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The 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia

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THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA

R. Randall Moore

Master of Arts in History

University of Richmond

1987

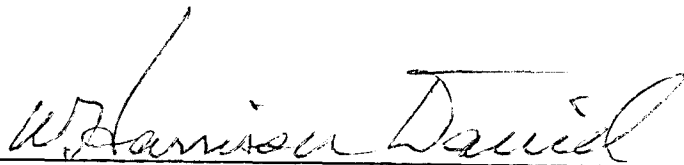
Dr. W. Harrison Daniel

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the 1856 presidential election campaign was conducted in Virginia. The paper specifically investigates how Virginia newspapers interpreted the events of the campaign. The role played by the political leadership of Virginia in the 1856 election is also examined.

The paper is based on contemporary newspaper editorials and political speeches. The manuscripts of prominent Virginia politicians during the period are also utilized.

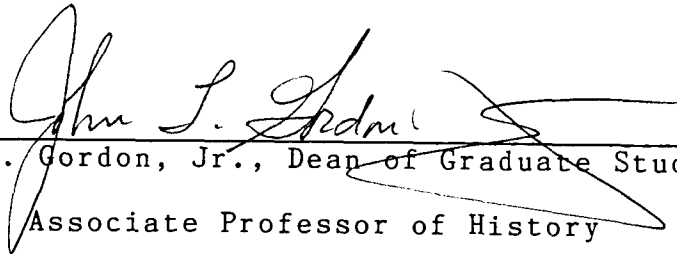
The paper illustrates how Democratic newspaper editorials in Virginia used scare tactics to convince readers that Virginia Know-Nothings were abolitionists. Know-Nothing editorials responded by emphasizing support for the Union and repudiating Democratic calls for secession. The paper compares how Democratic and Know-Nothing political leaders in Virginia participated in the 1856 campaign.

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THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA

By

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B. A., Virginia Wesleyan College, 1985

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the University of Richmond

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THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN IN VIRGINIA

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INTRODUCTION

While the presidential election of 1860 has received significant attention from historians, far less study has been devoted to the presidential campaign of 1856. The 1856 campaign, which featured separate races in the North and South, foreshadowed the sectionalism that would ultimately result in the Civil War. Although the outcome of the 1856 election did not result in civil war, the campaign itself remains an important area of investigation for students of history for a number of reasons. It was the first presidential campaign in which the Republican party took part, making slavery a central campaign target. The issues of this campaign were visceral, especially in the South, where newspaper editorials advocated secession if the Republican candidate was victorious.¹

National political parties in 1856 were in a state of transition.² The Republican party, committed to

¹Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise and the Virginia Fire-Eaters of 1856," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 21 (March 1935): 506.

²For a detailed discussion of political parties in the 1850s, see David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 225-266.

restricting the spread of slavery, was gaining strength in the North. Since the Whig party had virtually disintegrated by 1856, many former Whigs joined the American or Know-Nothing party and attempted to reshape it in the image of the Whig party. Other former Whigs joined the Democratic party, which was still a unified national party. In the South, the 1856 campaign was a contest between Democrats and Know-Nothings, as Republican support in the region was minimal. The election in the North was a three sided race, with the Republican party competing against both Democrats and Know-Nothings.

This research paper focuses on the 1856 election in Virginia. Specifically, it examines how Virginia newspapers covered the 1856 campaign for President. A comparative approach is used as newspapers from around the state are sampled, representing Democratic and Know-Nothing viewpoints.

A chronological approach is used to illustrate how events in the national campaign were perceived by Virginians. This approach examines how the newspapers interpreted campaigns for party nominations, party conventions, party platforms, and, of course, the fall election campaign. Particular emphasis is placed on how Virginians dealt with the changing political alignments which were occurring nationally. The reaction of the Virginia newspapers to the results of the election is

also presented and analyzed.

Using a variety of primary and secondary sources, this thesis examines two other crucial aspects of the campaign. The 1855 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia is studied, since many of the issues and personalities of that race were prominent in the 1856 race as well. The role played by Virginia's political leaders in the 1856 campaign is examined, particularly the activities of Governor Henry A. Wise and Senator R. M. T. Hunter, both of whom wanted to be on the Democratic ticket in 1856.

CHAPTER ONE
VIRGINIA POLITICS IN THE MID-1850S

As the 1856 presidential campaign unfolded in Virginia, the Democrats and the Know-Nothings constituted the two major political parties in the state. During the mid-1850s, the Democratic party faced serious challenges from Know-Nothing candidates in various localities around the state, and in some cities, such as in Norfolk, Know-Nothing candidates were able to win a majority of municipal offices.¹ As will be seen in the next chapter, the Democrats gathered their forces in the 1855 gubernatorial race and were victorious by a 10,000 vote margin. Since the Republican party was not a significant contender in Virginia politics during this period, the Democrats and Know-Nothings competed for the votes of Virginians in the 1856 campaign. Therefore, as the 1856 election approached, neither party could assume that its national ticket would be victorious in the Old

¹Thomas J. Wertenbaker, Norfolk: Historic Southern Port, edited by Marvin W. Schlegal (Durham: Duke University Press, 1962), p. 199.

Dominion. This resulted in an energetic campaign in the press, with both Democratic and Know-Nothing journals endorsing vociferously their respective candidates.

The role of newspapers in Virginia politics during the antebellum period was significant. Clement Eaton states that one of the prerequisites for a successful newspaper in the Old South was political patronage.² Also, he asserts that Southern newspapers in this period lacked originality, since most editorial pages were composed of reprinted articles from other newspapers.³ This contention accurately describes Virginia newspapers during this period. However, politics and especially political campaigns added flavor to these papers. Newspaper editors were outspoken and highly partisan, making their columns worth reprinting in other Southern newspapers.

