degrade.” Much as during the 1850 sectional crisis, The Spectator also laid out the circumstances that would necessitate disunion. The Spectator affirmed that Fremont’s election in itself would not require disunion. To break from the Union required “the enactment of some flagrant law by Congress, embodying Northern sentiment.” Secession required definitive proof that government in the interest of the Union was now impossible, and that the sentiments of the northern and southern people fundamentally differed. Fremont’s election, they believed, would be insufficient on its own. 38

The fundamental changes that took place during the mid-1850s were dominantly within the debates of national politics. The controversies surrounding the American Party, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Popular Sovereignty, and the rise of the Republican Party, served not as adjustors of the Valley’s political culture, but as confirmation that the greatest fears expressed within that culture were being realized. One national party had ceased to exist, and the second seemed on the verge of tearing itself apart. To make matters worse, a new party that explicitly avowed many of the things to which southerners stood opposed threatened the increasingly precarious Union. To Valley Unionists, these developments stood as literal proof of all that they feared: sectionalism and radicalism, the two things that most challenged the common interest and feeling within the Union. The fears they expressed in light of these developments did not question the fundamental goodness or desirability of the Union, but merely the soundness and expediency of their northern

38 “Retirement,” Staunton Vindicator, October 25, 1856; Staunton Spectator, October 22, 1856.
compatriots. Throughout these political disputes, their political culture of Union led them to believe that the Union was under threat, but could still be saved by whatever remnant of northern conservatism and nationalism persisted.
Chapter III. “When the Spirit of Union was Gone:” The Crisis of the Valley Unionists

On December 3, 1860, Rockbridge County Unionists gathered at the county courthouse in Lexington to debate Virginia’s proper course in the sectional crisis prompted by the election of Republican Abraham Lincoln. The sentiments expressed at this meeting, observers recorded, tended very strongly towards Unionism. But there was at least one exception. Judge John W. Brockenbrough, who ten years earlier had publicly praised the Union and urged Virginians to support it, now argued “that South Carolina had just cause for her present secession or revolutionary proceedings, and that Virginia ought to unite with her and her sister slave States in forming a Southern Confederacy.” It would be months before most of Brockenbrough’s neighbors came to agree with him. Nonetheless, the sentiments of some the Valley’s most ardent Unionists had shifted by the beginning of the secession crisis. The motivations behind this shift derived from the same political culture that had produced the Valley’s staunch Unionism. Events from the end of the 1850s through the early 1860s convinced Valley Unionists that the shared interests and values needed to continue the Union no longer existed by the spring of 1861.¹

The final years of the antebellum period proved to be traumatic for devoted Unionists in both sections. In the South, so-called “fire-eaters” expressed open hostility to the North. Some even called for reopening the Atlantic slave trade, and others advocated cutting off all commerce with the northern states. Southern radicals publicly advanced southern interests at the expense of northern interests, and many placed the South above the Union itself. Within the South, internal forces sought to sunder the bonds of Union that held the two sections so tenuously together. Many Unionists in both the North and South saw these fire-eaters as the enemy, as an insidious faction bent on destroying the Union. Likewise, Unionists also feared sectionalist developments

¹“Correspondence of the Richmond Dispatch: public meeting in Rockbridge. Lexington, Va., Dec. 4,” Richmond Daily Dispatch, December 6, 1860.
in the North that they feared could pose dangers just as great. The growth of the Republican Party stirred anxieties among both conservative southerners and northerners.

Even though Millard Fillmore’s failed presidential bid as a Know-Nothing arguably prevented John C. Fremont’s election, the Republican Party continued to grow, and no new national party emerged that Valley Whigs could call home. The Know-Nothings never succeeded in becoming the national opposition party that Valley Unionists had hoped for. Republicans’ ability to coalesce around one major issue – slavery in the territories – made them a powerful force in northern politics. Their unabashed opposition to slavery extension, however, denied them any meaningful support from southerners. The rise of the “Black Republicans” alarmed national conservatives in both sections. Here stood a party that actively promoted itself as the enemy of the South’s “peculiar institution.”

In Virginia, Democrats maintained their dominance of the state’s politics. Democrats more sympathetic to the goals of the Lower South held sway in the east, while national Democrats interested in maintaining the Union held more influence in the west. At Virginia’s periphery, the Republicans attracted minimal support from counties along the Potomac and Ohio rivers where substantial numbers of northern migrants lived. As for Virginia’s Whigs and Know-Nothings, the failure of the American Party denied them a permanent home in any party. Most who remained active in politics joined a movement known simply as the Opposition, who agreed on little else save their disapproval of the Democracy. In the southern end of the Shenandoah Valley, the Opposition movement attracted strong support from former Whigs, and local Democrats generally gravitated towards Unionism. In Augusta and Rockbridge, Unionists of
both parties maintained their faith in the capacity of compromise conservatives to save the Union from factionalists and sectionalists. ²

When the looming sectional crisis erupted after Lincoln’s election in 1860, Valley Unionists stood for the Union under the Constitution, and thought that federal coercion necessarily spelled the end of the Union. After the fall of Ft. Sumter to Confederate forces in April 1861, and President Lincoln’s demand for troops to suppress the Lower South, however, Valley Unionists felt that circumstances had made the decision to secede for them. The beliefs behind this rapid shift, that made Lincoln’s proclamation so noxious, originated in the region’s political culture, and widely held views of the nature of the Union. The need to hold the Union together by force defied everything they believed had to be true about a people united under one equitable government.

Sudden as the decision to support secession was, it did not occur in a vacuum. The events of the previous few years had persuaded Valley Unionists that the fundamental character of white northerners necessary to maintain the Union had become suspect. They agreed to secession after the common values that had sustained the old Union, in their minds, had ceased to predominate in the North. Lincoln’s proclamation not only realized many old republican fears of military rule and executive overreach, but signaled that abolitionism and other values threatening to white southerners no longer remained at the fringes of northern society. Lincoln’s decision to call for volunteers was important in itself, but also occurred within the context of a series of events that brought Valley Unionists to the conclusion that they no longer shared meaningful political and moral values with white northerners. The disunion that occurred in 1860 and 1861 that seemed inconceivable to Valley Unionists only a few years before became far easier for

them to imagine after one critical night in a small town at the northern edge of the Shenandoah Valley.

A. Harper’s Ferry and its Aftermath

On the evening of October 16, 1859, events in the small town of Harpers Ferry, Virginia would excite anew the sectional passions that had plagued the United States for decades. That night, a northern abolitionist named John Brown led a small band to attack the town’s federal armory. Once in town, Brown planned to seize weapons from the armory, distribute them to slaves, and instigate a guerilla campaign against slaveholders. The plan failed almost as soon as Brown put it into action. Despite Brown’s failure, the incident sparked fears of “servile insurrection” throughout the slave states. In this respect, the raid proved far more important in its aftermath than it did for any of its immediate consequences for Virginia. Proslavery southerners wanted answers from their northern brethren, demanding to know how fellow Americans could allow this to happen. In the Valley of Virginia, the incident called into question the moral and political soundness of their northern neighbors. Reaction against the North in the Shenandoah Valley proved more even-keeled than that which appeared further South, but the idea that white northerners would conspire to attack the constitutionally-protected institution of slavery deeply disturbed them. Valley Unionists did not react uniformly to the crisis Brown’s raid provoked, and many disagreed as to the nature of Virginia’s response. Nonetheless, Harpers Ferry raised important questions about the relationship between white northerners and southerners, and about the nature of the Union. Because the political character of the northern people was fundamental to the continuance of the Union, and because Valley Unionists drew many inferences about northern public character based on the events surrounding Harpers Ferry, how Valley Unionist
understood this event is critical to comprehending their mindset ahead of the 1860 presidential election.³

Valley Unionists divided mostly along party lines on the question of how best to respond to the raid. Democrats issued an ultimatum. Northerners were to be called upon to openly denounce Brown and his confederates, or else they were to have been considered enemies of the South and of the Union. The Vindicator proclaimed that the northern governors should have rounded up all of the conspirators involved with the incident, “but if they should refuse to comply with the demand of Virginia, then the South will know what safety is to be expected in the Union.” To the editors of The Vindicator, the raid on Harpers Ferry proved that the affective bonds that theretofore held the Union together teetered on the verge of collapse. The editors of the Vindicator emphasized these bonds by characterizing the Union as “a most solemn compact, formed and cemented by revolutionary ideas and baptized in rich ancestral blood.” Brown and his associates threatened not just a federal armory, but the household of the federal union. If the northern people truly opposed Brown, they contended, then they would demonstrate it by loudly protesting him. The raid also deeply shook the Vindicator’s faith in the reliability of the North on the question of slavery. Rather than adhere to the belief that “the masses of the North are sound, but misled by demagogues,” the editors reached the conclusion that “the Northern masses are rotten to the core. We believe that their leaders, instead of being the corrupters, are the corrupted.” This development was itself of great importance. Republican thought had traditionally warned against the power of demagogues to manipulate a body of virtuous citizens. By comparison, The Vindicator announced that these northern abolitionists were not merely fringe radicals, but representative of northern opinion. If Brown truly represented the feelings of

³ McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 201 – 206.
most northerners, the common interest and feeling upon which Valley Unionists grounded their faith in the Union showed signs of vanishing altogether.⁴

Samuel Gillock of the Valley Star similarly concluded that white northerners had become untrustworthy. Gillock inquired, in his view quite reasonably, “If the majority of the people of the North do not hold such sentiment as many would fain believe, why among all the meetings held in reference to the outrage at Harper’s Ferry was there not one held to condemn it?” After Harpers Ferry, the Valley Star began to question Rockbridge County’s place within the Union. Gillock worried that any Union between North and South required that each section be treated as “brothers and equals.” The Valley Star argued that these fraternal ties no longer held the Union together as effectively as they once did. Late in 1859, the Valley Star went so far as to say that the Union ought to be dissolved if “the fact that we are one people with a common inheritance, a common destiny, and with equal privileges is no longer to be a barrier against the outbreaks of abolitionism.” This idea of common inheritance and common destiny reflects the importance of Union to local political culture. This growing lack of common interest and values proved threatening. Much like the sectional debates of 1850 and 1851, and the basis debate at the state convention, Valley Unionists argued that political Union necessitated some form of common interest. The Harpers Ferry raid and the fallout following it demonstrated to them that this common interest and feeling was rapidly dying.⁵

