

THE DECLINE OF THE DEMOCRATIC PARTY IN IOWA, 1850-1860

By David S. Sparks*

The political revolution of the 1850's in the United States has very properly attracted long and serious study by historians. The death of the Whig party, the division of the Democratic party, and the birth of the Republican party certainly prepared the way for the greatest crisis in their history, as Americans tried to settle by armed force what they had been unable to solve by the art of politics.

Political developments in Iowa during the critical decade following 1850 were of much the same pattern as in all the states of the Old Northwest. Originally Democratic as a result of the party preferences of the first settlers, Iowa soon contained a lively Whig opposition. While the two parties shared town and county offices throughout the state, the Democrats managed to keep control of the constitutional conventions of 1844 and 1846 as well as the territorial and early state legislatures and the executive offices. Iowa Whigs shared the national experience of their party and gradually died out after the presidential campaign of 1852. The Democrats held on a little longer and despite defeat in 1854 managed to remain an organized opposition until the Civil War reduced them to a corporal's guard. Although the Republicans first campaigned as such in 1856, all those elements later making up the party had previously worked together to elect James W. Grimes on an "Opposition" ticket in 1854.

Most studies of Iowa politics during the 1850's have quite naturally concentrated on the Republicans.¹ These studies have carefully detailed Re-

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¹ Louis Pelzer, "The Origin and Organization of the Republican Party in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 4:487-526 (October, 1906); Frank I. Herriott, "A Neglected Factor in the Anti-Slavery Triumph in Iowa in 1854," *Deutsch-Amerikanische Geschichtblätter, Jahrbuch der Deutsch-Amerikanische Historische Gesellschaft von Illinois*, 18-19:174-335 (1918-1919); Frank I. Herriott, *Iowa and Abraham Lincoln* (Des Moines, 1911); Kenneth F. Millsap, "The Election of 1860 in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 48:97-120 (April, 1950); David S. Sparks, "The Birth of the Republican Party in Iowa, 1848-1860" (Ph.D. thesis, unpublished, University of Chicago, 1951); Edward Younger, "The Rise of John A. Kasson in Iowa Politics, 1857-1859," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 50:289-314 (October, 1952).

publican interest in halting the expansion of slavery. They have examined Republican promises for free land, higher tariffs, and a Pacific railroad. They have analyzed Republican leadership, party conventions, campaign strategy, and the party's fate at the polls. Much has been learned about the methods and objectives of Iowa politicians and their supporters during a very critical period. In one respect, however, our understanding of this vital time in Iowa politics remains quite deficient. In concentrating on the positive story of the rise of the Republicans, historians have failed to explore the negative side of the story — that is, the decline of the Democrats in Iowa during the 1850's. Is it not as pertinent to question why men abandoned their earlier allegiance to the Democrats as it is to ask why they turned to the Republicans? Certainly it is true that many Iowans looked upon a vote for the Republican party during the 1850's as no more than a protest against their own Democratic leadership. To a surprising degree the Republican party of the 1850's in Iowa was a temporary refuge for men whose political roofs had fallen down around their ears. It is clear that a thorough understanding of the birth of the Republican party is dependent upon some understanding of the division and decline of the Iowa Democrats which took place in the decade of the 1850's.

The defeat of the national Democratic party has usually provided the chronology and pattern for the brief examinations which the state parties have received. In this process considerable attention has been given to the effects of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, "Bleeding Kansas," the Lecompton Constitution, and the Dred Scott Decision, and, as a result, Democratic decline and defeat is usually dated from 1854. Professor Nichols' brilliant study² of the disruption of the national Democratic party begins only in 1856. For Iowa, at least, such emphasis and chronology are misleading. By accepting the national story as the matrix for the Iowa pattern, we distort the early history of the Republicans and the reasons for their success as well as the causes for the "disruption" of the Democratic party in Iowa.

A close examination of the Democratic party in Iowa shows a party so seriously torn by factionalism and so thoroughly at odds with the national party leadership that it was on the verge of collapse before 1854. The party press, county and state conventions, and most of the party leadership were regularly divided into two or more warring camps. Even in the halcyon days between 1846 and 1850 factionalism was a serious problem. A

² Roy Franklin Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York, 1948).

persisting conflict with the national party leadership revolved about the problems of slavery and the needs of the state for internal improvements, railroads, and homesteads. The significance of this story of the Iowa Democrats is that it pushes back in time the division and decline of the state organization. This, in turn, reduces the concentration on slavery as the question which destroyed the Democrats and places greater emphasis upon the more "normal" frictions within the party. If further study of the Democratic party in Iowa and in other states of the North tends to bear out the results of this brief review, then we must continue our revision of the causes of the political crisis of the 1850's and the Civil War that followed.

Iowa's first settlers were Democrats by a ratio of nearly two to one. Throughout the territorial period and during the first years of statehood the Democrats clearly controlled state politics. Both William W. Chapman and A. C. Dodge, delegates from the Territory of Iowa to the Congress from 1838 to 1846, were frontier Democrats. The territorial legislature was in Democratic hands, and the first state governors were Democrats. The constitutional convention of 1844 was made up of fifty-one Democrats and only twenty-one Whigs.³ A similar constitutional convention in 1846, with a total membership of thirty-two, contained twenty-two Democrats and ten Whigs.⁴ Iowa's first Senators were Augustus Caesar Dodge and George Wallace Jones who served in the Senate until 1855 and 1859 respectively, while one lonely Whig shared the honors with the Democrats, representing Iowa in the House of Representatives during the first seven years of statehood.⁵

The hegemony of the Democrats in the early political life of Iowa was the direct result of the way in which the land was settled. The earliest settlers came into Iowa from the south by way of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. This stream of migration flowed into Iowa and spread out along the Missouri border, into the Des Moines River Valley, or on up the Mississippi. As in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois,⁶ the new settlers from the

³ Benjamin F. Shambaugh, *The Constitutions of Iowa* (Iowa City, 1934), 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵ The Whig was Daniel F. Miller who only won his seat after a congressional investigation ordered a special election to resolve the issue. See Louis B. Schmidt, "The Miller-Thompson Election Contest," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 12:34-127 (January, 1914).

⁶ David Henry Bradford, "The Background and Formation of the Republican Party in Ohio, 1844-1861" (Ph.D. thesis, unpublished, University of Chicago, 1947); Roger Van Bolt, "Sectional Aspects of Expansionism, 1844-58," *Indiana Magazine of*

South were Democrats of the Jackson and Benton stamp. They had left behind them the landed gentry who owned slaves, filled the political offices, and who called themselves "broadcloth Whigs." Preferring woodland to the open prairie, these southern settlers took up land in the southern tiers of counties, on both sides of the Des Moines River, and up the Mississippi wherever woodland was to be found. The loyalty of these folk to the Democratic party was so strong that even the overwhelming popularity of Lincoln in 1860 did not win over Lee and Dubuque counties on the Mississippi; Davis, Appanoose, Wayne, and Decatur in the southern tier; or Wapello, Marion, and Boone in the Des Moines River Valley.

Iowa's early Democratic leaders came from among these southern settlers. Both in the House of Representatives and in the Senate there were to be found Iowans who were tied to the South by birth, education, or tradition. The father of Senator A. C. Dodge brought his slaves along with him when he migrated from Missouri to Wisconsin. Young Augustus was raised by a Negro mammy in the best tradition of the South.⁷ Senator George W. Jones was bound to the South by ties which even the Civil War did not break. Born in old Vincennes, Jones was raised in Indiana. When he entered Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1821, Jones carried a letter of introduction to Henry Clay. Years later, in an eulogy to Clay, Jones harked back to his own youth and told how Clay was "the guardian and director of my collegiate days; four of his sons were my college mates and warm friends. My intercourse with the father was that of a youth and a friendly advisor."⁸ During his college days Jones was also close to Jefferson Davis and to David Atchison, the "Hotspur" of the proslavery forces in Missouri. It was a letter from Jones to the President of the Confederacy in 1861 which led Lincoln's Secretary of State to order the imprisonment of Jones in December, 1861. Jones's Southern sympathies cost him several very uncomfortable months in a Northern prison, but even Secretary Seward could not prevent Jones's two sons from joining the Confederate service.⁹

History, 48:119-40 (June, 1952); John S. Wright, "The Background and Formation of the Republican Party in Illinois, 1846-1860" (Ph.D. thesis, unpublished, University of Chicago, 1946).

