

Civil War Treasures: The Ways of the Whigs: Campaign Materials from the Second Party System

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Feature Essay

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Was “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too!” the soundtrack that kicked off modern American political campaigning? Was William Henry Harrison’s 1840 “hard cider and log cabin” crusade really the first truly grassroots campaign that turned presidential electoral politics into a uniquely American form of entertainment? Historians may argue the point, but Whig Party campaign materials in the LSU Libraries’ Special Collections demonstrated the many curious ways the Whig Party promoted its candidates, beginning with Harrison, its first national presidential candidate from the election of 1840.

The Life and Times of William Henry Harrison (1840) by Samuel Jones Burr was probably as disingenuous as a campaign biography could possibly be. Despite his recent stint as editor of the *New-York Daily Whig*, Burr insisted his biography was purely impartial and objective, declaring, “Our politics are known—we have made no secret of them, yet we disclaim all party prejudice in the present work.” It didn’t even matter that the book was published during the heat of the campaign: “If he were not at this moment before the people for their suffrages as a candidate for a great and important station, we might have indulged in compliment and praise; but we have no disposition, and disclaim all intention of making our history political.” Well, indulge in compliment and praise Burr certainly did, as he filled his pages with the childhood poverty, battlefield heroics, and noble character virtues already by then common in campaign biographies.¹ If these commendations weren’t enough to declare Burr’s partisanship, he let slip his collaboration in Harrison’s “hard cider and log cabin” campaign theme that sought to make the candidate appear one with the common man: “He is remarkable for his true Virginian

¹ For an evaluation on this most insincere of literary genres, see Jill Lepore, “Bound for Glory: Writing Campaign Lives,” *The New Yorker* (October 20, 2008): 80-85.

hospitality, and his table, instead of being covered with exciting wines, is well supplied with the best cider.”²

Henry Clay’s first campaign biography appeared on the cusp of the 1832 presidential election, which he waged as the nominee of the National Republican Party, a predecessor party to the Whigs, and lost in a drubbing to Andrew Jackson. *Biography of Henry Clay (1831)* by George D. Prentice, a Connecticut newspaper editor, was commissioned by a financially unsound Hartford book publisher. While Prentice claimed that Clay never endorsed the book, the author openly acknowledged “a view to influence an approaching political election.”³ Prentice remained in Louisville after completing his research, becoming founding editor of the Whiggish *Louisville Journal* and a Whig Party leader in his own right.

During the early 1840s, Clay Clubs, political organizations in support of Henry Clay’s candidacy for president in 1844, arose spontaneously across the United States. *The Clay Minstrel (1844)* was compiled by John S. Littell, president of the Clay Club of Germantown, Pennsylvania, who dedicated the book to the collective membership of America’s Clay Clubs.⁴ The first third of this miniature volume (its pages are only five inches high) is a campaign biography of “confessedly the first Statesman of the Nation, and whom posterity will place by the side of the Father of his Country.” The remainder is a compilation of over 140 campaign songs set to popular tunes, testifying to an untiring nineteenth-century American penchant to compose rather silly ditties in support of political candidates.⁵ Take, for example, this tune reviling the turncoat John Tyler (a not uncommon theme in these pages) set to “Yankee Doodle:”

Shout Yankee Doodle! Whigs, huzza!
We’re done with Captain Tyler!
He who has been his country’s FLAW,
Shall never more defile her!
For farmer Clay then boys hurrah,
And proudly here proclaim him.
The great, the good, the valiant Hal,

² S.J. Burr, *The Life and Times of William Henry Harrison* (New York: L.W. Ransom, 1840), iii, 260, 264. [Hill Memorial Library, Rare E392 .B96 MINI]

³ George D. Prentice, *Biography of Henry Clay* (Hartford: Samuel Hanmer, Jr. and John J. Phelps, 1831), v. [Hill Memorial Library, Jones Lincoln E340 .C6 P9]

⁴ John S. Littell, *The Clay Minstrel; or, National Songster to which is Prefixed a Sketch of the Life, Public Services, and Character of Henry Clay*, 2nd ed. (New York: Greeley & M’Elrath, 1844) [Hill Memorial Library, Rare E340 .C6 L7 MINI]

⁵ See Hans Rasmussen, “Civil War Treasures: Serving Two Masters in the Election of 1876,” *Civil War Book Review* (Spring 2016)

AND SHOUT WHENE'ER YE NAME HIM!⁶

The Euterpean output was so massive that some compositions didn't make the cut. Between the first and second editions, "a few songs, of very inferior merit, have been made to give place to others, possessing higher claims to preservation."⁷ One wonders what constituted "inferior merit" among these choice musical compositions.