Valley Whigs reacted somewhat more circumspectly. While public reactions expressed concern regarding the attack, there was almost no impulse toward secession. Like local Democrats, Whigs blamed northern fanaticism, and reserved particular contempt for William

⁵ “The Opposition Convention,” Valley Star, December 8, 1859; “Should the South Secede from the Union in the Event of the Election of a Black Republican to the Presidency?” Valley Star, November 24, 1859.
Seward and the Republican Party. Unlike the Democrats, however, Whigs expressed more affirmatively their confidence in northern conservatism. Whig Alexander H. H. Stuart, who represented Augusta County in the state senate in 1859, also served as chairman of the Joint Committee of the General Assembly of Virginia on the Harper’s Ferry Outrages. As chairman, Stuart was principal author of the committee’s report to the General Assembly. Stuart asserted that the Harper’s Ferry incident came about as a consequence of a decline in northern values. “The crimes of John Brown,” Stuart wrote, “were neither more nor less than practical illustrations of the doctrines of the Republican party.” Stuart assigned much of the blame to conservative northerners, “who thus permitted the Republican party to obtain the ascendancy in the state and national councils.” But Stuart did not abandon all hope for the Union cause. He maintained some faith that Harper’s Ferry might “have the effect of awakening the conservative sentiment of the North into efficient action.” He did not call for an end to the Union because no clear evidence that the Union ought to dissolve had presented itself.6

Other Valley Whigs also believed that some persistent northern conservatism could save the Union. The Waddells’ Spectator asserted, “We have repeatedly said, and still believe, that a large majority of Northern people disapprove, not only of Brown’s course, but of all direct assaults upon our rights.” In addition, they claimed that secession did not yet make a viable option to defend southern rights. The Spectator urged the South to “adopt every peaceable measure of defence and protection within the Union and the Constitution, and when all these fail, to go out of the Union and fight for her rights.” As early as August of 1855, the Spectator announced “When any formal system of retaliation has to be resorted to, we may as well prepare for a speedy dissolution of the Union.” Similarly, the pseudonymous “Augusta” declared “it is

time for the citizens of the slave-holding States to adopt some action to protect their persons and property a well as to aver the calamity which threatens or forebodes the Union, from Northern fanatics. We can no longer remain indifferent to the outrages perpetrated on the rights of the South.”

The Whig Gazette made much the same case. Rather than raise the hue and cry against the entirety of the North, Smith used the Harpers Ferry incident as a rallying call for Unionists throughout the country: “Let sectional issues, sectional men, and sectional parties everywhere be regarded as the sources of lawlessness and treason.” Smith seems to have genuinely believed that there resided in the North a “silent majority” of sorts in favor of allowing the South to maintain slavery. The Gazette demanded that the “conservative masses of the country” withdraw from “the designing councils and reckless acts of the aspiring demagogues in all sections.” Here again sectionalism and atomized interests constituted the enemy arrayed against the Union. The Gazette furthermore concluded that had the great majority of northerners actually agreed with Brown, they would have declared their agreement loudly, and taken up arms to free him from prison. Smith did, however, suggest that if northern conservatives failed to rally alongside the South, the Union might be in peril.

By this time, however, Smith’s Gazette had begun to lay down the conditions under which Virginia ought to secede. One year earlier, the Gazette scolded the student speaker at the Virginia Military Institute’s commencement exercises for advocating disunion. In doing so, the editors stated what circumstances might require disunion: “When the federal constitution is disregarded, when the rights, or interest or honor of the South are violated, or seriously

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endangered, then, and not till then, will Virginia withdraw from the Union and rush into civil strife.” Alexander H. H. Stuart made similar claims in his report to the General Assembly. He proposed that the Union ought to dissolve when it ceased to be “a Union of sovereign States, entitled to regulate their domestic affairs in their own way, and bound to fulfill their obligations to each other.” Stuart did not dismiss the idea of disunion altogether, but denied that the circumstances Harper’s Ferry presented demanded it. Even though Valley Unionists opposed disunion in theory, they held to it as an ultimate means of preserving certain political rights under drastic circumstances.⁹

A. The Presidential Election of 1860

In the aftermath of the Harpers Ferry raid, Whig and Democratic editors agreed on the fundamentals of the problems facing the future of the Union. They agreed that Union required unique affective bonds of common interest and values. Both Whigs and Democrats in this region sensed that the currents of national politics increasingly turned against them. Through the middle and late 1850s, spokesmen for both parties advocated vigilance on the part of both Virginia and the South. The idea of secession and disunion occupied ever more of local rhetoric. Valley Unionists abhorred the notion that they might abandon the Union of their fathers, but they agreed that when the bonds were sufficiently weakened, the Union ought to dissolve. What they did not agree on, most importantly, was the facts of the scenario that confronted them at the end of 1859. Disagreement centered on whether circumstances merited secession, not whether secession itself served the aims of the South.

The mistrust of antislavery northerners that Harpers Ferry engendered continued into the 1860 campaign. Valley Unionists had never trusted the Republicans, and Harpers Ferry only

deepened that mistrust. Unionists made it their mission to defeat sectional forces whatever the cost. During the 1860 presidential canvass, Valley Unionists sensed their place on the nation’s ever smaller political middle ground. These pro-compromise forces cast about to salvage what was left of any sort of workable Union. In keeping with their traditional rhetoric, the Valley Whigs exorted the importance of maintaining the Union at all costs. During the presidential campaign, at least, their criticisms of the Lower South exhibited almost as much virulence as their tirades against northern abolitionists. Smith’s Gazette attacked southern disunionists on the grounds that they acted out of their own selfish interests rather than a need to preserve the common good. Smith argued “Their real motive for making war on the Union is neither more nor less than the promptings of sordid avarice or selfish ambition. They believe that by overthrowing the Union and forming a more intimate connection with England they will be able to obtain higher prices for their productions; and to do that they are willing to sacrifice the interests of the rest of the community.” Like many southern Whigs, Smith by this point identified with the Opposition, a movement built upon the rubble of the Whig and American Parties. This movement was not as organized as the old Whig Party, but it did retain much of the old Valley Whig obsession with conservatism, patriotism, and the upholding of the common interest. Thus the Gazette in the winter of 1860 declared “This government was not established by our fathers to become the object of designing men.” Despite the intense sectional wrangling of the late antebellum period, the Valley’s fundamental political values changed little.10

The Gazette, which by August of 1860 operated under one J.S. McNutt, promoted these principles throughout the 1860 campaign, both before McNutt’s takeover and after. The Gazette praised “old fashioned patriotism which places the true interests of the country above those of

party,” and denounced “selfish leaders from whose hands the spoils of office are slipping away.” They harkened back to the age of the Founders, a time when the Union was governed by “the purest and most patriotic men of the nation, who had come up from all sections of the country animated by the single desire of advancing the best interests and real glory of that country.” Maintaining the Gazette’s general disdain for Democrats, the paper supported the Constitutional Unionist ticket of John Bell and Edward Everett, lauding them for their “high and unselfish patriotism,” and their “unshaken loyalty to the Constitution and the Union.” The Gazette contrasted his Revolutionary forebears to the secessionist radicals of their own age who “would break up our glorious confederacy, and overthrow republicanism itself, in order to secure their own personal aggrandizement.” To hold to the common interest and feeling that constituted the Union, therefore, was to remain loyal to the heritage of the founding fathers. To do otherwise, to sever the bonds of Union, was to repudiate that same heritage.11

The editors of the Spectator likewise held fast to the bonds of Union. Employing their old rhetoric from the 1850s, the Spectator placed the blame for the sectional strife of the age squarely upon extremists in both sections. All true conservatives, so they said, supported the Union, while “With the exception of the insignificant faction of ultra abolitionists at the North and a few equally insane gentlemen of the fire-eating stripe at the South, nobody seems disposed at present to tolerate the idea of a dissolution.” The editors expressed this idea of a political borderland in more explicit terms as well. As far as the Spectator was concerned, Virginia’s and the Valley’s trials were not theirs alone. This sectional crisis had been foisted on the other border states as well: “It is Maryland, Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri that have borne all the losses.

and annoyance, and are to bear all the impending peril. To these States, therefore, the decision of the national aspects of these impending perils emphatically appertains.” Beyond this, The Spectator did not limit this borderland status or mentality as a uniquely southern condition. The editors believed that sectional trauma threatened the northern border states as well: “on them, with reference to the free States behind them, rest the duty and the right of deciding the national aspect of the subject of slavery on the free side of the line.” The Spectator thus cast the sectional battle as one that uniquely affected the border regions, and asserted that those inhabiting these regions had ample reason to find a resolution to this problem. Virginia at this time shared a border with the Ohio and Pennsylvania, so many Virginians were keenly aware of how they were positioned geographically relative to the free states and the other slaves states.¹²

The Spectator also held the view that the choice between Union and slavery was a false one. In the middle of the 1860 campaign, Richard Mauzy, who edited the True American until it merged with the Spectator in 1857, took over editorship of the paper. Mauzy declared that “Whilst I would surrender none of the rights of the States, I would sever none of the bonds of the Union; for the preservation of the Union in its integrity is necessary to the preservation of our liberties.” The Union thus served as a vehicle to protect the common interest held across all of the states. To protect this common interest required the election of a truly “national” president. Much as it had under the management of the Waddells, the Spectator under Mauzy’s direction warned of the destructive radical forces in both sections, and like his Rockbridge counterparts, he supported Bell and Everett. He warned, “the election of either Lincoln or Breckinridge is justly regarded as the triumph of an extreme over moderate opinions.” He even claimed, much as some Whig editors had claimed in 1856, that southern radicals wanted a Republican victory to speed up the process of disunion. He opposed Lincoln and the Republicans because they represented a

¹² Staunton Spectator, January 17, 1860; Staunton Spectator, January 31, 1860.
northern, antislavery, sectional cause. Defeating him would require the election of a national
candidate from a national party. The triumph of nationalist, anti-sectional forces necessitated that
some lay aside their partisan preferences.\textsuperscript{13}