⁷ *Congressional Globe*, 33 Cong., 1 Sess. (1853-1854), Appendix, 381.

⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 32 Cong., 1 Sess. (1851-1852), 1638. For biography of A. C. Dodge, see Louis Pelzer, *Augustus Caesar Dodge* (Iowa City, 1908).

⁹ John C. Parish, *George Wallace Jones* (Iowa City, 1912), 62.

The history of the Democratic party in Iowa prior to the Civil War is one of crumbling hegemony in which dissension led to division and defeat. One major source of Democratic difficulties was a growing divergence between the needs of the local party and the demands of the national party leadership. From the day that Iowa had entered the Union there had been signs that the local Democracy would find it difficult to support wholeheartedly the national platform. Even the large measure of agreement between the two on the issues of slavery and the status of the Negro in national life was sometimes threatened. Most Iowa Democrats were anti-Negro, indifferent to slavery in the South, and opposed to the entry of either into Iowa or the territories to the west. Most local party chieftains shared the national party's hope that slavery would never become an issue in national politics, but dissent cropped up even on this subject. The Germans, Dutch, English, and Scandinavians who came into Iowa in the 1850's regularly joined the Democratic party and just as regularly were openly hostile to the institution of slavery. They were not abolitionists but they were unwilling to see it spread.

Second only to slavery in the politics of the day was the issue of expansion. Iowa was thoroughly imbued with the spirit of Manifest Destiny. To most Iowans it mattered little whether settlers expanded north, west, or south, so long as territory was added to the national domain. Further, the enthusiasm of Iowans for the Mexican War indicated that they cared little whether it was peaceful expansion or conquest. Although President Polk's decision for war against Mexico was widely applauded, most Iowans soon were sorry that Polk had not lived up to his brave campaign slogan of "54° 40' or Fight" and had negotiated instead a settlement with the British in Oregon.

There can be little doubt that much of the early success of the Democratic party in Iowa was the result of its devotion to expansion. Unfortunately the Democratic advantage was soon neutralized by the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso in 1846, forcing the Democrats to take a stand on slavery whenever they tried to make political capital out of expansion. After the introduction of the famous Proviso, Iowa Democrats had either to advocate slave expansion or the expansion of free soil and were denied the pure joy of supporting simple expansion without reference to slavery. The result was to divide the Democracy in Iowa. Before the ink was dry on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo one faction of the party was ready to

repudiate the administration if any further expansion of slave territory resulted from the defeat of the Mexicans. The possibility of demanding an indemnity of Mexico and taking part of her northern provinces as payment of such an indemnity provided grounds for further division in local Democratic ranks.¹⁰ Loyal party men stood helpless while the Democrats' political capital evaporated in the growing controversy over slavery.

Iowa Democrats labored under even greater difficulties in the matter of the party position on internal improvements at federal expense. The local organization made repeated efforts to follow eastern and southern leadership and oppose internal improvements, but the needs of a frontier state were much too insistent. The obvious necessity for transportation of all kinds forced Iowa Democrats to break away from the national party policy and seek federal aid for river improvements and land grants for railroads. Even before Iowa had been admitted to the Union, Delegate A. C. Dodge had succeeded in obtaining from Congress a grant whereby alternate sections of the public lands, forming a strip five miles wide on each side of the Des Moines River, were set aside to aid the Territory in improving the navigation of the stream. With admission to the Union, Iowa increased its demands for such aid. Democratic Representatives William Thompson and Shepherd Leffler tried hard to have the improvement of the Des Moines and Rock River rapids of the Mississippi River included in the rivers and harbors bills of 1846 and 1847. The fact that they were not successful did not make President Polk's vetoes of the two bills any more palatable to Iowa Democrats. All through the 1850's Democratic administrations in Washington were able to bring a few local Democrats to heel on the matter of internal improvements, but the overwhelming majority of the Iowa party was stubborn and steadfast in its approval of internal improvements at federal expense.

Finally, a fourth issue seriously dividing Iowa Democrats during the antebellum period was land. A grant of free land out of the tremendous reservoir of the public domain was the dream of every western settler. By 1846 the dream had taken concrete form in the demand for a homestead law which would grant free land to those who would settle upon it. Undeniably popular in Iowa, the homestead idea ran into considerable opposition in the East and the South. When the eastern and southern leadership of the Democratic party regularly pigeonholed the homestead bills intro-

¹⁰ Iowa City *Iowa Capital Reporter*, March 29, 1848.

duced into every Congress, Iowa Democrats could do little more than wring their hands and try to avoid the subject at home among their constituents.

The divisions in the Iowa Democracy over slavery, expansion, internal improvements, and land, as well as on several minor issues, were generally between two rather well-defined groups. One, usually labeled the "administration" group, followed the lead of George Wallace Jones in state politics. This group reached its peak of power under the Pierce administration. The other faction, the anti-administration Democrats, tended to follow the lead of Augustus Caesar Dodge, but his absence from the country as ambassador to Spain from 1855 to 1859 deprived this wing of the party of responsible leadership at the time it was most needed.

Genuine party politics came to Iowa in 1848. While politicians had been cutting their teeth on the preceding two-year struggle to elect United States Senators,¹¹ it was not until the first presidential election after statehood that all the platforms, conventions, and miscellaneous paraphernalia of a real campaign appeared in Iowa. The Democrats made a clean sweep of county, state, and congressional offices in the August election, and in November they carried the state for Cass in the presidential contest. The widespread rejoicing over the handsome victory was, of course, marred by the election of Taylor to the presidency, but there is little evidence that Iowa Democrats were much worried by the cracks which had appeared in the party armor during the canvass. The immense popularity of the Mexican War and the resulting land cessions had dictated party strategy. Democratic ownership of the Mexican War was defended against the Whig attempts to steal the credit. The Wilmot Proviso was castigated as a bald move to drag the issue of slavery into national politics, and Iowa Democrats were united in their belief that slavery was strictly a problem for the Southern states. A few editors shed a tear or two over the defection of Martin Van Buren, and at least one noted the danger to the Union involved in the Free Soil party, but most Iowa Democrats felt the local party was immune to the antislavery agitation of the Free Soilers. Van Buren was pictured as the candidate of a "long-heeled, wooly-headed, flat-nosed, run-away negro, mongrel whig disorganizing Convention!"¹²

¹¹ Dan Elbert Clark, *History of Senatorial Elections in Iowa* (Iowa City, 1912), 1-48.

¹² *Iowa City Iowa Capital Reporter*, July 19, 1848; *Keokuk Dispatch*, Sept. 2, 1848.