Eaton cites a number of factors that influenced the growth of newspaper circulation in the years preceding the 1856 election. These included a more literate public and the change from weekly newspapers to daily papers.⁴

The growth in newspaper circulation also occurred in Virginia at a time when the franchise was being made available to more people, due to constitutional reforms

²Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), p. 266.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 269.

that were enacted in 1851. In terms of the 1856 election, these newspapers are valuable for their editorial content, as well as for their approach in covering the newsworthy events of the campaign. By comparing the newspapers of competing parties and of various regions around the state, much can be discerned regarding the importance of the 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia.

An understanding of the historical significance of the 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia requires some knowledge of the political environment in Virginia in the 1850s. One of the significant events of the period was the assortment of reforms made to the state constitution in 1851. Many of the reforms addressed the grievances of voters in the western part of the state who felt the General Assembly favored the interests of eastern Virginia. The reforms of 1851 included a reapportionment of the General Assembly which provided that 83 out of 152 seats in the House be awarded to the western part of the state.⁵ Although the Senate remained a stronghold of the eastern section, the west won other reforms, such as universal male suffrage and direct election of the governor, lieutenant governor, and most state judges.⁶ These reforms

⁵Virginius Dabney, Virginia: The New Dominion (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1971), p. 222.

⁶Ibid.

were initiated by the Democratic party in an attempt to maintain its image as the party of the common man and to decrease the power of eastern Whigs.⁷

The historian Henry T. Shanks, who has studied Virginia politics during the 1850s, divides the decade into two political phases. Shanks argues that the period between 1851 and 1856 witnessed a lessening of tension within the state regarding slavery, with the exception of the debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Shanks asserts that it was during this period that the Democratic party grew in strength while the Whig party gradually dissolved.⁸ He contends that the period from 1856 through 1859 was characterized by the growing discord among Democrats between the followers of Governor Henry Wise and Senator R. M. T. Hunter.⁹ The rivalry between Hunter and Wise that prevailed during the 1856 presidential election was evident in 1852, according to Shanks, who states that in that year Hunter opposed Wise's drive to force the Virginia delegation to the Democratic national convention to vote as a unit for James Buchanan of Pennsylvania.¹⁰ Furthermore,

⁷W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 48.

⁸Henry T. Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia, 1847-1861 (New York: AMS Press, 1971), p. 46.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 47.

Shanks contends that Wise did not discuss with Hunter the former's decision to run for governor in 1855, making the relationship between the men more tenuous.¹¹

As the 1856 campaign approached, the Democratic party in Virginia benefited from its recent victory over the Know-Nothings in the gubernatorial election. This victory provided Virginia Democrats with momentum as they prepared for the presidential race. The election was detrimental to the Know-Nothings, since it prevented them from increasing their credibility before the voters. Henry A. Wise won the governorship for the Democrats in 1855 by emphasizing the undemocratic nature of Know-Nothing dogma and by accusing the Know-Nothings of being abolitionists.¹² Virginia Democrats were strong supporters of Southern rights, meaning, of course, the right to take property into the territories of the United States.

Wise played an active role in the 1856 presidential campaign. Having won the governorship by over 10,000 votes, he was in a good position to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 1856. His biographer, Craig M. Simpson, asserts that Wise publicly endorsed Buchanan, but would have readily accepted the nomination if it had been

¹¹Ibid., p. 48.

¹²Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Virginia: A History (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 123.

offered to him.¹³ In any event, as will be illustrated in a later chapter, Wise's support for Buchanan, especially at the Democratic national convention, helped the latter win the nomination. Wise campaigned diligently for the Democratic ticket in 1856 by threatening both Virginia Know-Nothings and Northern abolitionists with secession if Fremont was elected.¹⁴ As Clement Eaton has pointed out, Wise and the Virginia Democratic newspapers ensured that during the 1856 campaign, Virginia Democrats would strongly support state rights.¹⁵

Another Virginia Democrat who figured prominently in the 1856 campaign was Robert M. T. Hunter. Hunter was a United States Senator who represented Virginia from from 1847 to 1861. Prior to the Democratic convention of 1856, a number of Virginia newspapers favored Hunter as the Democratic nominee. Since Wise was also a favorite son of Virginia, political conflict between these two men developed during the 1856 campaign and continued until the

¹³Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 122.

¹⁴Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise: A Study in Virginia Leadership, 1850-1861," West Virginia History 3 (April 1942): 194.

¹⁵Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise and the Virginia Fire-Eaters of 1856," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 21 (March 1935): 495.

Civil War.¹⁶ Henry H. Simms, a historian who has studied the conflict between Wise and Hunter during the 1850s, concludes that some historians have made too much of the relationship between the two men. Simms emphasizes the areas of agreement between Hunter and Wise. He points out, for example, that they both opposed the Compromise of 1850 because it did not go far enough in guaranteeing slavery in the territories.¹⁷ The conflict between Wise and Hunter as it relates to the 1856 campaign is discussed in detail in a later chapter.

The growth of the Know-Nothing party in the South occurred simultaneously with the decline of the Whig party in the region. As Henry T. Shanks points out, the disintegration of the Whig party in Virginia began during the presidential campaign of 1848. During this election, John Minor Botts, a Whig congressman from Richmond and later a prominent Virginia Know-Nothing, endorsed Henry Clay for president while most Virginia Whigs supported Zachary Taylor.¹⁸ This division, according to Shanks, effectively divided Virginia Whigs into two factions. The

¹⁶Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise: A Study in Virginia Leadership, 1850-1861," p. 195.