The Valley Star too called for the preservation of the Union under the Constitution. They
also exhorted their readers in Rockbridge County to abandon party labels in the hopes that this
might protect the Union. The editors argued that “the political parties in the South should lay
aside their partisan banners, unite their forces, and present a solid phalanx to the Black
Republicans, who are rapidly gaining ground and undermining the temple of our Union.”
Gillock, like many Valley Unionists, thought that political parties at this point served only to
divide conservative Unionists. They could only stop the Black Republican radicals by uniting
around the preservation of the Union. The 1860 election, in their view, prompted southerners to
rally around southern concerns in the interest of defending their section from the North. While
the Valley Star explicitly identified itself with southern interests, Gillock did not advocate
disunion. He supported northern Democrat Stephen Douglas over southern Democrat J.C.
Breckinridge. He favored Douglas not from any particular animus against Breckinridge, but
because he believed Douglas was the nominee of the national party. Uniting alongside northern
conservatives was more important to Gillock than sectionality. Even as the Valley Star called
upon southerners to unite as southerners, Gillock held to the importance of nationalist unionism.
He singled out for criticism the Alabama fire-eater William Lowndes Yancey, who publicly
advocated southern secession and nationhood long before the secession crisis. The Valley Star
argued in September 1860 that to secede would be contrary to southern interests; if Virginia

\textsuperscript{13} “About the Valley Newspapers – Staunton Spectator,” Valley of the Shadow: Two Communities in the American
Civil War, University of Virginia Library, accessed May 15, 2014,
http://vshadow.vcdh.virginia.edu/xml_docs/valley_news/html/about/spect.html; Staunton Spectator, May 29, 1860;
“How to Vote,” Staunton Spectator, September 11, 1860; “Staunton Spectator and Vindicator,” Chronicling
America.
followed Yancey’s preferred course, they warned, the Lower South would reopen the African slave trade, and the value of Virginia’s slaves would decrease.  

The Valley Star’s former editor, Governor John Letcher, also actively supported Douglas’s candidacy, but appears to have taken few public actions on his behalf. Weeks before Virginia’s Election Day, Lexington Democrat James Dorman Davidson and Augusta Democrat Samuel Yost wrote him requesting his presence at a pro-Douglas rally. Letcher declined, citing his position as governor of the state; because he represented “all interests and all classes of the people,” he thought it inappropriate to appear on Douglas’s behalf publicly. Though refusing to attend, he did offer his assessment of the national political scene. As many observers did, Letcher blamed the rift in his party on sectionalism, warning that “Sectional feelings, and sectional prejudices, have taken possession of the minds of large numbers of our people, in both the north and the South. The first fruits are already sour, in the division and dissolution of the Democratic party.” Letcher’s views very much matched those of both the Whig and Democratic editors in the southern Shenandoah Valley.

The Vindicator, which by April 1860 was operated by Samuel Yost, also supported Stephen Douglas rather than back the southern candidate for president. The Vindicator endorsed Douglas because to Yost’s mind, he represented the best that northern statesmanship had to offer. In Yost’s words, “he had fought more hard battles for the South on Northern soil than had all the Southern statesmen and politicians from the Potomac to the Gulf.” Here was a northern Democrat who, while a northerner, was a national candidate that proslavery southerners could trust. The Vindicator in fact suggested that the mere fact that Douglas attracted opposition from sectionalists North and South made him a good candidate. Because he drew the ire of “Black

15 John Letcher Papers, Series 6, Mss1L5684aFA2, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond; Boney, John Letcher, 21.
Republics, because he is too much inclined to the South; and vilified by the disunionists of the South because his proclivities are with the North,” the *Vindicator* concluded that “the conservative elements are once more coming together” around Douglas.\(^\text{16}\)

The *Vindicator*’s support for Douglas also likely related to the personal preferences of Samuel M. Yost, the paper’s publisher. Yost at this time served as one of the district’s delegates to the Democratic convention in Charleston. He witnessed firsthand the degeneration of the Democratic Party into sectional factions squabbling over the presidential nomination. The nomination fight at Charleston deepened divisions even within Virginia’s own delegation. Northern and southern Democrats, while generally committed to protecting slavery where it already existed, could not agree on a national position regarding the status of slavery in the territories. This disagreement eventually resulted in the divided candidacies of Breckinridge and Douglas. If Yost characterized events accurately, he and a number of Virginia delegates from the western counties openly preferred Douglas. The eastern delegates, however, favored Breckinridge. This divided the Virginia delegation to such a degree that they could not agree on either candidate, and much to the outrage of the eastern delegates, did not vote as a unit. Yost disparaged the perception that Virginia’s delegates ought to vote together. Western Virginians, Yost claimed, were “tired of playing second fiddle to the silk- stocking and kid-gloved gentry of Eastern Virginia.” The West, Yost declared, would not submit to the “interested politicians on the oyster banks,” whom he described as “a few wire-pullers in Eastern Virginia.” This tension clearly illustrates the depth of the divide between eastern and western Virginia. Though Valley

\(^{16}\) “Unit Vote of Virginia,” *Staunton Vindicator*, May 12, 1860; “Singularly Unfortunate,” *Staunton Vindicator*, June 8, 1860.
Unionists tended to favor unity of sentiment and action, they sacrificed Virginia’s prestige by supporting those whom they believed was the truly national candidate.\textsuperscript{17}

In any case, the \textit{Vindicator} continued to support the cause of Union throughout the 1860 campaign even at the risk of alienating the rest of the Democratic Party. Throughout the contest, Yost contended that the conservative political character of the American people would prevail against the forces of sectionalism. The agitation of abolitionists and fire-eaters, Yost claimed, would “only arouse the honest masses to reflection.” He continued to believe that Virginians could rely upon “a preponderance in favor of conservatism in the North, decidedly and uncompromisingly friendly to all the guaranteed rights of the South.” Under the banner of the national Democratic ticket, Yost hoped to orchestrate “a significant rebuke to Northern and Southern fanaticism by the sovereign people of the Union.”\textsuperscript{18}

As months of canvassing dragged on, and results from across the country came in, it became increasingly clear that Lincoln stood a very clear chance of winning the presidency. In Virginia as a whole, Constitutional Unionist John Bell won a slim plurality of 358 votes over J.C. Breckinridge. The story in Augusta and Rockbridge was somewhat different. In this part of the Valley, Bell won by a clear and convincing majority. In Augusta, Bell received 2,553 votes to 1,094 for Douglas. Rockbridge voters cast their ballots similarly. Bell earned 1,231 votes to Douglas’s 641. Far more remarkable was the divide within the Democratic vote itself. In both counties, Breckinridge received only a minority of the Democratic vote, 218 in Augusta to 361 in Rockbridge. Local Democrats, despite their general affinity for the South and their belief in the preservation of slavery, nonetheless cast their votes for the northern candidate. While voters reasons for affirmatively selecting Douglas are difficult to determine, it is not entirely

\textsuperscript{17} “Unit Vote of Virginia,” \textit{Staunton Vindicator}, May 12, 1860.
\textsuperscript{18} “Singularly Unfortunate,” \textit{Staunton Vindicator}, June 8, 1860.
unreasonable to speculate that the vote for Douglas appealed largely to anti-sectional sentiments common in these counties. Even if they did not necessarily approve of Douglas, they at the very least repudiated Breckinridge. The evidence from Virginia’s 1861 vote totals, however, remains inconclusive in terms of deciphering trends correlated with Unionism. Excepting Berkeley and Jefferson Counties, no other counties in the Shenandoah Valley sent even a plurality of votes to John Bell. The whole of the heavily Unionist region that became West Virginia, in fact, supported Breckinridge by a margin of 911 votes. Breckinridge in fact carried some Valley counties that later supported Union over secession. Regardless of the actual vote totals, those who publicly voiced their opinions in during the campaign generally supported the Union without respect to their party loyalty.19

B. The Lower South and the Basis for Secession

The months following Lincoln’s election proved critical for the future of Virginia and the nation. During this time, seven states seceded, and Virginians debated whether they should do likewise. The debate within Virginia implicitly addressed many of the concerns that had been brewing in both state and national politics for years. In their final analysis, the Valley’s political decision-makers settled on secession only as a last resort. In the meantime, however, Valley notables agonized over this question, and many who risked their lives and property in the name of the Confederacy had before that time been ardent defenders of the Union. The story of secession in these two counties is one of people devoted to a Union that only barely seemed to exist trying to make sense of the situation that confronted them. In the end, the decision to secede came as a rational outgrowth of their preexisting political culture of Union. Common interest and

values with the North had ceased to exist by the time of Lincoln’s proclamation, but they could still exist as part of a greater whole alongside other southerners.

When the dust from the presidential election had settled, Valley Unionists expressed trepidation and alarm. They feared the possibility of civil war, and believed that South Carolina’s secession on December 20 served no purpose other than to precipitate such a crisis. The Whig papers urged their readers to stay the course, remain true to southern interests, and stand by the Union. They were convinced, however, that the forces of radicalism and fanaticism had overrun the better instincts of the North. The Gazette, alarmed by Lincoln’s triumph, warned that the Union had been “falsely operated upon by a variety of causes, misled by designing men, and temporarily bewildered, has by its voice given monumetary ascendancy to a fanatical, sectional, and aggressive party.” McNutt maintained that Lincoln had only been elected because of the “dissensions and distractions of the conservative men of the country.” Had conservatives been united, a truly national candidate might have carried the day. Despite the perceived danger, the Whig editors dissuaded their readers from acting too hastily. Even though fanatics now reigned supreme in the North, these moderates maintained that if conservatives in both sections stood firm, they could sustain government under Lincoln’s Republicans. Amidst cries for disunion across the South, McNutt opined that any Union that the states might dissolve after an election “ought to have been given up long ago.”