William G. Brownlow, the firebrand editor of the *Jonesborough Whig* in Jonesborough, Tennessee, also lent his viciously enthusiastic support to the candidacy of Henry Clay with *A Political Register, Setting Forth the Principles of the Whig and Locofoco Parties in the United States, with the Life and Public Services of Henry Clay (1844)*.⁸ Although Brownlow's book was considerably more of a weighty product of political science than the *Clay Minstrel*, it hardly could be said to have been more dignified. Brownlow was infamous for his venomous attacks on all enemies both political and religious, a habit he first cultivated as a Methodist circuit rider when he frequently sparred verbally with missionaries of rival denominations. He continued his tactless ways here, beginning with his use of the pejorative term Locofoco to refer to the entire Democratic Party.⁹ *A Political Register* abounds with attacks on Democratic Party policies regarding banks, tariffs, and land policy, as well as its alleged collusion with the Roman Catholic Church, among other things. Brownlow followed his comprehensive if rather bilious evaluation of the American political system with a campaign biography of his political idol, Henry Clay, "the greatest man now living."

John Greiner, a Whig campaign songwriter, wrote an untitled **Whig campaign song** for Zachary Taylor, the party's successful nominee in 1848.¹⁰ Born in Philadelphia in 1810, Greiner moved to Marietta, Ohio, in the late 1830s and worked as a house and sign painter. Active in the temperance movement and in Whig Party politics in the Buckeye State, he won fame as a Whig

⁶ Littell, *The Clay Minstrel*, 168.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁸ William G. Brownlow, *A Political Register, Setting Forth the Principles of the Whig and Locofoco Parties in the United States, with the Life and Public Services of Henry Clay* (Jonesborough, Tenn.: *Jonesborough Whig*, 1844) [Hill Memorial Library, Rare E400 .B88]

⁹ The Locofocos were a radical faction of the Democratic Party opposed to banking monopolies among other things, which enjoyed a brief existence in the late 1830s. They had all but died out by the early 1840s, but Whigs continued to employ the name as a term of derision toward the whole of the Democratic Party into the 1850s. *The Clay Minstrel* included such references, including a little number titled "The Penitent Loco" about a disillusioned Democrat who leaves his party for the Whigs.

¹⁰ Whig Party Campaign Song, Mss. 3029, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, LSU Libraries, Baton Rouge, La.

campaign songwriter and a leader of songs at Whig rallies. Greiner served as Ohio state librarian from 1845 to 1851 and was later appointed secretary of the Territory of New Mexico, a post he held between 1852 and 1853. The manuscript of Greiner's original song for Taylor berates Democrats, their candidate Lewis Cass, and even the ever-reviled John Tyler, always predicting Whig victory in the election, which the party knows is possible now that it has nominated a potential winner who would (unlike Tyler) remain steadfast to the Whig cause.

With the telegraph news, what a fit of the blues
 Came over the Locos today.
 When they heard of Zack Taylor, they said turning paler
 What a pity we didn't run Clay.
 They swore that Old Zack shouldn't be on the track
 They thought it all wrong, cause why?
 Old Zack is a Whig, nothing else than a Whig,
 A Whig who will never say die.

Greiner's song curiously did not mention Millard Fillmore, the Whig nominee for vice president, probably because Fillmore was a problematic candidate. Hailing from New York, northerners assumed he opposed the expansion of slavery into the Mexican Cession, while southerners accused him of being an abolitionist. While Fillmore thought slavery an evil, he believed the federal government had no authority over it. Nonetheless, the potential charge of abolitionism threatened to upset the Taylor-Fillmore ticket in the South, so the Fillmore Rangers, a Whig political club organized in New Orleans, campaigned vigorously to allay southern fears and win Louisiana for the Whigs.¹¹

One year later, Louisiana Whigs hadn't forgotten the Rangers' labors. *The Rangers Lament for Poor Old Joe: A Whig Song (1849)*, which was "arranged from a popular melody and respectfully dedicated to the Fillmore Rangers," was composed for the Louisiana gubernatorial election of that year.¹² Supporting Alexander DeClouet, a Creole lawyer from St. Martin Parish and the Whig candidate for governor, the tune ridiculed Joseph Marshall Walker, a Rapides Parish cotton planter whom the Democrats had nominated. It compared Walker to a worn-out old racehorse past his prime and unable to compete with the younger and faster DeClouet colt whom the Fillmore Rangers backed. Ironically, Democrats had made it a point to

¹¹ John M. Sacher, *A Perfect War of Politics: Parties, Politicians, and Democracy in Louisiana, 1824-1861* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 153.