But the problem of internal improvements did give Iowa Democrats some trouble in 1848. Unable to sidetrack the issue they were forced to admit serious disagreement on the question. While President Polk had vetoed rivers and harbors bills in 1846 and again in 1847, Democrat William Thompson spoke for the majority of Iowa Democrats when he voted for the Petit resolution in the House repudiating the President's action.¹³ Indeed, scarcely more than six weeks after the veto message was published, Representative Thompson was back at the old stand pleading for either a land grant or a cash grant of \$50,000 from the federal government for the improvement of the upper Mississippi River. Even Whig editors sympathized with the local Democrats and admitted the futility of all efforts in the face of presidential vetoes.¹⁴ In the course of the campaign Democratic editors went so far as to fabricate a sympathy for internal improvements on the part of Lewis Cass out of his voting record in Congress. But this fell flat, for the Whigs recalled quite readily the way in which Cass had refused to identify himself with the great Rivers and Harbors Convention in Chicago the previous July.¹⁵ In the summer of 1848 the administration in Washington began to crack the party whip, for a few Democratic papers in Iowa reversed themselves and started to try to make a case for the Polk vetoes and the national party position on internal improvements. In such papers the President was pictured as the only barrier between a voracious East and a defenseless West, while the grants in rivers and harbors bills were likened to "a golden trumpet" for the East and a "tin whistle" for the West.¹⁶ At least one Iowa Democrat went so far as to echo Polk's constitutional doubts and, at the risk of being laughed out of the whole Northwest, called the bills "unjust to other portions of the Union" because they appropriated "more than Half a Million of dollars to the improvement of 'Harbors' on the Lakes which as 'ports of entry' have no existence save on paper. . . ."¹⁷ Fortunately for the local party, the campaign of 1848 was decided on the issues of expansion and slavery; on these the Democrats were united. Winning control of the state legislature in 1848 gave the Democrats the right to name two United States Senators. Such a handsome prize made the difficulties over internal improvements seem minor.

¹³ *Cong. Globe*, 30 Cong., 1 Sess. (1847-1848), 59.

¹⁴ *Fort Madison Iowa Statesman*, Feb. 5, 1848.

¹⁵ *Keokuk Des Moines Valley Whig*, June 23, 1848.

¹⁶ *Burlington Iowa State Gazette*, May 29, 1848.

¹⁷ *Bloomington [Muscatine] Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, July 15, 1848.

The year 1850 was a good one for Iowa Democrats. Alone among the states of the Northwest, Iowa had no avowed Free Soilers in either the state legislature or in Congress.¹⁸ In the gubernatorial contest Democrat Stephen Hempstead defeated Whig James Thompson by a comfortable margin. William Penn Clarke, the Free Soil candidate for governor, won only 575 votes out of a total of over 25,000. In congressional elections, too, the Democrats were victorious in both districts. This happy state of affairs largely resulted from the Democrats' firm support of the Compromise of 1850.

The efforts of Clay, Douglas, and Webster to find a method of keeping the question of slavery out of national politics were perfectly suited to the mood of Iowa Democrats. Just before the Clay resolutions were introduced in the Senate, the editor of the *Dubuque Miners' Express* was busy belaboring the Free Soil agitation of slavery so far from the home of the slave-owners.¹⁹ With the introduction of Clay's compromise resolutions the *Miners' Express* and all other Iowa Democrats were given a focus for their efforts to halt the agitation of the slavery question.²⁰

Meanwhile, in the Senate A. C. Dodge waded into the opponents of compromise:

. . . when I read these bitter animadversions from the North and East upon what I regard as the patriotic exertions of the venerable Senator from Kentucky to pour oil upon the troubled waters, and listen here to the merciless denunciations which both he and his resolutions receive from my friend from Mississippi, I could not but feel for the Senator from Kentucky a sympathy which nothing in his past history had awakened in me.²¹

At the same time, Jones busied himself introducing petitions and resolutions in favor of the Compromise. In July he reported that "in a large correspondence . . . equal, perhaps, to that of any member of Congress—I have received from my constituents and friends *not one* letter which takes ground against the compromise bill." Jones was expressing the heartfelt sentiments of all Iowa Democrats on the subject of slavery when he cried, "Would to God that this Congress could so elevate itself above the passions

¹⁸ Theodore C. Smith, *The Liberty and Free Soil Parties in the Northwest* (New York, 1897), 244.

¹⁹ *Dubuque Weekly Miners' Express*, Jan. 30, 1850.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, Feb. 6, 1850.

²¹ *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess. (1849-1850), 404.

and prejudices of the day as forever to give the quietus to this distracting question!"²²

All through the summer of 1850 the Democrats of Iowa, following the lead of Dodge and Jones, pounded away at the need for concessions in order to preserve the Union. It was the spirit of the Wilmot Proviso which the Democrats had come to fear by 1850. Dodge called the Proviso "a mask from behind which abolition seeks to destroy the Constitution, and, as an inevitable result, the Union."²³ The party press, while admitting that some of the provisions of the Compromise were "not to our liking" (notably the new fugitive slave law), agreed that "every good citizen should overlook the little of evil that may result, and be satisfied with the vast amount of good to flow from a definite and permanent adjustment of questions which have always proved too much for American equanimity. . . ."²⁴

Iowans were content, regardless of party, to follow the Democratic lead in accepting the Compromise, for as Dodge said, they wanted "to get the subject from before" them. Undoubtedly they would have echoed his thoughts when he said: "I am sick, sore, and tired of it; and therefore, though this measure is one that does not please me in all its parts, I shall swallow it in order to get the subject out of the halls of Congress. . . ."²⁵ The feeling that slavery was a question like a time bomb which might blow up the party and the Union was as prevalent among Iowa Democrats as it was in Washington. Local party meetings and conventions adopted resolutions and planks like the one passed in the Second Congressional District maintaining that "the continued and prolonged excitement" had been "kept up on the subject of slavery by designing demagogues in Congress and elsewhere for selfish and interested motives. . . ."²⁶

But the prestige and power of the Iowa Democrats were greatly weakened in 1850 as a result of their acceptance of the fugitive slave law embodied in the Compromise. Both Dodge and Jones, in their efforts to win Southern support for the Compromise, had made statements which seemed a little strong to many of their Iowa constituents as well as to their enemies.

²² *Ibid.*, Appendix, 1716.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1085.

²⁴ Bloomington [Muscatine] *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, May 30, 1850.

²⁵ *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., 1086.

²⁶ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, June 13, 1850.

The Senators tried to allay Southern suspicions of Iowa's sincerity in support of the Compromise. For his part, Jones reminded his Southern colleagues in the Senate of his long residence in slave states and charged that the evils which Free Soilers and abolitionists described in such lurid detail were a better reflection of their fanaticism than of actual conditions of slavery in the South.²⁷ Dodge felt constrained to read to the Senate a state law of Iowa which prohibited the entrance of free Negroes into the state except under a \$500 bond.²⁸ While such statements might serve to convince the South that a true compromise spirit prevailed in Iowa in 1850, they would live to haunt local Democrats for years to come.

Whatever the future might bring, the present belonged to the compromisers, and the fact that the Democrats possessed a monopoly of the pro-compromise votes in Congress was thoroughly exploited. The governor, both houses of the legislature, and both congressional districts remained Democratic in 1850-1851. The spirit of compromise was still supreme when the Whigs and Democrats began their spring maneuvers for the presidential campaign of 1852. The Whigs opened their February convention with a firm resolve that the Compromise of 1850 was a settlement of the slavery question "now and forever."²⁹ Together with the Democrats, the Whigs denied the concept of a "higher law" on the subject of slavery. Convening in April, the Democrats devoted four of the eight planks in their platform to singing the praises of the "final compromise." All Whig efforts to introduce other issues into the campaign came to nought when the Democrats refused to be drawn into a discussion of internal improvements, a new national bank, or distribution of the proceeds from the sale of public lands. Instead, the Democrats sat tight and expounded upon the virtues of their noncommittal candidate, Franklin Pierce. Pierce and the Compromise gave the Democrats a winning combination. This they knew, but there were more impelling reasons for the type of campaign they conducted in 1852.

The first of these reasons was the existence of a growing division in Democratic ranks both before and after the election of 1852. In Dubuque, the "Gibraltar of Democracy," the Jones wing of the party took umbrage at the nomination of Lincoln Clark for Congress from the Second District

²⁷ *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., 1716.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 1623.