Mauzy, by comparison, believed that by standing with John Bell and the Union, Virginians had demonstrated the proper course for the nation, and hoped that other states might follow: “Virginia has set an example of moderation and conservatism, worthy of the favorable consideration of the South.” Mauzy’s Spectator also publicly scolded South Carolina for

seceding so quickly. The Spectator criticized secession as not only “foolish, cowardly and treasonable,” but also as “the progeny of treason and cowardice – the resultant of a desire to overthrow the government and the fear of meeting the penalties attaching to the attempt [emphasis original].” One of the Spectator’s even subscribers accused southern secessionists of undermining republicanism. Lexington politician James B. Dorman likewise characterized the secession of the Lower South as “unjust and injurious” to Virginia, and noticed “an (essential) difference between the people (and the interests) of the Cotton States and of the Border Slave States.” The Valley Star also voiced the view that those who advocated disunion did so on too narrow a basis. The editors warned against those who would sacrifice “The general interest of humanity; the progress of civil and religious liberty; the pride, glory and ultimate hopes of a great Republic” all for the sake of “a Southern Confederacy, based on a Staple and an Institution.” Gillock did not want to break up the Union over cotton and slavery. Secession and disunion would require threats far more severe and dangers far more imminent. Yost’s Vindicator also attacked the seceding states for “recklessly and madly initiated steps of disunion, regardless not only of the sentiments, but the interests of the border States.” Slavery itself, so far as many Valley Unionists were concerned, was not the only item at issue. The destruction of the federal union and the creation of a new nation required a broader base than the interests of the Lower South.21

This concern about the interests necessary to dissolve the union and rally behind the Lower South was pervasive. As far as Samuel M. Yost’s Vindicator could tell, no Union between Virginia and South Carolina existed as of December 1860. As many Valley Unionists pointed

out, the interests of Virginia and the Lower South diverged markedly. Yost declared, “There can never be an united Confederacy of the slave States upon any extreme basis the cotton States may suggest.” This incongruity of interest lay in the growing clamor in the Lower South to reopen the transatlantic slave trade, which would threaten the livelihoods of the Border South’s interstate slave traders. While not making this specific connection, Yost believed “no union of equality between Virginia and South Carolina could exist where this traffic was legalized.” McNutt’s Gazette also feared the prospect of having to choose between northern abolitionists and a Lower South confederacy based on the Atlantic slave trade. Gillock too asserted that immediate secessionists demanded disunion “for no other reason than to make cotton higher and labor cheap.”

This fear of the reopening of the slave trade appeared widely among Valley Unionists. Writing to James Dorman Davidson in late March 1861, Samuel McDowell Moore, one of Rockbridge County’s delegates to the 1861 secession convention, speculated that the Valley Star, which had recently changed its Unionist position to support for secession, must have been purchased by slave traders. This fear may have stemmed from the new Confederate Constitution, which empowered its congress to prohibit the importation of slaves from states outside the Confederacy. Moore, like Dorman, had also at one point vocally supported gradual abolition, and may have feared other consequences of slave importation. The influence of the slave traders worried Moore, who described them as “the most potent money power that has ever existed in Virginia.” He distrusted them because their support went “entirely with the seceded states, and to promote it, they would sacrifice every other interest in the state, without the least scruple.”

Writing to Lexington businessman Samuel McDowell Reid, Rockbridge farmer Thomas S.

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Moore suggested that the real interest of establishing a southern confederacy was “free trade, getting negroes cheaper,” both proposals that threatened Valley interests. Mauzy’s Spectator during in November 1860 similarly supposed that the Lower South had seceded to set up “a Southern Confederacy with the African slave-trade reopened, and not because they dread any violation of their rights.” While not specifically addressing the issue of the slave trade, Augusta politician John D. Imboden worried that non-slaveholders might not fight for the South if they perceived the struggle as “a mere contest between politicians for the spoils of office.” The Valley Unionists opposed the Lower South secessionists in spite of cultural affinity and a commitment to slavery because they believed the basis for the Lower South’s secession was too narrow. They wished to live equally within the Union, and believed this impossible if the Confederacy adopted policies contrary to their interests.

Governor John Letcher also voiced the fears of not only his Valley constituents, but of many other Virginians as well. “Confidence is destroyed;” Letcher wrote, “fraternal feeling has been supplanted by intense sectional hate.” Letcher, at least, clearly sensed that the common bonds of interest and values that had sustained the Union no longer existed. At this time of crisis, he argued, Virginia had to look to her own interests. He also charged that the Lower South was acting in its own interests without consideration of the Union: “The Cotton States seem to be looking to their own interests alone, and why should we not look to ours? – Virginia has

immense interests, valuable and important, at state: and it becomes us to see that those interests are adequately protected.” Letcher left open the question of whether Virginia should adhere to the North or to the South in this address. While he did level harsh criticism against northern abolitionists, Letcher held out hope that some compromise might emerge capable of saving the Union: “No time is to be lost in putting into immediate requisition all fair, honorable and constitutional means that promise to secure a satisfactory and permanent adjustment.” Letcher did not dismiss the idea of secession out of hand, but he held onto it as a last resort. Like many of his contemporaries, Letcher seems to have believed that a Union required a balance of common interest with local interest, and that Virginia ought to choose the side of whichever confederacy could most adequately protect the Commonwealth.24

Those who assembled at a public Union Meeting in Staunton a few months before Letcher’s address generally agreed. The November 1860 Augusta County Union Meeting cast the solution to the sectional crisis in terms of shared interests and values. Even as they expressed their solidarity with the seceded states, they nonetheless saw fit to “beseech the gallant and patriotic people of the Cotton States to pause and calmly consider the yet unimagined evils which must result from a dissolution of the Union.” The Augusta Union Meeting also saw fit to criticize the North, which in their view had been overrun by a sectional party “united together by sentiments deemed to be hostile to the South.” In the spirit of perpetuating the “continued brotherhood between the North and the South,” the Union Meeting implored “the people of the non-slaveholding States require their public servants to observe their constitutional obligations to the South.” They considered themselves among the only ones left to resolve the crisis and meet the task ahead: “to preserve on the one hand, the known and equal rights of her own people as citizens of a common country, and on the other, the harmony of the Union and the integrity of

24 “Governor’s Message,” Valley Star, January 17, 1861.
the Constitution.” James B. Dorman also believed that a sincere appeal to conservative elements in the North could ease sectional tension. He rejected the case for immediate secession because it “presumes hostility on the part of the majority of the Northern people.” Dorman equated this position with the “irrepressible conflict” doctrine of William Seward, who was reviled throughout the white South as an abolitionist hostile to southern institutions. He added that he too would support secession after being convinced of this, but did not see the requisite hostility. This approach emphasized the need to appeal to common political values to unite white northerners and southerners.25

C. The Reference Question and Coercion: Republicanism in Crisis

In addition to the basis for disunion, the means of the state’s secession provoked alarm among Valley Unionists. Virtually none of the seceded states allowed for voters to approve or reject the decision. South Carolina’s legislature, for example, passed an ordinance of secession without even calling a state convention. Alabama’s legislature did call for a convention, but did not require a popular referendum to ratify its decision. Only Georgia did so. This apparent lack of popular will alarmed many Valley Unionists. In the months preceding Virginia’s decision to secede, Virginia papers published materials both in favor of and against popular reference at the state’s upcoming constitutional convention. “An Old Subscriber” writing to the Spectator worried that Virginia might meet the fate of its southern neighbors: “The elective franchise there is gone. The rulers determine the kind and form of government, make laws to suit themselves.” The Spectator itself openly supported this position, urging its readers to vote in favor of reference when the public voted on the convention ordinance. Editor Richard Mauzy evidently feared that a convention not bound by a reference provision would lead to minority rule.

25 “Augusta County Union Meeting!,” Staunton Spectator, November 27, 1860; Speech, James B. Dorman Papers, Rockbridge Historical Society Collection, RHS MSS, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University.
Decrying those who opposed reference as “oligarchs,” the Valley Star doubted whether the people of the Lower South really favored secession: “if the Secession ordinances had been submitted to a popular vote and sufficient time given to discuss their merits, they would have been rejected in some of the Cotton States, if not in all but South Carolina.” Valley Unionists thus saw themselves beset on both sides by extremists and radicals.26

This issue of how a state ought to secede held particular importance for Valley Unionists because of the ways in which they viewed the sectional crisis from both state and national levels. The strongest secessionist sentiment in Virginia came from the eastern counties, just as the strongest secession sentiment in the South came from the Lower South. Within this context, Valley Unionists feared they would be dragged into disunion by a secessionist-dominated convention unaccountable to the people. From this fear, they accused the Lower South of contriving a plan to force the Upper South out of the Union. They reasoned that if the Lower South seceded, the slave interests remaining within the Union would become comparatively weaker. Mauzy suggested that “This may be the reason why some of the Southern States are in such a hurry to secede. They think that if they secede and leave us at the mercy of a Black Republican majority in congress, that we will secede likewise.” Indignant, Mauzy wrote that “no State has the right to secede when that act will involve other states in the common ruin. Virginia has interests independent of the Cotton States, and she should take care of them in spite of the action of those states.” Should secession occur, it would have to pose no harm to Virginia.27

Valley Unionists depicted the immediate secession of the Lower South as a calamity nearly equal to the prospect of a sectional civil war, and they feared being “coerced” out of the

27 “Though Lincoln is elected there is no danger,” Staunton Spectator, November 13, 1860.
Union by the South as well as the North. Few expressed joy at the news of South Carolina’s secession. John P. Lightner of Augusta, writing from Washington College in Lexington, described South Carolina as a “den of traitors.” In the Spectator, Mauzy compared South Carolina’s immediate secession with the possibility of northern military intervention. He thought that “The application of coercion to keep a State in the Union would be bad enough, but to coerce or drag a state out of the Union would be a thousand-fold worse.” Valley Unionists, Yost’s Vindicator said, would “never consent that South Carolina and Alabama shall arrange the programme by which the border States must leave the Union.” Valley editors repeatedly emphasized that they would not see Virginia “hitched” onto the Lower South. If Virginians made up their minds to secede, they had to do so on their own terms. This fear of coercion was no idle speculation. Ever since Congress debated President Jackson’s Force Bill during the Nullification Crisis some thirty years earlier, the specter of coercion against the states loomed large over the sectional controversy. Southerners generally and Upper South Unionists specifically feared this possibility, and it manifested itself nearly every time antebellum sectional tensions flared into full on crisis. The sectional crisis of the early 1860s was no different relative to this concern.²⁸