¹⁷Henry H. Simms, Life of Robert M. T. Hunter: A Study in Sectionalism and Secession (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1935), p. 134.

¹⁸Henry T. Shanks, The Secession Movement in Virginia, 1847-1861, p. 48.

nationalist faction, led by Botts, supported Clay's plans for internal improvements and generally opposed extending slavery into the territories. The other faction, led by Thomas S. Flournoy, promulgated the state rights doctrine endorsing slavery in the territories.¹⁹ Shanks argues that while the two Whig factions joined in support of the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 served to permanently divide Virginia Whigs. Shanks states:

The Kansas-Nebraska bill completed the division. Botts and his followers opposed this measure on the ground that it abrogated the Compromise of 1850, whereas the majority of the Whigs along with the Democrats maintained that it merely carried out that settlement. This bill, also, split the Virginia Whigs from the Northern branch.²⁰

Shanks concludes that during the 1850s, most Whigs agreed with Democrats on issues concerning slavery. The Whigs, however, did not agree with the Democrats that a Republican presidential victory would necessitate secession of the Southern states.²¹ The growth of the Know-Nothing party in Virginia during the mid-1850s is well documented by W. Darrell Overdyke in The Know-Nothing Party in the South. Overdyke contends that Know-Nothingism in Virginia made

¹⁹Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

its debut during the summer and fall of 1854.²² According to Overdyke, the party benefited in its early months from the decision of Whig newspaper editors to endorse Know-Nothingism. Know-Nothing strength in Norfolk was reflected by the decision of the Norfolk Era to be one of the first Virginia newspapers to endorse the Know-Nothings.²³

Craig M. Simpson asserts that Know-Nothingism in Virginia was strongest in areas where the Whig party had been strong, such as in Norfolk and in the northern counties of the state.²⁴ Prominent Know-Nothing leaders in Virginia during the 1850s included John Minor Botts, a former Whig congressman from Richmond. Alexander H. H. Stuart of Staunton, a member of the Virginia House of Delegates for three years and a supporter of Henry Clay, was an outspoken Know-Nothing in the 1855 and 1856 political campaigns in Virginia. He also served as Secretary of the Interior in the administration of Millard Fillmore.²⁵ John D. Imboden, another prominent Know-Nothing, was a Staunton attorney who, as will be seen

²²W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South, p. 64.

²³Ibid., p. 54.

²⁴Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 109.

²⁵Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, 11 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 9:160.

in the next chapter, advised Thomas Flournoy in his race for governor against Henry Wise.

The ideology of the Know-Nothing party in Virginia has proven to be a difficult topic for historians, because many of the party's positions and activities were secret and because the Know-Nothing party in the state was composed of people with varied views on the issues of the day. In general, however, Know-Nothings in Virginia opposed the concept of secession and wanted to preserve the Union.²⁶ The slavery issue posed problems for the Know-Nothings as it did for the Whigs. Most Know-Nothings in Virginia, however, recognized the right of a state to determine if it would permit slavery within its borders.²⁷

The role of nativism in the Virginia Know-Nothing movement has also been investigated by historians. Prejudice against foreigners and Catholics was, to a large degree, a rallying point for Know-Nothings in the North. Philip Morrison Rice argues that in the 1855 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia, anti-Catholicism was not a factor in the campaign.²⁸ However, Rice states that nativism found a

²⁶John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party" (Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1974), p. v.

²⁷Ibid., p. vi.

²⁸Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 55 (January 1947): 69.

receptive audience in the state, since immigration was helping the North increase its power in Congress.²⁹ As will be illustrated in a later chapter, some Know-Nothing editorials during the 1856 campaign focused on nativist and anti-Catholic themes. In general, however, the Know-Nothings in Virginia adhered to the old-line Whig ideology, which did not emphasize nativist issues.

Division between the Know-Nothings of the North and those in Virginia was rooted more in the slavery controversy than in nativism. This conflict began in the summer of 1855 during the meeting of the Know-Nothing National Council in Philadelphia. At this gathering, Southern delegates were able to secure the passage of a platform plank known as the Twelfth Section, which was largely a statement in support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.³⁰ A number of Northern delegates walked out of this meeting following the adoption of the Twelfth Section. A final split occurred in February of 1856 when the Know-Nothing convention met and the Northern delegates failed in their efforts to pass a resolution urging a repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.³¹ Although the Twelfth Section was removed from the party platform at this

²⁹Ibid., p. 70.

³⁰David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 254.

³¹Ibid., p. 255.

convention, the Northern delegation was not appeased. They walked out of the convention, leaving the Southern delegates to nominate Millard Fillmore for president, who was favored by Southern old-line Whigs for his pro-union views.³² Andrew Jackson Donelson of Tennessee, a former Democrat, was ultimately nominated for vice-president, defeating Alexander H. H. Stuart of Virginia, among others.³³ The Northern delegates who left the 1856 Know-Nothing convention became known as North Americans while Fillmore supporters were called South Americans. The North Americans nominated for president the Republican candidate John C. Fremont in June of 1856. However, some Know-Nothings in the North found Fillmore preferable to the abolitionist Fremont.³⁴

It should be noted that a rudimentary Republican organization existed in Virginia at the time of the 1856 presidential campaign. According to one scholar, the Republican party attracted those in the western part of the

³²Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 55 (April 1947): 161.

³³Ibid.