²⁹ Keosauqua *Western American*, March 6, 1852.

and refused to print his name on the ticket when it appeared in the local party press. They gave out the startling information that Clark's name was not being printed because of the way in which "politicians" had become "despots" in the matter of making nominations.³⁰ A truce was subsequently worked out, however, and in the end Clark received the support of the Jones faction.

Perhaps Jones was a little extra touchy because he himself was a candidate for re-election. The traditional arrangement in Iowa decreed that the northern and southern halves of the state should share equally in political offices and privileges. This was especially true in the matter of senatorships. Since the term of A. C. Dodge, who was a Burlington man, ran until 1854, Jones and his friends assumed there would be no opposition to the right of Dubuque to name the new Senator and that Jones would be it. But opposition there was. Jones had apparently neglected to include a Burlington railroad project in a plea for federal land grants which he had introduced into the Senate,³¹ and there was considerable talk in Democratic circles of ignoring the old north-south division of the spoils. It looked to Jones like the beginning of a move to throw him overboard.

There was quite clearly a concerted drive in several factions of the state party to defeat Jones, but most of it appears to have remained beneath the surface and confined to the professional politicians.³² Jones fought back as best he could, putting all the pressure he could on the national party leadership to grant Iowa some railroad lands. In June he had written to the party's presidential nominee, Franklin Pierce, that he had "great fears for the success of our party in my own State if the Bill now before the House making a grant of land to the State of Iowa for the construction of certain Rail Roads in that State, be not passed."³³

Jones was quite correct. The party was in serious trouble because of railroads. Iowa was displaying a positive mania for railroads in the spring of 1852, but the state was too sparsely settled to support, without federal aid, one-tenth of the railroads it envisioned. The fact that the national

³⁰ Dubuque *Weekly Miners' Express*, July 7, 1852.

³¹ Parish, *George Wallace Jones*, 44.

³² Clark, *History of Senatorial Elections in Iowa*, 52; Dubuque *Weekly Miners' Express*, Dec. 15, 1852.

³³ George Wallace Jones to Franklin Pierce, Washington, June 7, 1852, *Franklin Pierce Papers* (Library of Congress).

party refused to support federal expenditures of land or cash for such ventures put an intolerable strain on the state Democracy. Democrats in the House and Senate had been and would continue to be most diligent in their attempts to win federal support, but by the time some success was achieved by the land grant of 1856 the local party was too far gone to derive much benefit from it.

According to election returns in 1852, the Democrats had done fairly well. It appeared that local party leadership may have been overly pessimistic, for Pierce carried the state, the Democrats controlled the legislature and would choose the next Senator, and the party had won in both congressional districts. But balanced off against this impressive showing was the Free Soil vote now three times its 1848 total, with a sizeable portion of it coming from traditionally Democratic counties in the southeastern corner of the state. Also on the debit side was the continued split in Democratic ranks which was now completely in the open as the party caucus met to decide upon a successor to Jones. A bitter fight ensued. If James W. Grimes can be believed, the feeling was intense. He wrote to his wife, "Everybody is busy electioneering, some for one office and some for another, but the all-engrossing subject is the election of United States Senator. It has already been the subject of one bloody fight, and many more are anticipated."³⁴ The election of Jones was finally rammed through the Democratic caucus, but not until party loyalties had been strained to the breaking point in the case of many individuals.

If the years following the election of 1852 had presented no problems, the Democratic party in Iowa might have found a new basis for unity and patched up its many quarrels. But few parties in American history have been allowed a respite in which to thrash out their family troubles, and the Democrats of Iowa were no exception. Outside pressures on the party increased rather than lessened. The greatest of these came from the way in which the local party continued to be squeezed between the demands of a frontier state for internal improvements, railroads, and homesteads, and the national party's refusal to open the federal purse.

Throughout 1853 Iowa's railroad fever continued unabated. In October the *Enquirer* of Muscatine noted that every tier of counties was backing a favorite railroad, and several of them seemed sure that their projected road would become a link in the transcontinental railroad which all Westerners

³⁴ William Salter, *The Life of James W. Grimes* (New York, 1876), 31.

were eagerly awaiting.³⁵ A host of counties mortgaged themselves for years to come in order to purchase stock in railroad companies, many of which never laid a single mile of track in Iowa.³⁶ Examples of the extent of the fever can be found in virtually every issue of every newspaper published in Iowa during the summer of 1853. One issue of such a paper carried the news that Dubuque County had just voted \$200,000 in bonds to promote the Dubuque & Pacific Railroad, while the city of Dubuque had come up with \$100,000 more for the same road; Linn County was to vote the following week on a \$200,000 bond issue for the Iowa Central Air Line Railroad; the Iowa Western Railroad had the support of Mahaska County to the tune of \$60,000, Keokuk County for \$25,000, Warren County for \$10,000, Marion County for \$50,000, and Muscatine for \$55,000.³⁷ There was scarcely a businessman or politician in Iowa who did not have an interest in some railroad.

Iowa Democrats were naturally called upon to win the coveted land grants to aid construction. Both Senators Dodge and Jones supported a projected grant to the Davenport and Iowa City road as early as 1851. In February of that year Dodge introduced in the Senate a bill designed to secure public land for railroad use.³⁸ Dodge recognized that opposition from the South within the ranks of the Democratic party threatened to defeat the whole land grant movement. In an effort to head off such opposition he cited the deciding vote which the martyred Calhoun had cast in support of a land grant to the Illinois and Michigan Canal and argued that the Calhoun vote was an excellent precedent for southern Democratic approval of railroad grants.³⁹ Dodge and his friends succeeded in driving the bill through the Senate over Southern opposition, but the grant died in the House.

Jones was back in 1852 with his bill, "Senate Bill One, An Act to grant the right of way, and making a grant of land to the State of Iowa in aid of the construction of certain railroads in that State." Once again the bill passed the Senate only to be defeated in the House. To make matters worse for the Iowa Democracy, Senate Bill Three, "An act granting the

³⁵ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, Oct. 20, 1853.

³⁶ Earl S. Beard, "Local Aid to Railroads in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 50: 1-17 (January, 1952.)

³⁷ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, June 11, 1853.

³⁸ *Cong. Globe*, 31 Cong., 1 Sess., 392.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 848.

right of way to the State of Missouri to aid in the construction of a railroad from Hannibal to St. Joseph in said State," passed both the House and Senate and became law just after the Iowa bill was defeated. Dodge and Jones might well have wondered if the national Democratic leadership was trying to destroy the party in Iowa. Whatever the purpose, Iowa's dreams of getting on the highroad to the Pacific were being regularly thwarted between 1850 and 1854 by opposition within national Democratic ranks.

It was the same need (and mania) for railroads which led Iowa into the embroglio of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. Land grants for Iowa railroads could be logically defended if such roads were to become part of the main-line of the Pacific railroad or if (and this was far more likely) they were to become feeders and distributors for the transcontinental line. Iowans also were very much concerned with the future of the territory on their western border. All past frontier experience indicated that Iowans would be the largest single group in the settlement of the Platte River country when it was opened. Iowa railroad men, real estate promoters, bankers, and politicians watched eagerly for the first sign that the new lands would be opened. During 1853 the Pierce administration had concluded a series of treaties with the Indian tribes in Nebraska and Kansas, and it was apparent that the trans-Missouri lands would soon be available for settlement, investment, and exploitation.