Valley Unionists therefore consistently identified federal coercion as an unacceptable occurrence that would spell the end of the Union because it meant the bonds of interest and values weak enough that holding the nation together required force. Even Valley residents who expressed opinions on few other political matters voiced in no uncertain terms their opposition to coercion. The thought of federal coercion could make a secessionist out of even the most ardent of Unionists. To Valley Unionists, the need to secure the bonds of Union through use of force signified disunion itself. While expressing hesitancy regarding secession, Greenlee Davidson of

Lexington believed that in the event of federal coercion, “the course of Virginia would be
determined at once.” Yost’s *Vindicator* enunciated this position clearly in January 1861. Yost
argued that “There could not be conceived a policy more at war with the principles of a free and
voluntary republic than that power resided anywhere to strengthen the bonds of union by
coercive means.” To Yost, the Union was not something to be held together by force. It was
intimately tied with national sentiments. Because the Union was “a community of interests and
personal regard, rather than upon the ‘mere coercive power’ of the federal head,” there could be
no Union through coercion “while the sympathies, sentiments and purposes of the masses are
urgently calling for separation.” Coercion did not frighten Yost because he did not value the
Union; it frightened him because he believed that the very need to use such a tool showed the
Union beyond saving.29

George Junkin, the Pennsylvania-born President of Washington College, agreed with
Yost on this point. In January 1861, a letter Junkin wrote to the governor of Pennsylvania
provided his opinion on the sectional crisis to residents of his state of birth. According to Junkin,
“no number of military forces can save the Union. Every threat, every allusion to coercion rather
tends to dissolution. It aggravates feeling and tends increases alienation : whereas love is the
only principle of unity worth regarding.” To Junkin, a Union that had to be saved through force
of arms was not worth saving. Coercion, Junkin argued, would only hold together “A union of
knaves in the bond of hypocrisy.” A Presbyterian minister, Junkin then specifically quoted the
New Testament book of Ephesians in describing the Union as “the unity of the spirit in the bond
of peace.” Equating the Union with God’s divinely ordained church reflected a view of the
Union as a sacred, inviolable institution. According to Junkin’s view at least, any Union that

29 Greenlee Davidson to John D. Imboden, February 19, 1860, John D. Imboden Papers, ACC 10516, Albert and
Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia; “Coercion,” *Staunton Vindicator*, January 11,
1861.
required force to hold it together lacked divinely sanctioned “unity of the spirit.” The issue of coercion spoke to the deeper issue of the political character of the American people.  

Thomas S. Moore concurred. While disavowing the right of state secession, Moore impressed upon Lexington businessman Samuel McDowell Reid that coercion meant no less than catastrophe. In Moore’s view, coercion “would not unite the different sections in mind and in heart, and that is the great difficulty.” Like Junkin, Moore grounded his faith in the Union in divine sovereignty. He believed that only a higher power, not human action, could hold the nation together. Moore even considered the sectional crisis a sign of God’s displeasure with the American people. He thought that “This is God Almighty’s Nation. We are his people. He made us to honor him. We have become infidel and corrupt. We have forgotten God our maker.” At the core of the Union’s trouble, on this view, lay the moral degeneracy of the American public. Union was just as much, if not more, a moral condition as it was a political one. Neither Junkin nor Moore argued at great length about executive tyranny or the power of the federal government. Foremost in their minds was the public virtue and fundamental character of the American public. 

George Baylor, a Democrat and one of Augusta’s delegates to the secession convention, agreed as well. Though he did not cast the matter strictly in terms of the common values of the American people, he did believe in the fruitlessness of coercion. On March 1, addressing the assembled delegates, Baylor argued that while no state possessed the right to secede, the federal government ought not force any seceded state back into the Union. Baylor believed coercion both unconstitutional and ineffectual. Even if the northern states colluded to conquer South Carolina and drag it back into the Union fold, Baylor implored, “You would not make her

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30 “A Voice from a Pennsylvanian in the Heart of Virginia,” *Lexington Gazette*, January 31, 1861; Eph 4: 3 KJV.
31 “A Voice from the Heart of Virginia,” *Lexington Gazette*, January 3, 1861; Thomas S. Moore to Samuel M. Reid, January 19, 1861, Samuel McDowell Reid Papers, RHS MSS.
perform her duty as a member of the Federal Government. You could not make her send her Representatives to the Congress of the United States.” No Union that required force to maintain it could be said to exist at all. He did not speak to the matter of public character, but he nonetheless believed coercion could only mean the Union ceased to exist. Implicit within this view, however, was the position that continued Union required something more abstract than mere shared interests.32

Others supported secession even without regard to the issue of coercion. When voices did emerge in favor of secession, they usually did so within the context of their own political cultural understanding of the Union. Augusta lawyer George W. Imboden frankly admitted to Judge John H. McCue, also of Augusta, that he viewed secession as the most viable option to defend Virginia’s rights. Imboden identified his support for secession with his common identity alongside the rest of the South: “I am in favor a united South, first last and all the time. Whether right or wrong I go with the South.” He even threatened to leave Virginia if the state did not secede, though he conceded that his position was in the minority in Augusta. Despite his southern identity, however, he still pledged some semblance of loyalty to the Union: “I am anti-disunion and anti coercion, but the Union is dissolved.” In other words, his loyalty to the Union lasted only as long as the Union itself lasted, making the precise nature of that Union important. Since the common bonds of interest and values had disappeared, he no longer held any loyalty to the Union. Even Imboden’s support for secession in opposition to the North, however, resonated with local political culture. He believed that Virginia and the South “have but one and the same destiny, one and the same interest,” and chided those “singing hosannans to the union when there is no union!” Even secessionism and unity alongside the Lower South, therefore, took on

the properties of the political culture of Union. Union held great significance, but it could only endure so long as the bonds of interest and values remained in place.\textsuperscript{33}

George Imboden’s older brother John D. Imboden took a more cautious, gradualist approach to resistance against the North. John Imboden regarded Lincoln’s election not as the end of the Union itself, but as “another step towards that sectional domination to which we never will submit if it be attained.” Such a step did not require secession on this view. In John Imboden’s opinion, to break up the Union “for the mere loss of an election” was nothing more than “a mere pretext on the part of disunionists per se to precipitate a revolution.” He argued instead that because there still existed a conservative majority in Congress, the South could still defend chattel slavery through political channels. John Imboden even after Lincoln’s election maintained that enough conservative sentiment prevailed in the North to feasibly hold the Union together. In his view, civil war could only come if circumstances threatened the rights of the political citizen. Something far more monumental would need to happen: the end of republican society as the Valley Unionists understood it.\textsuperscript{34}

By January 1861, the Imboden brothers had become of more or less the same mind regarding secession. Shortly after the Convention bill passed, John Imboden announced his candidacy as one of Augusta’s delegates. In John Imboden’s mind, “Parties and politicians, falsehood, infidelity and fanaticism, Corruption in public morals, and the raving madness of sectional hate, originated in the pulpits of the North, fostered in their schools, organized upon their hustings, and expounded through the ballot box, have brought the country to the verge of ruin.” He thus attributed the disintegration of the Union not only to the perceived abuses of


\textsuperscript{34} John D. Imboden to John H. McCue, December 3, 1860, McCue Family Papers, ACC 4406.
northern politicians, but also the social and cultural institutions that molded northern public sentiments. The victory of Lincoln and the Republicans, John Imboden believed, would subject the South to the will of “an unprincipled Northern majority of wild politico-religious fanatics.” Men like the Imbodens believed that an equitable Union alongside men of such character could no longer exist.\(^{35}\)

Francis H. Smith, an army officer originally from Norfolk who had lived in Lexington since his appointment as Superintendent of the Virginia Military Institute in 1839, also advocated united southern action. Smith did not concern himself with whether South Carolina could justify secession. He was more worried about the circumstances that secession presented. He wanted to preserve the Union, but believed that the situation South Carolina created demanded united action on the part of the South. If the Union were to survive, Smith wanted it to be on southern terms. Smith, unlike many Valley Unionists, rejected the notion that the extremists in both sections threatened the republic. Writing to Philip St. George Cocke of Alabama, he lambasted those who “say at such a time that S. Car[olina] is more to blame than Mass,” and even suggested he might leave the state. Smith was less worried about how to preserve the Union and more concerned with defending southern interests.\(^{36}\)

Despite disagreeing with many Valley Unionists, Francis H. Smith held similar views of the Union and the conditions required for disunion. Smith demanded a Union “in spirit as well as form,” and made it clear he would insist on secession in the event of federal coercion. According to Smith, “The Union was valueless, if it had to be maintained, at the sacrifice of its constitutional guarantees. The Union was dissolved – when the spirit of union was gone.” Even

\(^{35}\) “To the People of Augusta,” *Staunton Vindicator*, January 18, 1861; “To the People of Augusta County,” *Staunton Spectator*, January 22, 1861.

to Smith, who rejected some of his neighbors’ more moderate ideas, the preservation of the Union required certain common values. Smith therefore warned William E. Taylor of Norfolk of the “wide spread prevalence of a spirit, which is unfriendly to our institutions – and destructive to our constitutional liberties.” Smith’s differences with Unionists lay in what circumstances demonstrated this lack of common values. To Smith, being in a Union alongside the free states without the seven slave states of the Lower South was enough.  

Not everyone in the Valley was so sanguine about Virginia’s prospects alongside the Lower South, however. Writing at the end of 1860, Elizabeth Ann Willson of Rockbridge expressed grave doubts about the future of the Union and of the South. Relatively little of Willson’s correspondence has survived, so her views on secession near the end of the secession crisis remain unclear, but she voiced open hostility to the idea in late December of 1860. She stated that “the time for the dissolution of the Union is not yet come, but I believe that the time for a new ordering of things has come.” Furthermore, she argued that when voters elect a representative, they should “expect to be represented morally as well as politickally.” In her view, therefore, the stability of the Union rested in some sense on the moral fiber of elected representatives. Willson greatly stressed the importance of character in her analysis of the secession crisis. She believed that “The idea of a great Southern Republic is but a chimera; What is to prevent its being broken up into section[s]? nothing; the passions of designing politicians be brought into play then as now.” According to her view, the fundamental character of politicians remained the same regardless of whether the South seceded or not. The threats to liberty remained irrespective of the South’s place politically. She cautioned that “that there is too much to lose to lightly break up the Union of the States,” and asserted that those who wanted to secede

did so because they sought power. Willson raised fundamentally the same fears regarding secession as many secessionists raised relative to the North: office seeking, conniving politicians. Across the whole spectrum of the secession debate, both those who opposed and supported secession appealed to essentially the same values.  