³⁴A great deal of information regarding the national political parties on the eve of the 1856 presidential campaign can be found in David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861, and in Roy F. Nichols And Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856," in History of American Presidential Elections, 1789-1968, eds. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., et al., 4 vols. (New York: Chelsea House, 1971), pp. 1007-1094.

state who sought to eliminate the power base of the slaveholders of the east, which, in turn, would strengthen the political posture of non-slaveholding whites in the west.³⁵ Unlike Republicans in the North, Virginia Republicans were not particularly concerned with the moral aspects of slavery. Republicans in Virginia, who were primarily middle class farmers and businessmen, sought to improve the living standards for the white citizens of the western part of the state.³⁶

One of the leaders of the Virginia Republican party was John C. Underwood of Clarke County. He corresponded with William H. Seward of New York and gave an address at the Republican nominating convention in 1856.³⁷ Underwood and Thomas J. Hewitt of Hancock County headed the Republican electoral ticket in Virginia for John C. Fremont in 1856.³⁸ The Republican presidential ticket received only 291 votes in Virginia in 1856.³⁹ These votes came primarily from the

³⁵Richard Grady Lowe, "Republicans, Rebellion, and Reconstruction: The Republican Party in Virginia, 1856-1870" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), p. 2.

³⁶Ibid., p. 32.

³⁷Patricia E. P. Hickin, "Anti-Slavery in Virginia, 1831-1861" (Ph. D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), pp. 690-691.

³⁸Ibid., p. 710.

³⁹Ibid., p. 712.

western and northwestern parts of the state.⁴⁰

The Republican party failed to attract many adherents in Virginia for a number of reasons. One scholar suggests that voice voting in Virginia discouraged many from voting for Fremont, since they feared retaliation through violence or through loss of work.⁴¹ Other reasons included the lack of a solid party organization in Virginia, as well as the absence of a well known leader.⁴² However, the most obvious and convincing reason for the poor showing of Republicans in the state was the ideology of the party itself, which vigorously opposed extending slavery into the territories. White slaveholders could never vote Republican and even many non-slaveholding whites wanted slavery maintained, since it prevented blacks from competing with whites for jobs. Unlike the Know-Nothing party, the Republican party kept few secrets, especially regarding its views on slavery. Abolitionism was, in general, viewed as radical by most Virginians in 1856 and this prevented a serious Republican challenge to the Democrats and Know-Nothings in Virginia.

Thus, the mid-1850s witnessed in Virginia a Democratic

⁴⁰Ibid. Hickin provides excellent detail and analysis of the Republican vote tally in 1856.

⁴¹Richard Grady Lowe, "Republicans, Rebellion, and Reconstruction: The Republican Party in Virginia, 1856-1870," p. 30.

⁴²Ibid.

party which, although divided into factions, was united in defense of state rights and the right of slaveholders to take their slaves into the territories. The Democrats were challenged by the Know-Nothing party, composed of former Whigs, some nativists, and an assortment of other people who, for one reason or another, opposed the Democrats. Although some Republican sentiment existed in the state, it was the Democrats and the Know-Nothings who competed in Virginia in the gubernatorial election of 1855 and the presidential race a year later.

CHAPTER TWO

PRELUDE TO THE PRESIDENTIAL CONTEST:

THE 1855 GUBERNATORIAL ELECTION IN VIRGINIA

A thorough understanding of the issues, personalities, and events of the 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia requires that at least some attention be focused on the 1855 gubernatorial election in the state. The election of Henry A. Wise and the concurrent defeat of the Know-Nothing ticket set the stage for the presidential contest in Virginia.

Although the Democrats rejoiced in the misfortune of the Know-Nothings, the election of Wise was not greeted by universal enthusiasm among Democrats. As will be seen, his stand on certain issues, the question regarding his political integrity, and his tendency to engage in demagoguery were factors that diminished his popularity among certain factions of Democrats as well as Know-Nothings. Wise's political rivalry with Senator R. M. T. Hunter coalesced in this campaign and endured into the presidential contest of the following year.

The 1855 campaign for governor also illustrates the

composition and tenets of the two competing political parties in the state during this period. Thus, the political maneuvers of Virginia politicians during the 1856 presidential campaign were, to a certain degree, rooted in the issues and events of the 1855 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia.

The convention of Democrats which met in Staunton on November 30th, 1854 was charged with nominating for the governorship either Wise or Shelton F. Leake, a member of R. M. T. Hunter's faction. The political differences between the two men and their followers are difficult to determine. As one historian has stated:

Naturally, each faction reflected the character of its leader, and both Wise and Hunter had shifted their political positions so often that it was difficult to classify either accurately. Both steered a course toward a single unchanging goal: political power.¹

This is a valid statement, since Wise was a former Whig who did not emphasize state rights until he competed with Leake for the nomination.² Hunter was regarded as a devoted defender of this doctrine, but his decision to introduce a land bill in the Senate was detrimental to his efforts in

¹F. N. Boney, John Letcher of Virginia (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 60.

²Ibid.

obtaining Leake's nomination.³ In fact, the Staunton convention divided over Hunter's homestead bill.⁴

As the Staunton convention opened, neither candidate could obtain the necessary two-thirds majority needed for the nomination. Thus, Wise supporters at the convention moved that the rules be changed and they proposed that the convention adopt the same rules used by the Virginia House of Delegates. The Leake supporters endorsed this move, realizing too late that under these new rules a simple majority would nominate the gubernatorial candidate.⁵

Parliamentary maneuvers, however, were not exclusively responsible for Wise's nomination. Due to his image as a reformer, Wise was able to obtain solid support from delegates representing the western part of the state. At the constitutional convention which met in 1850 to revise the Virginia constitution, Wise was the only representative from the east (Accomac County) who favored reforms that

³See Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 106. Simpson asserts that Hunter's land bill was controversial because, among other reasons, it appeared to protect immigrants and railroads.

⁴Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 55 (January 1947): 67.