The story of Hadley Johnson illustrates the immediate interest of Iowans in the Nebraska country and explains their initial enthusiasm for the Kansas-Nebraska bill of 1854. A member of the legislature and a state politician of some note, Johnson had settled in Council Bluffs in the expectation that it would become the eastern terminus of the Pacific railway. In October, 1853, a vagrant Missouri newspaper fell into his hands. The paper carried the information that a group of Missourians, missionaries, and Wyandotte Indians were going to hold an election in the country across the Missouri River. While the Missourians were apparently making no claims for the legality of their election, Johnson became convinced that Iowans could not afford to be bested in any respect in the Kansas-Nebraska country. He quickly organized a group of "impromptu immigrants" numbering over 350 men who rowed over to Scarpy's Landing on the Nebraska side of the river in order to hold an election. When the vote was counted it was found that Johnson had received the endorsement of every man present

for the office of "Delegate from the Provisional Government of Nebraska to the National Congress." After the Scarpy's Landing proceedings had been "ratified" by several meetings along the Iowa "slope," Johnson set out for Washington to join Senators Dodge and Jones in their efforts to prepare a new bill for the organization of a territorial government for Nebraska.⁴⁰ When Congress convened in December, 1853, Dodge again introduced a Nebraska bill which was promptly referred to Stephen A. Douglas' committee on territories. That committee went to work immediately upon it, reporting early in January. Within a few days the measure had been modified to include provisions for the repeal of the 36° 30' line of the Missouri Compromise and allow slavery to enter the Nebraska Territory, if the people there should vote for it. Now the fat was in the fire.

Too long has the defeat of the Democrats in Iowa been interpreted as resulting almost exclusively from the party's stand on the Kansas-Nebraska bill. According to this understanding, the Democrats were driven from power by an angered and aroused citizenry who could not stomach the "soft" attitude of the party on the subject of slavery. In this respect the role of the "Anti-Nebraska" Democrats has been carefully examined and emphasis placed upon their resistance to the introduction of slavery into the West. Without depreciating the significance of the Kansas-Nebraska bill and the slavery question in the decline of the Democrats and the beginning of the Republican party in Iowa, it can be shown that the story is far more complex and significant than has been believed.

There were at least five distinct problems or issues which the Democrats faced as the campaign of 1854 opened. Over and above these five concrete problems, discussed in both party councils and press, was a sixth one only dimly understood at the time. This latter problem, and probably the most fundamental one, was the lack of purpose in the national Democratic party. The youth and vigor of Jackson's day were gone; the glory of the Mexican victory had faded away. There was no reforming zeal or crusading fervor left in the party, no positive issue to which it was dedicated. A truly conservative party might well survive and prosper without any of these, but the party of Jackson had never been conservative. One finds no dedicated souls among the Iowa Democrats of this age. They were honorable, responsible, and diligent men, but such qualities rarely inspire an electorate.

⁴⁰ William E. Connelly (ed.), "The Provisional Government of Nebraska Territory," Nebraska State Historical Society, *Proceedings and Collections* (2nd series), 3:84-7 (1899).

The Democratic party in Iowa, as in the nation, was old and tired. Long in power (the Harrison and Taylor interludes had not broken the Democratic grip on the political life of the nation), the local party now contented itself with the small questions of office and favors. In addition to this basic problem of no positive purpose, the Democracy of Iowa was defeated in 1854 as a result of (a) the excessive factionalism we have seen at work earlier; (b) a record of failure to achieve the coveted federal lands and money desired by the entire Northwest; (c) a bad case of defeatism; (d) the temperance issue; and (e) the question of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska bill.

The Democrats got off to an early start in the campaign of 1854, opening their convention in Iowa City on January 9. The date is of some consequence, for it is the day before the Kansas-Nebraska bill appeared in the *Washington Sentinel*, with the additional Section Twenty-one, which gave the first intimation that the Missouri Compromise line was in jeopardy. January 9, 1854, was almost two weeks before the famous White House conference in which the Democratic leadership decided to make an administration measure of the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. Thus signs of factionalism among Iowa Democrats in their January convention had nothing to do with the Kansas-Nebraska bill and the problem of slavery in the territories. As a matter of fact the only reference to the whole problem was the adoption of a simple resolution calling for the speedy organization of the Nebraska territory.

But that factionalism was present was evident in many of the actions taken by the convention. The resolution of thanks to the party's representatives in Washington was introduced but defeated. Such a vote of thanks was normally taken for granted; its defeat meant the party was in serious trouble. The finished platform was a collection of mild generalities including planks against monopolies and disunion and favoring the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. After giving the Pierce administration a pat on the back, the convention did agree upon a general endorsement of the national party's platform of 1852, which had included approval of the Fugitive Slave Law, but no specific endorsement of that law was made. The platform was plainly a compromise affair between bitterly feuding factions. The knotty problem of banks was ignored as were the questions of railroad land grants and the homestead law. Nothing was said about the location of the state capital, one of the hottest issues of the day, nor did the rising

temperance movement receive either encouragement or reproof. Silence was obviously considered the best alternative to agreement and unity.

The Democrats' failure to secure the much-coveted grants of land and money for homesteads, railroads, and internal improvements also hurt the party during the 1854 contest. The campaign started off ominously with the rejection of another homestead bill by the Eastern and Southern leaders of the Democracy. Piled on top of previous defeats, with no sign that the national Democratic leadership would ever relent and pass a homestead law, this defeat gave an air of futility to the actions of Dodge and Representative Bernhart Henn who had fought valiantly in both the Senate and the House for the measure.⁴¹ There is, on the other hand, some indication that the homestead bill which Henn introduced in the House in December, 1853, became something of a handicap to the Iowa Democrats in the subsequent campaign. The Henn measure would have prevented several categories of foreign-born from deriving any benefits under the bill, and Iowa Germans were particularly sensitive to any discrimination at this time because of a rising tide of nativism in many communities in the state.⁴² The Democrats were equally unsuccessful in securing land grants for railroads. Dodge and Jones continued to present the petitions of various Iowans for a grant to this or that railroad.⁴³ They made speeches⁴⁴ and spent a good portion of their time seeking support for the Iowa grants. The pressure on the Democrats on this score appears to have increased somewhat during the year because of a slump in railroad building, making federal grants seem imperative for their continued construction. The third plank in the economic platform of the Northwest also remained a stumbling block to the Democracy: federal support of internal improvements. When the Pierce veto of a rivers and harbors bill was announced, Iowa Democrats accepted it without a murmur.⁴⁵ It was not unexpected and certainly added to the sense of frustration plaguing the Democrats of the entire Northwest as they watched their economic program either ignored, defeated, or vetoed, and largely by their own party leadership in the East and South.

⁴¹ *Cong. Globe*, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 1127-8.

⁴² Herriott, "A Neglected Factor in the Anti-Slavery Triumph in Iowa in 1854," 66-70.

⁴³ *Cong. Globe*, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., 159, 221, 273, 407, 1058.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 357-8.

⁴⁵ *Muscatine Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, Aug. 17, 1854.

Democratic defeat in 1854 has been frequently attributed to overconfidence.⁴⁶ It would be more accurate to call it defeatism. Since the state legislature to be elected in the fall was the one that was to choose a successor to Dodge in the Senate, he was as much a candidate as other Democratic nominees in the state. In spite of his personal stake in the campaign, Dodge did not return from Washington, and his total public contribution to the canvass was a couple of joint letters which he and Jones sent to the Democratic press in Iowa. It is significant that when the Democrats were defeated, Dodge accepted an appointment as ambassador to Spain rather than return to Iowa and try to repair the damage the party had suffered. He did not return to the state until 1859. Jones's contribution was no more substantial. While not a direct candidate for office, he certainly had much at stake. Aside from participating in the joint letters with Dodge, he sat pat in Washington. When his term expired he followed Dodge's example and accepted the post of minister to New Granada and never returned to political prominence in Iowa. These are not the actions of men determined to hold their party together and turn back the vigorous challenge of their foes, but rather of men who had already lost a large measure of hope.