D. Union and Secession on the Valley Borderland

Valley Unionists also appealed to these values in the context of a political and geographic borderland. They keenly sensed their precarious position between extremes both within their state and within the Union. In November 1860, the Augusta Union Meeting published resolutions proclaiming they were “citizens of a commonwealth allied to the South in its domestic institutions, affections and sympathies; but bordering on the North, and, therefore, in immediate contiguity to the perils which may follow a dissolution of the Union.” The North-South borderland, from this perspective, was one of simple geography: the Valley happened to be located such that it would bear much of the damage from any war with the North. But others perceive this borderland in differing ways that shed light on Valley Unionists’ thought processes during the Secession Crisis.  

Many Valley Unionists explicitly noted their position in the middle of affairs both in terms of geography and politics. Among the more prominent and more verbose was John B. Baldwin, a Whig politician from Augusta County. Early in 1861, Augusta’s voters selected Baldwin as one of their three delegates to the state constitutional convention called to debate the question of Virginia’s secession. In one of his speeches on the convention floor, Baldwin appealed to his home county’s central position within the Commonwealth. Because of its place on the boundary between eastern and western Virginia, Baldwin argued, Augusta could mediate

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38 Elizabeth Ann Willson to William, December 29, 1860, Elizabeth Ann Willson Papers, MSS 38-490, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia.
39 “Augusta County Union Meeting!,” Staunton Spectator, November 27, 1860.
between the interests of these two sections: “Situated at the centre of the State, connected with both East and West by the great lines of travel and improvement, and with the great Valley, midway of which she stands, she is connected with each and all by every tie, social and industrial, that can bind communities together.” He even went so far as to assert that Augusta’s representative could speak on behalf of all Virginia. Baldwin’s speech illustrates a clear perception that the Valley occupied a unique place in Virginia politics that made it amenable to compromise and negotiation.40

Baldwin used similar language in his discussions of national politics. Like most of the delegates who met in Richmond, Baldwin acknowledged the central role that slavery played in propelling the northern and southern states toward conflict. Baldwin opined that “no observer can fail to take notice of the fact that the question of slavery has been made the tool of politicians North and South. No one can fail to take cognizance of the fact that it has been used by gambling politicians, of both sections, as a counter in the miserable game of politics.” Unlike some southerners, Baldwin leveled criticism at both northerners and southerners. He believed that “there is a kinship between extremes of opinion and party,” and accused South Carolinians of rejoicing at Lincoln’s election as an excuse to secede from the Union. Baldwin believed that throughout the nation, “infatuation, madness and fanaticism” threatened to “destroy the rights and interests of millions of freemen, North and South.” For Baldwin, there lay in the Union a greater whole the preservation of which demanded the attention of all patriotic citizens. Even in the face of pervasive disagreements as to matters of policy, Baldwin believed that holding the Union together was in the interests of all Americans, and those who advocated secession and dissolution acted out of their own selfish, atomized preferences.41

40 Reese, Proceedings, 2:139.
41 Reese, Proceedings, 2:189, 195.
Although Baldwin spoke on these issues at greater length than did most of the Unionist delegates, these views were hardly unique to him. Other delegates from Augusta and Rockbridge agreed with him on fundamental points. James B. Dorman of Rockbridge County also served as a delegate to the 1861 convention, and his views matched Baldwin’s in certain key respects. Dorman also claimed the privilege of speaking for the whole of Virginia based on his county’s central location. Dorman declared before his fellow delegates that he spoke on behalf of “a county which has interests as closely connected with all the great and diversified interests of Virginia as any other county in the State.” Because of its connections to this diverse set of interests, Dorman could claim Rockbridge as “a type of the great Commonwealth itself, in its slaveholding, mining, manufacturing, and in all its staple interests.” Dorman made much the same claim as Baldwin; he argued that his home county’s location near the middle of the state and its attachment to multiple interests made its electorate a fair judge of political matters. Like many Valley Unionists, Dorman advocated a collected, moderate approach to solving political crises, preferring deliberation to rash and intemperate action. He urged the delegates to “unite the people of this Commonwealth upon some common ground of action.” Fears of sectionalism and factionalism persistent among Valley Unionists led Dorman, and others, to favor action that accounted for the views of all Virginians rather than the energized radicals who favored immediate secession.\footnote{Reese,\textit{Proceedings}, 1:402.}

From the standpoint of the Valley Unionists, fears of sectionalism and factionalism were well grounded. While the 1851 constitution eased many of the political concerns in western Virginia, the sectional divide between the plantation-dominated regions of the tidewater and piedmont, and the trans-Alleghany west remained. Two days before Virginia voted to secede, Dorman wrote to Lexington lawyer James Dorman Davidson, expressing his view that the east
would demand a vote on secession, and that the west would not secede without coordinated action with the other border slave states. He even feared that Rockbridge itself might fracture in the event of Virginia’s secession. Two days later, on the day of the vote, Dorman wrote to Davidson again expressing his wish to “unite in giving as large a majority as possible to the action taken, for the purpose of effect abroad.” He remained cautious only because he had no sense of the public sentiment at home. Regardless, Dorman demonstrated a concern with unity of action. By mid-April, Dorman appears to have become more concerned with maintaining consensus within Virginia that staying within the Union.43

The importance of maintaining common interest within the Union appeared during the secession debates in the context of Virginia’s place within the nation relative to neighboring states. Virginia was but one of several states that had conflicting ties to both North and South, and the Valley was not the only region caught in between opposing sections. This fostered the belief on the part of many that the border states of the Upper South, as well as the middle Free States, held some sort of common interest apart from the extreme South and the extreme North. George Baylor argued that Virginia should “act as a mediator in the present strife; and if she deserves to have any influence that middle ground is the place for her to occupy.” While Baylor himself did not expand upon this idea to encompass the other Border States, other Valley delegates did.44

Augusta Whig Alexander H. H. Stuart discussed this principle at length in his speeches before the convention. He argued that in one sense, Virginia should coordinate with the other Border States as a matter of expediency; it would be dangerous for Virginia to join with the Lower South if none of her neighboring border slave states did. Stuart also indicated that unique

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43 James B. Dorman to James D. Davidson, April 16, 1861, in Greenawalt, “Unionists in Rockbridge County,” 99.
44 Reese, Proceedings, 1:287.
interests bound Virginia to these Border States differently from the Lower South. He even extended this political borderland to include the northern free state excluding the states of New England and the Old Northwest, which many proslavery southerners perceived as hotbeds of abolitionist radicalism. The states along the border, Stuart believed, had in common, “business relations, private interests, social ties, the ties of brotherhood, the ties of intermarriage and of communication.” In place of Union with radicals, Stuart sought to form a new “tier of friendly States between the slaveholding States and the States of the extreme North and North-west,” that moderates might be able to “effect a reconstruction of the Union upon such terms as we would indicate.” Stuart’s conception of Union, therefore, explicitly excluded radicals, and Stuart specifically promoted the ties across the Border States as mitigating fanaticism. On this view, the Union was not lost as of the spring of 1861, but it needed to be “reconstructed” so as to exclude the nation’s geographic extremes.45

Like Stuart, John B. Baldwin also pointed out that Virginia had strong ties to the neighboring slave states. He concluded that the secession crisis presented “an occasion when it becomes the Border Slave States to stand firm together.” Baldwin did not specifically address the issue of whether or not to form a border state confederacy – the idea circulated widely at the time – but he did voice the view that border free states all ought to participate in the discussion on the future of the Union. Like Stuart, Baldwin believed that Virginia’s secession would rend the Commonwealth in two. Baldwin told his fellow delegates: “I take it for granted that this body is not going to forget that Eastern Virginia is not this entire Commonwealth… the political power of this Commonwealth, the great controlling body of this Commonwealth lies in the West, and that that great West has interests demanding the attention of this Convention.” Secession presented itself as a grave fear to the Valley Unionists not only because of the dangers it posed...

45 Reese, Proceedings, 4:19.
toward the Union, but because of how it threatened the stability of life within the state. Like Stuart, John Baldwin feared that secession could disrupt the harmony of Virginia itself.\(^{46}\)

The Rockbridge Unionists held many of the same views on these issues. William Frazier, a state senator from Rockbridge County, wrote to James Dorman Davidson of his view that “it behooves the great Central parts of this (late) Confederacy to join their destinies together – say all South of New England and all North of South Carolina and the other ‘Cotton States,’ and from the Atlantic to the Lakes.” Many Valley Unionists insisted upon coordinated action of some sort on the part of the Border States in order to save the Union. Frazier believed the Union could still stand in the face of the secession crisis, but that it had to exclude the extremist elements of both North and South. It was a view Davidson apparently shared; he informed Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky that the Union could be preserved if “[Virginia] hold herself & the Border States in pause.” James B. Dorman stressed that “we of the border states had interests as distinct in some important respects, from the Cotton States as well as from those of New England.” Dorman also proposed that action by the Border States should include the cooperation of the free states of New Jersey and Pennsylvania. There thus existed among the Valley Unionists a broad consensus that Virginia and the Border States could exist alongside one another within a Union based on a common interest. Valley Unionists also generally seem to have agreed that any permanent rupture of the existing Union posed problems for the stability of their home state; sectionalism was not only a national problem. Because secession would alter the balance of power between North and South, Virginia’s separation from the Union in defense of southern interests would force each section of the state to consider its own interests as well.\(^{47}\)