⁵John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party" (Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1974), p. 24.

would give the west more political power.⁶ Western delegates to the Staunton convention remembered Wise's efforts in their behalf and helped him win the party nomination.⁷ Also nominated at the convention were Elisha W. McComas of Kanawha for lieutenant governor and Willis P. Bocock of Richmond for attorney general.

As stated previously, not all Democrats rallied behind Wise after his nomination. John Letcher, a congressman from Rockbridge County, was one prominent Democrat who did not endorse Wise after the Staunton convention. Letcher favored Leake for the nomination, as he believed Leake to be the more moderate of the two candidates.⁸ Believing the Democrats would face a difficult race against the Know-Nothings, Letcher was not confident that Wise would be able to defeat the Know-Nothing nominee.⁹ Letcher did not campaign for Wise in the race for governor because he disliked him personally and objected to the deceptive parliamentary maneuvers carried out by Wise followers at

⁶Ibid.

⁷See Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), pp. 94-95. At the constitutional convention, Wise supported moves to make population the sole basis for representation in the General Assembly, a reform desired in the western part of the state. Easterners generally favored maintaining the method of basing representation on property and population.

⁸F. N. Boney, John Letcher of Virginia, p. 61.

⁹Ibid.

the Staunton convention.¹⁰ Thus, Wise's political integrity and his political moderation were questioned by a prominent member of his own party. These problems endured as Wise attempted to play a prominent role in the 1856 presidential campaign.

The Know-Nothing nominating convention did not meet until March 15, 1855 in Winchester, Virginia. The convention nominated Thomas Stanhope Flournoy, a former Whig who had served in Congress, as its candidate for governor.¹¹ James M. H. Beale of Mason County was nominated for lieutenant governor and John M. Patton of Richmond for attorney general. The nominating convention was held in secret and according to one scholar, no records exist describing the events of the convention.¹² The platform adopted by this convention asserted that "industrious" and "honest" foreigners should be admitted into the United States, but they should have to wait many years before obtaining the right to vote and would never be able to hold political office.¹³

As scholars have indicated, the Know-Nothing platform

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," p. 71.

¹²John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothing: Whigs in Search of a National Party," p. 40.

¹³Ibid.

and ticket of 1855 does not give a clear impression of what the American party stood for in this election. One historian has argued that there is a "dearth of evidence" regarding the degree to which the former Whigs joined with the Know-Nothings in 1855.¹⁴ However, this same student of the campaign claims that most Whigs at least voted for Flournoy merely to avoid voting for a Democrat.¹⁵ Another historian has argued that many Whigs disliked being considered members of the American party and wanted to preserve their independence in the 1855 race.¹⁶ Also, many Whigs disapproved of Beale's nomination as Flournoy's running mate, since Beale was a former Democrat.¹⁷ However, it is generally agreed that the old-line Whigs joined with the Know-Nothings in supporting Flournoy for the governorship.¹⁸

The question regarding what the Know-Nothings represented in the 1855 campaign was not answered by Flournoy. He ignored the slavery issue in his acceptance

¹⁴John R. Turner, "The 1855 Gubernatorial Campaign in Virginia" (Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1966), p. 67.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," p. 71.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸John R. Turner, "The 1855 Gubernatorial Campaign in Virginia," p. 64.

speech, focusing instead on the need to curtail foreign immigration in the United States as a means to reduce the political power of the North.¹⁹ As will be seen, the direction of the ensuing campaign was left to the Democrats, making it difficult for the American party to enunciate its agenda for the state.

Norfolk's Southern Argus, a Democratic newspaper, responded to the Know-Nothing nominations by reminding readers that Flournoy served only one term in Congress and was "decisively beaten" in his race for reelection.²⁰ On the nomination for lieutenant governor, the paper argued that Beale's recent membership in the Democratic party would turn old-line Whigs away from his candidacy.²¹ Of John M. Patton, the Know-Nothing nominee for attorney general, the paper asserted he was "...worthy to be the tail of this ticket."²²

Wise campaigned throughout the state in 1855 from January through May and, in his numerous speeches, articulated his views on the issues of the campaign. Wise promised that one of his goals as governor would be to

¹⁹John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party," p. 41.

²⁰Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), March 19, 1855.

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid.

improve the public education system of the state.²³ As one scholar has observed, Wise was one of few political leaders in Virginia during this period who believed in a state public school system.²⁴ The Democratic newspaper in Norfolk, the Southern Argus, reported that in a speech given in Lynchburg, Wise endorsed increased taxation as a means to allow both the wealthy and the less fortunate an opportunity to obtain education.²⁵ On other issues, Wise favored maximizing the state's use of its resources and endorsed the completion of railways, which would facilitate economic growth and political harmony by linking various sections of the state.²⁶ In support of the state's agricultural sector, Wise endorsed a plan to build a state supported agricultural college.²⁷

In his campaign speeches, Wise outlined his views on the slavery issue. He supported the Kansas-Nebraska bill in the 1855 campaign and predicted that the abolitionists would face a difficult fight in their efforts

²³Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 98.

²⁴John R. Turner, "The 1855 Gubernatorial Campaign in Virginia," p. 80.

²⁵Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), January 30, 1855.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 98.

to repeal the law.²⁸ Although Wise supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Wise was not an enthusiastic supporter of slavery. Wise was most concerned, however, that Southerners, not Northerners, should be charged with working out the slavery issue.²⁹

Recognizing the importance of the slavery issue in the campaign, Wise frequently equated the Know-Nothings with Northern abolitionists.³⁰ The Democratic newspapers of the state aided Wise in this endeavor. For example, an editorial in the Southern Argus asserted:

It is not our purpose to reproach every individual of the Know-Nothing party in Virginia with a secret hostility to the interests of the South. It is not essential to our argument to assume any such position. But we do affirm, that the Know-Nothing organization even in the South, is inimical to slavery, and will be employed as an instrument for its overthrow.³¹

Thus, Wise campaigned in 1855 as a reformer who, once elected, would propose innovative methods for achieving his

²⁸Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), January 30, 1855.