A fourth problem to give the Democrats trouble in 1854 was the "Maine Law agitation" as the temperance question was then labeled. Maine had recently adopted a law prohibiting liquor, and all the states of the Old Northwest seemed to be following suit and were in the midst of referendums on the issue. The temperance movement had been developing for some years in Iowa, but until 1854 it had remained outside of politics. However, late in 1853 several state temperance leaders came to the conclusion that the success of the crusade elsewhere warranted a bid for legislation in Iowa.⁴⁷ Accordingly, each of the parties was approached early in 1854. The Democrats refused to commit themselves on the subject, but the "Opposition" was receptive and adopted a platform plank in support of prohibition. In the course of the campaign Henry Clay Dean, the "stormy petrel of Iowa politics," tried to nail down the two gubernatorial candidates on the temperance question. In open letters to both Curtis Bates and James W. Grimes, Dean asked them to outline their position on the temperance issue

⁴⁶ Herriott, "A Neglected Factor in the Anti-Slavery Triumph in Iowa in 1854," 7; George Fort Milton, *The Eve of Conflict* (Boston, 1934), 173; Sparks, "The Birth of the Republican Party in Iowa, 1848-1860," 114.

⁴⁷ Dan Elbert Clark, "The History of Liquor Legislation in Iowa," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 6:68-70 (January, 1908).

and their course of action if elected. Although both Bates and Grimes replied that they would not veto a prohibition bill, it was well known throughout the state that Grimes was personally a temperance man, while Bates preferred either a license law or no legislation at all. Actually, neither party was united either for or against prohibition, although there is little doubt that the bulk of the temperance people were among the Whigs or "Opposition," while the majority of the Democrats wanted to leave the subject alone. As a result, while the question of prohibition divided both parties in 1854 to some extent, it divided the Democrats themselves even more. The aforementioned Henry Clay Dean became one of the most active campaigners in the state in behalf of Bates and prohibition.⁴⁸ This led to difficulties in towns like Dubuque, Muscatine, and Burlington, where the German population was high and the prohibition sentiment low. The Dubuque *Miners' Express*, a Bates paper, noted with an evident air of distaste the activities of "Henry Clay Dean the Temperance Brawler" and spoke of him as a "raving and ranting apostle of temperance."⁴⁹ In the Second Congressional District, James Thorington, a well-known temperance advocate, won the "Opposition" nomination and went on to defeat the popular ex-governor Stephen Hempstead.⁵⁰ After the election, editorial comment was in general agreement that temperance had been the vital issue in that District. Further evidence of the handicap which the liquor question imposed upon the Democrats may be deduced from the vote taken in April of 1855 resulting in the adoption of prohibition for Iowa. To a surprising degree the counties returning majorities against a prohibition law were the same counties voting Democratic in 1852.⁵¹ But even the Democratic anti-prohibition counties contained very substantial prohibition elements which had weakened the party in the previous campaign.

Thus it is evident that the Democrats in Iowa might well have been defeated even if there had been no problem of slavery in the territories and no Kansas-Nebraska bill. Democratic factionalism in the local party, repeated defeats for the Northwestern economic program, defeatism, and troubles with temperance had thrown the party way off balance.

⁴⁸ Charles E. Snyder, "Curtis Bates," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 44: 307 (July, 1946).

⁴⁹ Dubuque *Weekly Miners' Express*, June 28, 1854.

⁵⁰ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, Aug. 31, 1854.

⁵¹ State of Iowa, *Official Register, Executive, Judicial and County Officers of the State of Iowa, 1889* (Cedar Rapids, 1889), 207-208.

State Democratic leaders appear to have been quite as surprised by the storm of protest kicked up by the Kansas-Nebraska bill as was the national party leadership. They also seemed to share the view that the Missouri Compromise had been effectively repealed by the Compromise of 1850, even though that repeal was not explicit. All three of Iowa's Democratic representatives in Washington emphasized the virtues of expansion and thought the repeal of the 36° 30' line a small price to pay for the tremendous benefits that would follow. In his major speech in the Senate on the measure, Dodge predicted that the "settlement and occupation of Nebraska will accomplish for us what the acquisition and peopling of Iowa did for Illinois." He then explained that he had originally thought of creating a single territory to the west of both Missouri and Iowa but soon switched to support of the "establishment of *two* Territories; otherwise the seat of government and leading thoroughfares must have all fallen south of Iowa."⁵² Obviously Iowa's interest in organizing the territories centered on the "seat of government and leading thoroughfares" (meaning railroads).

Bernhart Henn used a little more circumspect language, but his meaning was the same. In May he told the House:

. . . it was the mission of our race to subdue the wilderness of the North American continent. . . . We have acquired possessions on the Pacific; we need roads thither to protect them! We have planted our banners west of the Rocky Mountains; we need American muscle to hold them aloft! Between us and them interpose Nebraska and Kansas. The sovereignty is ours — the possession must follow. By organizing these Territories, we have American law, *created by American will*, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. We have a safe conduit for our overland emigration. We have peace with the Indian tribes. We have increased commercial advantages, and increased wealth as a nation.⁵³

Perhaps the trouble with the Democrats was that they were carried away by their visions of Manifest Destiny and simply could not imagine that anyone in Iowa would oppose a measure so lofty in purpose and so promising in its prospect of profits.

Senator Jones agreed with Dodge and Henn on the virtues of the Kansas-Nebraska bill. However, he seems to have sensed the danger in an open endorsement of the measure, for in his only Senate speech on the subject

⁵² *Cong. Globe*, 33 Cong., 1 Sess., Appendix, 382.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, Appendix, 885-8.

Jones confined his remarks to an attack upon the Clayton Amendment.⁵⁴ This amendment, introduced by Clayton of Delaware, had its roots in the nativist sentiments gaining currency in these years. The amendment would have limited the right to vote and hold office in the proposed territories to citizens of the United States. This was contrary to the frontier experience, where a man's presence in the new community was all that was normally required to make him eligible for the suffrage and office holding. Jones, with long personal experience in frontier politics, knew that, regardless of Iowa's reaction to the bill as a whole, his foreign-born constituents would deeply resent the second-class status which the Clayton Amendment would create for them. Jones was also aware that the foreign-born Democrats in Iowa were already upset by the provisions of the homestead measure currently before the House, which had been introduced by Henn. And finally, by concentrating upon the Clayton Amendment, Jones was able to obscure his general approval of the Douglas bill. He was so successful in this last objective that the Whig press in Muscatine sternly accused him of "shirking the responsibility" when it announced the vote on the bill in the Senate.⁵⁵

With few notable exceptions, opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska bill was as general among Iowa Democrats at home as approval had been in the Washington contingent. Both of the Democratic newspapers in Dubuque rejected the Douglas bill when it was first reported, but within a week they had reversed their stands.⁵⁶ Originally opposing the measure on the grounds that it would needlessly reopen the slavery question, they both laid their change of heart at the door of Douglas' speech. A search of the surviving files of Democratic newspapers fails to show another paper, either pro- or anti-administration, which approved the Kansas-Nebraska bill. A very revealing side light appears in the columns of the *Iowa Democratic Enquirer* of Muscatine. Late in 1853 H. D. LaCossitt had sold the paper with the understanding that he could send back to the new editors dispatches from the Washington scene. LaCossitt wrote a series of articles while in Washington during the Kansas-Nebraska debate. These articles were in support of the Nebraska bill, and the new editors of the *Enquirer* dutifully printed them. The *Enquirer's* editors then devoted several edi-

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, Appendix, 779-80.

⁵⁵ *Muscatine Journal*, March 10, 1854.