\(^{47}\) William Frazier to James D. Davidson, January 6, 1860 in Greenawalt, “Unionists in Rockbridge County,” 82; James D. Davidson to John J. Crittenden, February 10, 1861, James Dorman Davidson Papers, Rockbridge Historical Society Collection, RHS MSS, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University; James B. Dorman to
Alexander H. H. Stuart, for example, surmised that Virginia’s secession could prove calamitous to the soundness of the Commonwealth. Like most Virginia politicians, Stuart knew full well of the competing interests of eastern and western Virginia, and of the problems this had caused. He feared that splitting the state from the Union would rupture Virginia itself, a consequence “more painful, even, that the overthrow of the Union itself.” Stuart observed that the people of the mountain west on the far side of the Alleghany Mountains had strong trade and social ties with the neighboring free states of Pennsylvania and Ohio. He worried that should Virginia adopt an ordinance of secession, the west “will be called upon to sever connections of the most intimate character – connections which affect vitally every interest which they have – connections which are indispensable to their enjoyment.” For Stuart, secession from the Union meant more than simply dissolving bonds with the North. It heralded the fracturing of the Commonwealth itself. From his standpoint on Virginia’s political borderland, few consequences could be more calamitous. On both national and state levels, therefore, the Valley Unionists saw the borderland as having its own unique position and its own interests that made it important as a political entity.48

Like his neighbors, James B. Dorman also knew that the secession crisis had important implications for Virginia’s state-level politics. He told Governor Letcher “there cannot be unanimity of thought or action between the people west of the Blue Ridge, and their brethren of the East, except upon the ground of moderation, conservatism, deliberation, and the placing Virginia’s separate and special interests above all others that passion, prejudice and feeling, either for the extreme South or against the North, might strive to present.” Even maintaining Virginia’s unity, in this sense, required shared values. Maj. J.T.L. Preston, the founder of the

John Letcher, November 18, 1860, in Greenawalt, “Unionists in Rockbridge County,” 85 – 86; for additional discussion of the perceived commonalities along the North-South borderland, see Astor, Rebels on the Border. 48 Reese, Proceedings, 4:16.
Virginia Military Institute, also argued the Valley’s common Scots Irish heritage with Pennsylvania “was deeper & more natural, than the sympathy with S. Carolina.” The secession crisis was problematic not only because it threatened the Union, but because it posed dangers to the continued unity of Virginia itself.49

E. Lincoln’s Proclamation and Virginia’s Secession

Despite lengthy, earnest, and repeated protestations to the contrary, Valley Unionists in the end acceded to secession and disunion. They reached this conclusion only after the attack on Ft. Sumter, and even then only after Lincoln’s decision to summon volunteers from the states that remained within the Union. Northern response to the attack on Ft. Sumter cemented the circumstances under which Valley Unionists could consent to secession. To them, Lincoln’s willingness to coerce the South back into the Union demonstrated that the ties of interest and values no longer united North and South in a common Union. They detached themselves from the federal union of their fathers not because their unionism was superficial or because they had no firm attachment to the Union. They came to support cooperation with the Confederacy because the idea of political Union itself was so important to begin with. Valley Unionists could no longer bind themselves in a Union with those who would try to coerce their neighbors; this demonstrated that the Union could no longer be said to exist.

The Valley Unionists waited virtually until the last possible moment before aligning themselves with the secessionist cause, and even that point, they did not do so with the greatest of enthusiasm. Lexington politician Samuel McDowell Moore expressed open disgust at the attack on Ft. Sumter in a private letter to Francis T. Anderson of Botetourt County. He described the attack as “one of the most cruel, inhumane and barbarous acts ever performed.” Moore, at

least, participated in Virginia’s secessionist project more from outrage at Lincoln’s proclamation and internal unity within his state than out of solidarity with South Carolina. On April 23, nearly a week after the convention vote, Mauzy’s Spectator announced its solemn support for the Confederate cause, declaring, “We would have preferred fighting in the Union, that we might not occupy the attitude of foreigners to our friends in the North, to whom we would have appealed to rally with us in defense of freedom and constitutional rights against the usurpers who have betrayed the trusts unwisely confided in them.” The Spectator’s commitment to Union had theretofore been sincere, but this statement in itself reveals much about some of the prevailing views of the political scene in 1861. Mauzy expressed a preference to stand alongside northerners against a common enemy he does not specify, but concluded that Lincoln’s actions left Virginia no option but to secede. This suggests that some of the Valley Unionists saw the Civil War as a consequence of broader political and social problems affecting the entire Union, not just a handful of northerners. 50

Former Unionists in their new-found support for secession often pointed to Lincoln’s proclamation as the impetus for their change of position, but some of them elaborated on this point to specify that secession occurred as a consequence of northern attitudes than of a single event. These Unionist writers very consistently appealed to traditional republican rhetoric invoking fears of tyranny and military despotism. But some Unionists observed broader problems within the republic that suggest Lincoln’s proclamation was simply the final confirmation of Valley Unionists’ long-held fears that existed long before Lincoln rose to national prominence. “A Conservative” writing in the pages of the Spectator said that he would not have feared the consequences of Lincoln’s proclamation “if the Northern people had not

50 Samuel McDowell Moore to Francis T. Anderson, Anderson Family Papers, ACC 38 – 96, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia; “We are still for Union – a Union of brave and patriotic men for the defense of our State,” Staunton Spectator, April 23, 1861.
responded to it so eagerly. They manifest a spirit of hatred to the South and a desire to *subjugate* us, which have driven me to the wall.” Even John B. Baldwin, who actually voted against the secession ordinance at the convention, wrote to an acquaintance that he supported the cause after “The moment it appeared beyond question that the people of the North, without distinction of party, were clamorous for a war of invasion and subjugation against us.” Baldwin, therefore, placed much of the blame on the northern people themselves rather than on particular government actions. Another former Unionist writing under the name “Virginia,” upon hearing of Lincoln’s proclamation “considered that we no longer could have or effect justice, a voice in the Senate chamber, or a righteous administration by a purely sectional demagogue.” The public values of white northerners constituted an important component of local thinking on secession.51

Other Unionists likewise worried about northerners’ values. Following the Virginia convention’s vote to secede, William Houston of Rockbridge wrote in his diary that Virginia had “succeeded from Abolition Phanatiks and cutthoats.” He emphasized the political extremes in the North rather than any particular action by the federal government. Houston also wrote that in supporting secession he acted not against the Union, “but against those who have caused Its destruction.” To Houston, Virginians remaining united to the North made as much sense as “for Christian men to unite with the Devil In the hope of therefor promoting a pure Christianity.” Mauzy also noted northern values, arguing that the war had come about because “Ambition has usurped the place of Patriotism, and Tyranny that of Liberty.” Mauzy placed ambition and patriotism in clear opposition to one another in accordance with contemporary Valley political values. Lincoln issued his proclamation in the name of holding the Union together, a goal many Virginians held in high regard, but by casting it as an ambitious act lacking patriotism, Mauzy

showed that Valley Unionists had many concerns about Lincoln’s motivations in taking these actions. While Valley Unionists appealed to conventional republican rhetoric rooted in the anxieties of the early republic, they did so in the context of a local political culture that strongly emphasized a need for unity in the face of competing interests.\textsuperscript{52}

Mildred Gibson Lynch of Fishersville in Augusta County also feared for the future of the Union and for the values of white northerners. Writing in her diary shortly after Virginia’s convention voted to secede, the expressed her support for Virginia and the southern cause. She also voiced her outrage at the perceived decline in northern moral character. Virginia, she said, took a reasonable position in defense of its rights in seeking redress from the Republicans, but “tyrants would none of her counsel, would none of her negotiations for peace, they spurned her sacrifice of interest and independence from their pillar of Mammon. Even while we trusted and hoped, the North prepared armies.” Mammon is itself a biblical concept referring to an evil force of avarice in traditional Christianity. By invoking this imagery, Lynch expressed moral outrage at the degeneracy of grasping, conniving Yankee fanatics. Disunion was a function not just of actions taken by the Lincoln administration, but of moral corruption in one section of the Union.\textsuperscript{53}

On the heels of Lincoln’s Proclamation that had worried so many Valley Unionists, the Virginia convention moved into secret session to determine the commonwealth’s course. On April 17, 1861, they announced their final vote on the matter of secession. The delegates voted 88 to 55 in favor of secession. The position of the Valley delegates, however, had scarcely changed. All of the Augusta delegates voted against secession, yet pledged their loyalty to Virginia’s course. John B. Baldwin from the beginning considered himself “one of those who

\textsuperscript{52} William Hale Houston, Diary, Rockbridge Historical Society Collection, RHS MSS, Leyburn Library, Washington and Lee University; “The Question at Issue in this Election,” \textit{Staunton Spectator}, May 14, 1861.  
\textsuperscript{53} Mildred Gibson Lynch Diary, Mss 5:1 L9895:1, Virginia Historical Society, Richmond.
intend to share the fortunes of the State, come weal, come woe.” George Baylor stood on the same ground. He argued against secession until the very end, but informed his fellow delegates, “I am determined to go wherever Virginia goes, and I would have gentlemen not suppose for a moment that because I cannot vote for this measure…I would throw myself in the way of the action of the Convention.” Of the Rockbridge delegates, only James B. Dorman changed his vote from Union to secession, but there is very good evidence suggesting he voted with the victorious secessionists in order to “unite in giving as large a majority as possible to the action taken.” His colleague Samuel McDowell Moore, while preferring a more moderate course of resistance, still believed Virginians “should disregard all previous differences and prepare to go into the war with one heart and one opinion.” Valley Unionism placed sufficient importance on the unity of polities that those delegates who voted against secession even after Lincoln called for troops to suppress the Lower South aided the Confederate cause. Their dedication to political unity was such that they stood by their state despite disagreeing with the convention’s decision.\textsuperscript{54}

By the time Lincoln’s Proclamation had been made widely known, and Virginia’s Convention had voted to secede, the thrust of Valley opinion moved decisively in favor of secession. The convention vote virtually guaranteed Virginia’s secession, but the ordinance authorizing the convention required its decision to be ratified by a popular vote. Valley Unionists who once demanded absolute loyalty to the federal Union now insisted on equal dedication to the cause of secession. Mauzy’s \textit{Spectator} began openly encouraging its readers to vote for the secession ordinance shortly after the convention announced it. “We hope that there will be no division in this county, and no one will give ‘aid and comfort’ to the enemy by voting against the ordinance,” the editors wrote. The \textit{Gazette} celebrated Virginians who wanted to separate from “the corrupt, rotten, and abolitionized despotism of the Northern usurpers,” and McCorkle and

\textsuperscript{54} Reese, \textit{Proceedings}, 4:126, 130, 89.
Gillock’s *Valley Star* demanded “a unanimous vote in Rockbridge in favor of separating from the tyrant Lincoln and his fanatical bloodthirsty, Black Republican crew at the North.” While many Valley Unionists evinced dissatisfaction with the course of the state convention, they still emphasized the need for polities to stay united. They determined to follow Virginia’s course, even if they did not necessarily agree with it. Augusta County voters approved the secession ordinance by a vote of 3,130 to 10, while Rockbridge voters favored it by a vote of 1,727 to 1. By the end of May 1861, the bulk of the political class and the mainstream of opinion in Augusta and Rockbridge stood squarely behind Virginia in its course.55

This political culture of Union, therefore, manifested itself in different ways among different people. To some, it brought them to the conclusion that the northern public no longer shared critical interests or values, and that then Union had already effectively come to an end. Others, who were reluctant to secede even after Lincoln’s call for volunteers, drew from this culture the importance of unity, and assented to their state’s decision even if they disagreed with it. Where a particular Unionist located the important interests and values differed from person to person, but the somewhat differing conclusions they reached had their origins in the same political culture.