²⁹Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 107.

³⁰John R. Turner, "The 1855 Gubernatorial Campaign in Virginia," p. 84.

³¹Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), January 31, 1855.

his campaign goals.³² However, he was also a demagogue who was not adverse to making charges about his opponents based on weak evidence. These factors as well as Wise's success in obtaining campaign appearances by Hunter, Senator James Mason and Senator Stephen A. Douglas were conducive to a Democratic victory in May.³³

The efforts of the Know-Nothings to refute Wise's charges were, for the most part, ineffective. One debilitating problem for the Know-Nothings was Flournoy's aversion to campaigning. As one historian has asserted, "Thomas Flournoy's part in the campaign ended with his letter of acceptance."³⁴ Know-Nothing leaders in Virginia encouraged Flournoy to maintain a high profile in the campaign. A letter written to Flournoy, signed by John D. Imboden of Staunton and other prominent Virginia Know-Nothings, encouraged Flournoy to engage Wise in an energetic campaign. The letter stated:

Knowing the ability with which you will bear our standard through the contest, wherever and

³²See Clement Eaton, The Mind of the Old South, p. 106 and p. 108. Eaton points out that as governor, Wise proposed a tax on oysters to pay for internal improvements and the agricultural college. According to Eaton, the Virginia General Assembly refused to enact the tax because it opposed Wise's efforts improve the state at public expense.

³³Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 114.

³⁴Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," p. 72.

whenever it may be in your power to meet Mr. Wise, we feel an anxious solicitude, that circumstances will allow you to accompany him through the valley.³⁵

The letter explained the need for Flournoy's active role in the campaign by stating:

The feeling of the public mind is such throughout all this region that it needs but the additional stimulation of your personal appearance on the rostrum with Mr. Wise to amount to enthusiasm. If it be possible, we would therefore urge upon you to take to the field in the upper valley and traverse it to the Potomac.³⁶

Thus, Virginia's Know-Nothing leaders urged their gubernatorial nominee to follow his Democratic counterpart and to debate him whenever possible. Flournoy's disinclination to campaign actively diminished his chances for victory, considering Wise had been campaigning around the state since January of 1855.

Another factor contributing to Know-Nothing difficulties in this election was the inability of the Know-Nothing ticket to enunciate clearly what it stood for in the election. For example, Wise's charges that Virginia Know-Nothings were abolitionist in outlook were ineffectively answered by Flournoy and his running mates. Flournoy and James M. H. Beale perceived slavery to be detrimental to the Virginia economy much the way Wise

³⁵John D. Imboden et al. to Thomas S. Flournoy, March 22, 1855, Imboden Papers (Accession #38-23), University of Virginia.

³⁶Ibid.

did.³⁷ However, their membership in a secret society helped Wise create suspicion concerning the motives of the Know-Nothing nominees. Know-Nothing newspapers, such as Norfolk's American Beacon, were put on the defensive by the slavery issue. The Norfolk paper wrote that there was "no truth" to the argument that Know-Nothings were abolitionists.³⁸ The Know-Nothing candidate for attorney general, John M. Patton, did little to help define the party's agenda by publicly admitting that he was not sure what Know-Nothingism stood for.³⁹ Thus, the Know-Nothing ticket faced an identity crisis in this election much as it did during the presidential election in 1856.

The failure of the Know-Nothings to exploit the division in the Democratic party between the Hunter and Wise factions also played a role in the defeat of the Know-Nothings.⁴⁰ In his own campaign in 1855 and in his efforts to support the Democratic ticket in 1856, Henry A. Wise frequently attempted to bring former Whigs and Know-Nothings over to the Democratic party. The

³⁷Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 110.

³⁸American Beacon (Norfolk, Va.), January 20, 1855.

³⁹John R. Turner, "The 1855 Gubernatorial Campaign in Virginia," p. 86.

⁴⁰W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 92.

Know-Nothing ticket in 1855 had difficulty broadening its base due to the secrecy of the party and its ambiguous party platform. Thus, it was ineffective in bringing disgruntled Democrats over to the Know-Nothing ticket.⁴¹

The gubernatorial election was held on May 24, 1855. Wise received 83,424 votes to Flourney's 73,244 votes.⁴² These figures indicate that 6,000 more Virginians voted in this election than in the 1856 presidential election.⁴³ The larger voter participation in the gubernatorial contest compared to the presidential race illustrates the relative importance of state government during this period.

W. Darrell Overdyke, author of The Know-Nothing Party in the South, disagrees with scholars who argue that Wise's victory marked the end of Know-Nothing strength in Virginia and the rest of the South.⁴⁴ As the 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia will illustrate, the Democrats were not inclined to underestimate the Know-Nothing threat even after their 1855 victory. The Democrats recognized that a

⁴¹See John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party," p. 44. Taylor points out that in the 1855 election, the Know-Nothings failed to make inroads in traditional Democratic counties.

⁴²Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 114.

⁴³Philip Morrison Rice, "The Know-Nothing Party in Virginia, 1854-1856," p. 73.

⁴⁴W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South, p. 91.

Know-Nothing party united behind a strong presidential nominee could run a close race in Virginia in 1856.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CAMPAIGN'S FIRST PHASE: JANUARY THROUGH JUNE 1856

The Democratic Newspapers

As the 1856 presidential campaign began, the Democratic newspapers of Virginia had little difficulty finding campaign themes to test in their editorials and news reports. From January through the Democratic nominating convention in June, these newspapers focused on speculation concerning the race for the Democratic nominations. In the midst of this speculation, they enunciated what policies the Democratic party should support in the general election. In their editorials, the Democratic newspapers ridiculed the policies of both the Know-Nothings and Republicans, often making no ideological distinctions between the two parties. Democratic editorials argued that the Union and slavery would best be protected by a Democratic victory in 1856. These editorials were designed to bring former Whigs and undecided voters over to the Democratic party.

The campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination received much attention in Democratic newspapers around

Virginia. The Norfolk Southern Argus endorsed the domestic policies of President Franklin Pierce frequently during the early phase of the campaign and encouraged Virginia Democrats to stand by the President in the coming campaign. This newspaper announced in a January editorial that it supported the state rights policies of the Democratic party as outlined in the 1852 platform.¹ The Southern Argus focused on this state rights theme a month later as it reported on Pierce's growing strength in Virginia. The paper claimed that citizens in numerous counties wanted Pierce to be the Democratic nominee and that many prominent former Whigs and Know-Nothings were endorsing his candidacy.² This is one illustration of how Democratic newspapers attempted to appeal to groups outside the Democratic party.

The Petersburg Democrat endorsed Senator R. M. T. Hunter for the Presidency in January of 1856. A month later, an article in this newspaper reported that Hunter was a favorite of many Virginia Democrats:

Public opinion in Virginia with respect to the presidential succession, begins gradually to develop itself. From the signs and indications of the times, there is no doubt but that R. M. T. Hunter is the choice overwhelmingly of the Virginia Democracy."³

¹Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), January 14, 1856.

²Ibid., February 16, 1856.

³Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), February 22, 1856.

Articles in the Petersburg paper also reported that other newspapers in Virginia were endorsing Hunter, including the Valley Democrat, the Rockingham Register, the Staunton Vindicator, and the Lynchburg Republican.⁴ In another editorial, the Petersburg Democrat was critical of James Buchanan, Hunter's rival for the nomination. The editorial argued that Buchanan should be denied the nomination because his diplomatic service had kept him out of the country for long periods during Pierce's administration. However, the editorial admitted it would support Buchanan if he were nominated.⁵

The Democratic newspaper in Harrisonburg, the Valley Democrat, endorsed R. M. T. Hunter in an editorial on January of 1856. Although the paper did not mention Henry A. Wise by name, it did compare Hunter favorably to the traits most often associated with Wise. The editorial asserted:

His success has been attained by no tricks or the arts and intrigues of the demagogue, nor even by devious paths or unworthy means, but his eminence is the result of the power of his intellect, and the honesty and purity of his motives.⁶

The Daily Richmond Enquirer was another Democratic newspaper of the period. For the most part, it stayed

⁴Ibid., February 22, 1856.

⁵Ibid., February 23, 1856.

⁶Valley Democrat (Harrisonburg, Va.), January 18, 1856.

neutral in the race for the Democratic nomination. Unlike the Petersburg paper, it did not discredit Buchanan's candidacy. Letters to the editor endorsing Wise for the Presidency were published as well.⁷

In April and May of 1856, the Democratic newspapers of Virginia began reassessing the campaign for the Democratic nomination. Sentiment favoring James Buchanan had been increasing during this time. As a Pennsylvanian, he would likely run well in the North while maintaining support in the South by his advocacy of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The Southern Argus printed a letter from Governor Wise on April 23, 1856, in which he endorsed Buchanan for President.⁸ The Southern Argus, however, did not endorse Buchanan with this letter. Instead, in early May, it printed an editorial which defended President Pierce against his enemies within the Democratic party. The paper stated, "With this conception of duty, we cannot hesitate to protest against the attacks on President Pierce, in which certain journals in the interest of Mr. Buchanan, incessantly indulge."⁹ The Southern Argus expressed the concern that attacks on Pierce from Democrats would be detrimental to

⁷Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), February 11, 1856.

⁸Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), April 23, 1856.

⁹Ibid., May 1, 1856.

the party in the fall elections.¹⁰ The paper added, "The Cincinnati Convention will endorse President Pierce, and the Democracy will go into the fight on the issues presented by his administration."¹¹

In the lengthy May 1 editorial, the Southern Argus criticized pro-Buchanan papers for the severity used in their attacks on Pierce. The Norfolk paper discussed what effect these attacks on Pierce would have among Virginia Democrats:

The assaults on President Pierce are especially injurious to Mr. Buchanan in Virginia. Everybody appreciates Mr. Buchanan's strength in this state; but the Democracy of Virginia have over and over endorsed Mr. Pierce's administration and they will not tolerate such imputations on their own judgment and fidelity. Every blow struck at Pierce, hits the Democracy of Virginia, and tends to drive them from all association with the persons by whom they are thus censured and assailed.¹²

The paper charged that Buchanan's supporters should not question Pierce's policies, since Buchanan was appointed by Pierce to be ambassador to Great Britain and was, therefore, a part of the Pierce administration.¹³

The Petersburg Democrat, which had earlier favored Senator Hunter for the nomination, announced in April that

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

it thought Pierce should be renominated. Following a news report that Pierce had been endorsed by the Democrats of Mississippi, the paper lauded the President enthusiastically:

The same may be said of the Democratic masses of Virginia. While preferring probably as an abstract proposition one of her own sons for the succession, yet no Democrat in this Union is more deeply enshrined in their affections and confidence than Franklin Pierce. They are grateful to him for his republican administration of the government. They are thankful to him for his unbinding adherence to the strict letter and spirit of the Constitution.¹⁴

The Petersburg Democrat was confident at the end of April that the Virginia delegation to the Democratic nominating convention in June would support Pierce.¹⁵ A later editorial in the Petersburg paper warned pro-Buchanan newspapers not to attack Senator Hunter in their editorials.¹⁶