⁵⁶ *Dubuque Weekly Miners' Express*, Feb. 8, 1854.

torial columns to explaining why they could not agree with their Washington correspondent and why they persisted in their rejection of the Douglas bill.⁵⁷ The foreign language press, largely Democratic, joined in the repudiation of the national leadership. Theodore Guelich, editor of *Der Demokrat* of Davenport, slashed out at the "despicable treachery" of Douglas and the administration. Guelich also made the rather acute observation that this bill simply revealed that the fundamental differences between the moribund Whigs and the divided Democrats had disappeared and that they were now being held together solely in the interests of office and spoils. He also predicted the rise of a new party that would put fresh spirit and purpose into American politics.⁵⁸

The famous "Appeal of the Independent Democrats," penned in Washington by Salmon Chase, signed by Charles Sumner and four other abolitionists or Free Soilers, and so influential in wrecking the Democratic parties in Ohio and Illinois, apparently had little effect on Iowa Democrats. It was published by both the *New York Times* and Horace Greeley's *Tribune* and thus certainly received wide circulation in Iowa, but the fact that it was reprinted in only one newspaper in the state would indicate that the local politicians found it inapplicable to the Iowa situation.⁵⁹

It is very difficult to determine the exact damage done to Iowa Democrats by the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In the flurry of Anti-Nebraska meetings which were held all over the state, Democrats did take part. They were present, along with "Conscience" Whigs, Free Soilers, Abolitionists, and Know-Nothings. The press of the day frequently observed that many men gathered outside of halls where Anti-Nebraska meetings had been called and waited to see the size of the crowd and the political complexion of those present before declaring themselves by entering the hall. Few prominent Democrats allowed their names to get into the press in connection with these meetings, and the correspondence of such men sheds little light on the subject. Most of the election returns of 1854 are no more significant, for they do not distinguish between those who left the Democratic party because of its record of failure and dissension and those who left only with the introduction of the Kansas issue. The victory of Democrat Augustus

⁵⁷ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, Feb. 9, 16, March 2, 1854.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Louis Pelzer, "The History and Principles of the Democratic Party in Iowa, 1846-1857," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 6:205-206 (April, 1908).

⁵⁹ Ottumwa *Des Moines Courier*, March 2, 1854.

Hall over Rufus L. B. Clarke in the First Congressional District had greater significance than it had generally been accorded. As the *Keokuk Dispatch* observed:

Mr. Hall was nominated as a Nebraska man; the Convention that placed him before the people, eschewing a timid policy, passed resolutions endorsing the great principles of popular sovereignty, contained in the Nebraska-Kansas Bill. . . . This demonstrates that our general defeat in Iowa was not caused by the Nebraska measure.⁶⁰

The opinion of the *Dispatch* cannot be accepted without reservations, but it does help to redress the balance. It reminds us that the Democratic defeat in Iowa in 1854 was the result of a complex series of events, some of which, like the frustration of the Northwestern economic program, dated back to the Polk administration, and many of which were the result of a loss of purpose. Excessive factionalism, a defeatist attitude, divisions on matters like prohibition, the location of the state capital, and the constitutional prohibition on banking in the state were the symptoms of a sick party. Just as the healthy human body is host to bacteria and virus at all times, but sickens and dies only when the invaders exceed a certain number, so a political party can stand considerable dissension and many honest differences of opinion but will weaken and die if these things become excessive.

In the campaigns following the 1854 defeat the Iowa Democrats continued to be bothered by a variety of troubles. Throughout 1855 and 1856 the Know-Nothings showed considerable power; they found the Democrats particularly easy prey. It must be remembered that the main sources of Democratic strength in Iowa were the early settlers in the southern border and river counties and the immigrant elements concentrated primarily in the river counties. Here, the anti-foreign-born prejudices of the Know-Nothings were highly popular with many of the native-born and quite unpopular, naturally, among the immigrants. The Democrats were particularly anxious to stifle the Know-Nothing movement before it drove the German vote into the arms of the "Opposition." In a Democratic convention of the Eighth Judicial District of Iowa, comprising the counties of Jones, Clinton, Muscatine, Scott, Cedar, and Jackson, the only issue deemed worthy of a resolution was one taking a strong stand against the Know-

⁶⁰ *Keokuk Dispatch*, Sept. 13, 1854.

Nothings.⁶¹ Muscatine Democrats followed suit some months later.⁶² A Jefferson County Democratic convention provided a variation: as a preliminary to participation in the convention, each delegate was required to "rise in his place and give a pledge that he was a Democrat and had no sympathy with Know-Nothings."⁶³ Within a year the Know-Nothings had acquired a party press of at least five newspapers and apparently more voting strength in one year than the abolitionists had acquired in ten years. The relationship of the Know-Nothing movement to the decline of the Iowa Democracy was properly understood by the editors of the *Muscatine Enquirer*. These editors noted that the death of the Whig party and the divisions in the Democratic party had left many men without a political roof. Such men were ready to "go in for anything rather than the two old organizations." The real threat of the movement lay in the fact that many men found it the "readiest means to break up the old parties, with which they were dissatisfied."⁶⁴

The Democrats were further demoralized in 1855 by the departure of A. C. Dodge for his position in Madrid, leaving the anti-administration wing of the party without experienced leadership. By 1856 the various "Opposition" elements had succeeded in forming a Republican organization in the state and carrying Iowa for Fremont, as well as winning both seats in Congress. Democratic reaction was feeble; rather than searching out the best candidates they might have nominated and trying to exploit the many mistakes made by the inexperienced Republicans, the Democrats continued to spend most of their energies on squabbling among themselves. In August, 1857, just six weeks before the gubernatorial contest, Jones wrote to former President Pierce, revealing the full extent of his party's collapse. According to Jones:

I have had a great deal of correspondence with the present administration [Buchanan's] relative to the offices in this state, all of which they intended to fill by other than my friends through the influence of the men in the state who went for Mr. Buch[anan] for the nomination in preference to yourself who they knew I preferred to all other men on earth. I distinctly gave them to under-

⁶¹ *Muscatine Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, March 15, 1855.

⁶² *Ibid.*, July 19, 1855.

⁶³ Charles J. Fulton, "Jefferson County Politics Before the Civil War," *Annals of Iowa* (3rd series), 11:437 (July, 1914).

⁶⁴ *Muscatine Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, Nov. 30, 1854.

stand that if men who had been apptd to office by yourself at the instance of my colleagues & myself were to be removed from office merely to gratify such fellows as [Thomas S.] Wilson, [Augustus] Hall, [Lincoln] Clark and the like — and their favorites were made to succeed them & I could not procure their rejection by the Senate that I would resign the seat which I hold there & allow another abolitionist like Mr. Harlan to be appted as my successor.⁶⁵

Surprisingly enough, one of the factors which accounted for much Democratic embarrassment in other northern states in 1857, and which is normally credited with being an important factor in the decline of the Iowa Democracy, apparently had no effect. This was the famous Dred Scott Decision which, with its endorsement by the Buchanan administration, wrought havoc in some sections of the North. A careful search of the Iowa press reveals only an occasional announcement of the Supreme Court's decision and no political discussion of it at all. This is equally true of both the Republican and Democratic press in 1857. The Dred Scott Decision seems to have had no perceptible effect on the declining Democratic fortunes until it became a very minor issue in the 1860 presidential campaign.

The year ended with the Democracy split further by the Lecompton debacle. While Senator Jones endorsed the Buchanan approval of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution for Kansas, 90 per cent of the Democratic editors in the state supported Stephen A. Douglas' rejection of the Lecompton "fraud," and repudiated the leadership of Jones.⁶⁶ This situation persisted throughout 1858, culminating in a comic opera scene in Dubuque. Although Jones's term in the Senate was to expire in March, 1859, the legislature which was to choose his successor had been elected in 1857 and that election had been won by the Republicans, giving them the choice of the next United States Senator. Under these circumstances a senatorial nomination by the Democratic caucus would be honorific — an endorsement for past policies rather than a promise of future support. But Jones's support of Buchanan and the Lecompton Constitution gave his old rival, Thomas S. Wilson, an opportunity to repudiate Buchanan and reprimand Jones by taking from him the endorsement of the Democratic caucus in the legislature. The race between Jones and Wilson became heated and lasted

⁶⁵ George Wallace Jones to Franklin Pierce, Dubuque, Aug. 6, 1857, *Pierce Papers*.