¹² *The Rangers Lament for Poor Old Joe: A Whig Song* (New Orleans: Wm. T. Mayo, 1849) [Hill Memorial Library, LLMVC M1665 .W4 R3 1846 FLAT]

chide the forty-year-old Declouet for his inexperience. In the end, the tune didn't help the Declouet colt pass the finish line, as Walker won narrowly with 51.6 percent of the vote.¹³

Prior to the 1852 presidential election, the Democratic candidate Franklin Pierce got none other than his old Bowdoin College friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, to write his campaign biography.¹⁴ General Winfield Scott, however, had to settle for an anonymous *Life of General Scott (1852)*, a thirty-two-page account of the military exploits of the Whig nominee from the War of 1812, through various Indian wars and removals, to his brilliant campaign from Veracruz to Mexico City in the Mexican-American War. A quick and dashing read, *Life of General Scott* was filled with twenty-four woodcuts romantically illustrating Scott's various heroic exploits, portraying the great soldier as both triumphant and compassionate. It concluded with a not-so-subtle reminder of the occasion for the biography: "Happy will it be for our country, if its candidates for the Presidency shall always be able to point to so illustrious a record of deeds that attest wise statesmanship, as the civil career of General Scott affords!"¹⁵

By the election of 1856, the Whig Party had all but dispersed, its old members seeking greener pastures elsewhere. Still, a rump convention held in Baltimore in September nominated Millard Fillmore as the Whig candidate for president, but this act was merely an ineffectual gesture. Fillmore had been nominated earlier as the presidential candidate for the American Party—the new home for most Whigs who hadn't gone to the Democrats or the new Republican Party—at its convention in Philadelphia the previous February. While the last remnants of the Whig Party faded away soon thereafter, some stalwarts held out at least through the campaign. *The Fillmore Ranger (1856)*, an American Party campaign newspaper published in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, recalled the old New Orleans Whig club that had stood with Fillmore against charges of abolitionism back in '48.¹⁶ Commencing probably in early July 1856, the paper pledged to publish "every Monday until the presidential election" for a fee of one dollar paid "invariably in advance." *The Fillmore Ranger* was published in both English and French by George C. McWhorter, a former state representative and state treasurer who earlier that year had acquired sole ownership of the *Baton Rouge Gazette*, a longtime Whig newspaper.¹⁷ McWhorter

¹³ Sacher, *Perfect War of Politics*, 156-159.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Life of Franklin Pierce* (Boston: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852).

¹⁵ *Life of General Scott* (New York?: A.H. Jocelyn?, 1852), 32. [Hill Memorial Library, E403.1 .S4 L76 1852 LARA]

¹⁶ *The Fillmore Ranger*, vol. 1, no. 7 (August 18, 1856). [Hill Memorial Library, F379 .B33 F55 LARF]

¹⁷ "Exchanges," *Thibodaux Minerva*, January 5, 1856.

had been a steadfast Whig Party supporter, nominee, and officeholder for years, but since the Whig Party had effectively died out in Louisiana by 1854, he chose to throw his lot behind Fillmore and the Know-Nothings in the 1856 election.¹⁸ It did no good, as Fillmore won only the state of Maryland and McWhorter died about two weeks after the election, along with the party to which he had devoted his public life.

The Whig Party and its affiliates won only two of the seven elections mentioned in this essay, suggesting their campaign biographies, songs, and polemical tracts ultimately did them little good at the ballot box. For that matter, considering the formulaic quality of most campaign biographies, it is unlikely that they've proven materially beneficial for any political party.¹⁹ Nonetheless, these overtly partisan materials offer the clearest insights into the opinions and self-perceptions of party operatives during the most competitive season of the political calendar. Thus, the ways the Whigs fought their campaigns offer us some fascinating glimpses into the origins of America's distinctive political culture.

Hans Rasmussen received an MA degree in history from Louisiana State University and an MLIS degree in archives and records enterprise from the University of Texas at Austin. He worked as an archivist and catalog librarian at the University of Southern Mississippi until 2006 when he joined the Louisiana State University Libraries. He has served as Head of Special Collections Technical Services in the LSU Libraries since 2013.

¹⁸ Sacher, *Perfect War of Politics*, 236.

¹⁹ An exception might be the *Life of Gen. Ben Harrison* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1888) by Lew Wallace, the acclaimed author of *Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ* and former territorial governor of New Mexico. Although he received the commission immediately after the Republican nominating convention in late June and dashed off his work in barely a month (for which he apologized profusely in the preface), it at least presented itself honestly as a campaign biography by closing with a thoroughly practical thirty-five-page "Citizen's Handbook of Valuable Facts for Campaign Work."