Two counties once staunchly Unionist very suddenly shifted their allegiance to a position they had spent the better part of a decade disparaging. Like immediate secessionists, they valued the institution of slavery and saw the growing northern hostility to the institution as a threat. Unlike immediate secessionists, however, they denied that the mere antagonism between the sections formed adequate justification for leaving the Union. In context of the Valley’s

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republican political culture that emphasized political unity, the decision to wait was entirely rational. Valley Unionist political culture promoted cooperation and consensus. It also required that polities unite through common bonds of interest and affection. The nature of the Union spoke to more than just the actions of statesmen in either section; it required common interests and common values. To Valley Unionists, the actions of the Lower South seemed rash, and justifiable only on the grounds of interests too narrow to require Virginia’s participation. They perceived a lack of common interest and political values that precluded them from any Union with the Lower South. Only a dramatic demonstration of an end of the common bond with the North, such as the Proclamation, could propel them to disunion.

Lincoln’s Proclamation, the most commonly cited cause of the Upper South’s secession, did not impel disunion solely based on republican fears of tyranny and military rule. These fears were important, but Valley political culture based the dissolution of political communities on certain other conditions. When northerners rallied to preserve that which could only be maintained by force, and when other white Virginians moved for secession, then and only then did the Valley Unionists join the secessionist cause. Like antebellum Americans on other borderlands, they found themselves “attempting to defend a middle ground that no longer existed.” The proclamation effectively signaled that the beliefs and worldviews that threatened white southerners’ way of life were not the opinions of a few fringe radicals. They were instead the opinion of a growing number of white northerners who were now willing to use force to hold the South within the Union. The entrenchment of interests and values hostile to the slave South, Valley Unionists concluded, precluded Virginia from equitable inclusion in such a Union.56

Valley Unionism thus encompassed a wide range of political ideas that considered both state and local dynamics. Describing secession in the Valley requires examining more than the

56 Fields, *Slavery and Freedom*, xii.
local interest in slavery, and more than attributing secessionism to a reaction against aggression by the Lincoln administration. The Union as the Valley Unionists understood it existed as an entity greater than the American nation or as a compact among equal states. In the Valley Unionist mindset, the Union brought together many peoples as well as many states. In discussing the importance of different peoples, it is important to account for the perceived public virtues and character of political people both North and South. Valley Unionism was far from superficial. In fact, it was almost the opposite of superficial. Valley Unionists held the federal Union in high regard, such high regard that they risked their reputation amongst fellow southerners in an effort to maintain it. They ultimately agreed to the secessionist project only after events in the North thoroughly persuaded them that the fundamental character of the northern people was such that no Union of common interest and feeling could hold them together any longer. Valley Unionists thus did not secede because the Union was unimportant, but precisely because it was so important.
Conclusion

The Virginia secession vote on April 17, 1861 was closely followed by the other Upper South states of North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas. The other border states of Maryland, Kentucky, and Missouri never formally seceded, but loyalties remained divided. War followed closely on the heels of secession, and Virginia soon became the seat of that war as the Union and Confederate armies met in open battle for the first time at Manassas Junction. Though the war in Virginia took place mainly in the eastern section of the state, it did not spare the Valley.

The old Unionists of Augusta and Rockbridge committed themselves to the Confederate cause, and many served in the Virginia regiments during the war. Samuel McDowell Moore and James B. Dorman served as Confederate officers as did some of the instructors at the Virginia Military Institute, including Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. John B. Baldwin served as a member of the Confederate Congress, while Alexander H. H. Stuart, who was too old to actively take part in the war effort, spoke out in favor of relief for Confederate soldiers. A notable exception was George Junkin, whose Unionism was so strong that he resigned his position at Washington College and returned to Philadelphia. The war eventually came to Rockbridge and Augusta by the end of the conflict. In 1864, Union troops under Maj. General David Hunter entered Staunton, burning and looting some parts of the city. Hunter’s forces also raided Lexington, where they burned down the Virginia Military Institute, but spared Washington College. Near the end of the war, Union forces under Philip Sheridan defeated a smaller force of Confederates commanded by Jubal Early near the town of Waynesboro, just a few miles from Staunton. After the surrender of the Confederate armies the following month, the old Unionists of Augusta and Rockbridge found themselves once again in the Union of their fathers.¹

The story of the Valley Unionists is not a triumphant one. It is a story of men committed to both slave society and the Union, ideals that by 1861 could no longer coexist within the same nation. The Union of the Founders, a Union said to have been established on shared principles, proved infeasible in the face of the growing divide between free labor northerners and proslavery southerners who each held to a different national vision. This sense of shared vision, this notion of common destiny and common values, could no longer exist if such a divide existed. It was such a state of affairs that the Valley Unionists sought to uphold. In their final estimation following Lincoln’s Proclamation, they made their dramatic exit from the Union not in defiance of their republican heritage, but in defense of that heritage the way they perceived it. No Union that would threaten the persistence of slavery, so far as they were concerned, was worth salvaging. Such a Union they abandoned, and to such a Union they were forced to return.

The trials facing that Union, from the perspective of the Valley Unionists, were not just questions of North versus South and slave versus free. These were questions of the common values and interests required of a united people. To Valley Unionists, the republic itself embodied in the Union was at risk, and it was the extreme elements in both sections that created that risk. Though thoroughly dedicated to southern institutions and interests and hostile to abolitionists, they did not believe the radical course of the fire eaters served the goals of the South or of the Union. So important was the Union that some even prepared to make common cause with moderate free states against both the northeast and the Lower South. To these Unionists, the Union represented something higher than the American nation-state. Its
preservation stood as a dominant political value alongside the maintenance of southern social institutions, and it symbolized the common interests and values of white Americans across both sections.

These ideals of Union shaped the ways in which Americans viewed themselves and their neighbors as members of a political community. Fully understanding the origins of the Civil War requires comprehension of how Americans thought about that which they desired either to protect or dissolve. Expanding the analytic concept of Union to encompass political issues below the national level, by considering issues such as constitutional reform, demonstrates how important these ideas were. To Valley Unionists, and likely to other Americans as well, the health of the body politic depended heavily on some sense of political unity based in common public virtue. The study of the roots of secession and the Civil War often focuses, and quite rightly, on the centrality of slavery to southern political culture, and the sectional divides that occurred over this issue. As important as this focus is, the importance of the concept of Union and why so many believed it worth dissolving over slavery, more fully illumines the ideological underpinnings of secession.
Note on Sources

This project relies heavily on accounts from contemporary newspaper reports as well as from manuscript collections. Where possible, I have endeavored to be as precise as possible in my identifications of particular primary sources. For the sake of narrative simplicity, however, I have taken some liberties with the names of the newspapers sources. As was common in the nineteenth century, newspapers changed their names on a not infrequent basis. Between 1850 and 1861, some of these papers did not have precisely the same name as they had in 1850. I have maintained a single consistent name for each paper to avoid confusion at points when the names of papers changed; the Republican Vindicator is cited the same as the Staunton Vindicator for this reason.

Also, for the sake of simplicity and consistency, I have taken the liberty of referring to the editors of the Spectator before its sale to Richard Mauzy as “the Waddells.” Different members of the Waddell family were involved in various aspects of this paper’s management over the course of the late antebellum period, and in any case their positions seem to have been fairly consistent. The Vindicator, however, was operated by a series of sole and joint proprietorships over the course of the 1850s, and it is not always clear whether individuals referenced are publishers, editors, or both. Where possible, I have identified the specific editor when citing direct quotes. Otherwise, I have generally refrained from speculating. For more precise information on the management of these publications, I have relied on information provided by the Chronicling America project of the Library of Congress, as well as the Valley of the Shadow project of the University of Virginia.

Most of the newspapers cited have been preserved on microfilm. Certain issues of the Gazette, however, I consulted directly from un-filmed originals kept at Leyburn Library. In addition, the September 15, 1851 edition of the Vindicator cited on p. 50 is not to my knowledge available on microfilm. An original copy is available in the Rare Books Collection of Swem Library at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg.

With regards to the manuscript collections, I examined hard copies or photocopies in all but a few cases. The material from the University of Virginia’s Small Library I consulted from the original material, but later returned to in digital form through the Valley of the Shadow Project. For my purposes here, I have cited the original manuscripts. Other materials unique to this digital history project are included in the bibliography with proper citation.

Also, some of the sources from Rockbridge County are currently housed in the Rockbridge Historical Society Collection held at Leyburn Library. Items contained within this collection do not yet have manuscript numbers, but I have cited them with the designation “RHS MSS.”

The letters of Francis H. Smith were examined as part of an edited collection assembled by Edwin L. Dooley. I have not listed a manuscript number for this collection, as I have been unable to locate one.
To examine the secession convention speeches, I used a searchable, web-based version of the convention proceedings available through *Secession: Virginia and the Crisis of Union, 1861*, a project of the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond’s Boatwright Library. For purposes of citation, however, I have referenced the edited edition compiled by George H. Reese, the text Boatwright refers to in its project.

On a final note, I have left the language of these sources in mostly unmodified form. I have not used “sic” to denote abnormal spellings, as most of the meanings of these words are still relatively unambiguous.
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Shenandoah Valley


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