⁶⁶ Muscatine *Iowa Democratic Enquirer*, January and February, 1858, *passim*.

long after it had become a statewide joke. Many editors likened the Dubuque wrangle to the famed feud between Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets.⁶⁷ The upshot of the affair was that Benjamin Samuels was chosen to make the futile race,⁶⁸ his choice being interpreted as an emphatic repudiation of the Buchanan administration by the Iowa Democracy.⁶⁹

With Jones out of the way in 1859, as minister to New Granada, and Dodge returning to the state to make the run for governor, the Democrats began to perk up. Stephen A. Douglas in the Senate gave the Iowa party and the entire Northwest a leader they could honestly follow. His emphasis upon popular sovereignty squared with the hopes and experience of Iowans. The Democratic Convention, remembering Dodge's long service to the party, his proven vote-getting ability, and his absence from Iowa during the 1856 fiasco and the Lecompton mess, nominated him by acclamation. His companions on the ticket included Thomas S. Wilson and two other prominent Douglas men. The usual resolution backing the national administration was stopped cold on the floor; for a time it looked as though Buchanan actually would be censured, but cooler heads prevailed. The finished platform was a straightforward statement of the Douglas position: it endorsed popular sovereignty; repudiated the Dred Scott Decision, together with the Supreme Court; called for the acquisition of Cuba, the building of a Pacific railroad, and passage of a homestead law; and condemned the move to reopen the African slave trade. On state issues the platform was a little more equivocal but not nearly to the degree that had become habitual during recent campaigns.

When the election was over in 1859, Iowans had chosen the taciturn Samuel Jordan Kirkwood over the fiery A. C. Dodge, but by a margin so slim that it gave Republicans cold chills. In a total vote of 110,048, Kirkwood won by a majority of only 2,964. It was a slight increase over the size of the Republican victory of 1857 but only a little more than half the victory Grimes had won back in 1854. While a county-by-county survey of the election showed that the Republicans had picked up five scattered counties which had been Democratic in 1857, it also showed that the Demo-

⁶⁷ Parish, *George Wallace Jones*, 49-52; Clark, *History of Senatorial Elections in Iowa*, 104.

⁶⁸ There is added evidence of the severity of the Democratic schism in 1858 in Mildred Throne, "C. C. Carpenter in the 1858 Iowa Legislature," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 52:31-60 (January, 1954).

⁶⁹ Clark, *History of Senatorial Elections in Iowa*, 118-19.

crats had won back three of the counties voting Republican in 1857. An unimpressive two counties was the net Republican gain. In spite of the good showing Dodge had made, the fact that they had been defeated even behind their best vote-getter seems to have taken most of the starch out of the Democrats: if they could not win with Douglas and Dodge in 1859, what chance had they in 1860?

The February convention to choose delegates to Charleston was completely dominated by Douglas men who chose A. C. Dodge and Benjamin M. Samuels to head a delegation of eight. After reaffirming its 1856 platform, denouncing John Brown and his raid on Harper's Ferry, and voting a perfunctory thanks to the Buchanan administration, the convention instructed its Charleston delegates to cast their ballots as a unit for Stephen A. Douglas "so long as he should be a candidate before that body."⁷⁰ Ben Samuels played a prominent part in the Charleston drama, joining other Iowans who watched in dismay as the convention disintegrated.⁷¹ Later, in Baltimore, there was not one dissident voice as Iowa delegates joined the Northwestern Democrats in nominating Douglas.

The Democratic ratification convention met in Des Moines on July 12. It was a dispirited crew and reached for straws to keep afloat. The first five resolutions of the meeting pledged allegiance to Douglas and adherence to the doctrines of nonintervention and popular sovereignty; the sixth was a plea for homestead legislation. Beyond that the convention sought to shift the discussion from national problems to local issues. Apparently working on the assumption that a flood of words might drown their troubles, the convention adopted seventeen more resolutions, making the final platform the longest in the history of the state.⁷²

The overwhelming majority of Iowa Democrats either went along with Douglas or stayed home, but a small group met in Davenport on August 15 to promote the Breckinridge-Lane candidacy. This faction chose a full slate of presidential electors and adopted an ultra-Buchanan platform. The heart of the movement lay in Davenport and Scott County with some support coming from other river towns. This "National Democracy" had one lone voice in the Lyons City *Advocate*, but the enthusiasm that comes with a

⁷⁰ Louis Pelzer, "The History of Political Parties in Iowa from 1857 to 1860," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY AND POLITICS*, 7:216 (April, 1909).

⁷¹ Owen Peterson, "Ben Samuels in the Democratic National Convention of 1860," *IOWA JOURNAL OF HISTORY*, 50:225-38 (July, 1952).

⁷² Herbert S. Fairall, *Manual of Iowa Politics* (Iowa City, 1884), 54-7.

chance for victory was not there, and the moral fervor which usually characterizes a third party was missing.

Iowans never doubted that the Republicans had the state in the bag. On the one hand was the divided Democracy, fast losing its grip on the spoils and daily becoming more identified with the interests of the South. A long series of defeats in Iowa had left it without leadership or enthusiasm. The Republicans, on the other hand, were strong in their youth and popularity. The smell of victory was in the air, and ambitious men were hurrying to get aboard the bandwagon. A firm grip on the state patronage gave Republicans an ample supply of money and loyal workers at the grass roots level (in precincts or townships).⁷³ Senator Grimes, answering an inquiry from Abraham Lincoln concerning Republican prospects in Iowa, reported that the state would go Republican "by an increased majority."⁷⁴ Grimes thought the Democrats with their candidate Benjamin Samuels were waging a last-ditch fight in the First Congressional District to defeat the Republican incumbent, but even there Grimes was confident of victory. Grimes's report to Lincoln showed that he was far more concerned about the outcome in Pennsylvania and Indiana than in Iowa. He was right: in Iowa, Lincoln defeated Douglas by 70,000 to 55,000; Breckinridge and Bell each received just over 1,000 votes and less than 3,000 altogether.

The Democracy of Iowa had harvested the bitter fruit of years of division which went all the way back to 1850-1851. A bankruptcy of ideas and purposes had led to division between national and local parties and to dissension within the local party itself. The Democrats could not close ranks on the issue of prohibition. Local party chieftains were thwarted by the national leaders when Iowa's need for federal land or money grants was advanced. A general atmosphere of hopelessness and defeatism had replaced the old vigor of the Jacksonians. Offices and spoils had become a major concern of the party leaders as well as of the usual party hacks. The issue of slavery served to topple a badly weakened Democracy whose foundations had already crumbled as a result of bitter and long standing divisions. The 1860 crisis and the Civil War which followed merely empha-

⁷³ In July the *Iowa Capital Reporter* of Iowa City went over to the Republicans for a reported \$500 plus a promise of county printing. J. Edward [H?]orce to Grenville M. Dodge, Iowa City, July 29, 1860, *Grenville M. Dodge Papers* (State Dept. of History and Archives, Des Moines, Iowa), Vol. I.

⁷⁴ James W. Grimes to Abraham Lincoln, Burlington, Oct. 1, 1860, *Abraham Lincoln Papers* (Library of Congress).

sized the depth of these divisions and prolonged their life. Democrats loyal to the Union had become first disgruntled Democrats and then had joined the Republican party because they had nowhere else to go.