The Daily Richmond Enquirer did not focus a great deal of attention on the race for the Democratic nomination. Instead, during the first half of 1856, most of its editorials focused on the Know-Nothing threat. An editorial in the Richmond paper in May advised the other Democratic papers in Virginia to stay neutral in the race:

We regret to see some of the Democratic papers exhibiting too much warmth in discussing the

¹⁴Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), April 18, 1856.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid., April 19, 1856.

claims of their respective favorites for the nomination at Cincinnati. While Democrats may express a preference for some one of the distinguished statesmen, named for the Presidency, their zeal should be tempered with discretion and justice.¹⁷

The editorial stated that it would be able to support any good Democrat, including Wise, Hunter, Pierce, Buchanan, or Stephen Douglas.¹⁸

The Democrats met at their national convention in Cincinnati, Ohio during the first week of June. As will be explained later, James Buchanan was nominated for President on the seventeenth ballot with John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky named as the candidate for Vice-President. Democratic newspapers in Virginia quickly rallied behind the nominees of the party. Unity among Democrats in 1856 contrasts with the divisions in the Know-Nothing party during this election.

The names of Buchanan and Breckinridge first appeared on the masthead of the Daily Richmond Enquirer on June 7, 1856. The newspaper praised Buchanan for his devotion to the Constitution.¹⁹ On June 9, the Richmond paper endorsed Buchanan as a candidate who Virginia Democrats had supported for the Presidency frequently between the years

¹⁷Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), May 5, 1856.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., June 7, 1856.

1844 to 1856.²⁰

The Petersburg Democrat placed the Democratic nominees on its masthead on June 7. The Petersburg paper asserted that, "the ticket is, in a word, everything that the most exacting friend of the Union could desire."²¹

On June 9, The Southern Argus placed the names of the nominees on its masthead for the first time. While the Norfolk paper endorsed the nominees of the party, it was also concerned that the name of Franklin Pierce not be disgraced:

We do not regard this nomination as in the slightest degree derogatory to Mr. Pierce, any more than Mr. Pierce's universal nomination was disparaging to his predecessor. In acting upon the one term principle for a few years past, the people have intended no rebuke upon retiring administrations.²²

The paper especially praised the convention for nominating Breckinridge, who was described as a good Southerner with a national outlook.²³

During the first half of 1856, the Democratic newspapers featured many news reports and editorials about the Know-Nothing party and its role in the 1856 election. The candidacy of Millard Fillmore was discredited by these papers which portrayed Know-Nothings as abolitionists whose

²⁰Ibid., June 9, 1856.

²¹Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), June 7, 1856.

²²Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), June 9, 1856.

²³Ibid.

doctrines on most issues were not compatible with the Southern way of life. However, Democratic newspapers generally avoided labeling Fillmore an abolitionist, since even many Democrats respected the former president.

The national convention of the American party, which nominated Fillmore for President and Andrew J. Donelson of Tennessee for Vice-President, met at Philadelphia on February 22, 1856. It received much coverage from the Democratic press because of Fillmore's popularity among many Southern old-line Whigs and because of the controversy that developed during the convention over the party's official stand on slavery.

In early 1856 the Democratic papers devoted much attention to the internal disarray evident in the Know-Nothing party position on slavery. Six months earlier, in June of 1855, the Know-Nothing national council drafted a platform for the upcoming presidential election. A portion of that document, the Twelfth Section, was a pro-Southern statement that endorsed the Kansas-Nebraska Act.²⁴ However, at the national convention of the Know-Nothing party in February of 1856, the Twelfth Section was replaced by a non-committal statement concerning slavery. The issue was sectionally divisive, as Northern

²⁴W. Darrell Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), p. 131.

delegates left the convention after they failed to win approval of a resolution urging the repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.²⁵ They ultimately shifted their support to the Republican candidate John C. Fremont. The Southern delegates went on to nominate Fillmore at this February 1856 convention, but he did not accept the nomination until May.²⁶

The Democratic newspapers in Virginia devoted much space to the internal disarray evident in the American party. News reports indicated that the slavery issue had brought chaos to the Know-Nothing convention. The Southern Argus stated that it would not have covered events at the Know-Nothing convention were it not for the "silly wranglings" of the delegates.²⁷ Events at the convention aided the paper in its efforts toward portraying the Know-Nothings as abolitionists. One editorial asserted:

We have seen enough of the proceedings to be satisfied that the Southern Know-Nothings are to be whipped into an acknowledgment of the Philadelphia

²⁵David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis: 1848-1861 (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 254.

²⁶Ibid., p. 259. As Potter points out, Fillmore was out of the country when he was nominated by the Know-Nothings. For further information on Fillmore's relationship with the Know-Nothing party in the mid-1850s, refer to Robert J. Rayback, Millard Fillmore: Biography of a President (Buffalo, New York: Henry Stewart, 1959).

²⁷Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), February 25, 1856.

voice in the nomination.²⁸

The paper added, "The Southern Know-Nothings are completely at the mercy of the Black Republicans, and they will no doubt be sent home to their constituency, shorn of their strength."²⁹

The Petersburg Democrat attacked the Know-Nothing convention in Philadelphia by expressing its concern that a three way race could force the election into Congress, where a coalition of Know-Nothing and Republicans could elect the next president. An editorial stated:

The nomination of Fillmore is a gross fraud, put on the country by scheming political harlots, who hope by producing a diversion in his favor at the South to assist the Black Republicans in preventing an election by the people and in carrying the contest for President to the present House of Representatives.³⁰

The paper asserted that the decision made at Philadelphia to abolish the Twelfth Section would help the Democrats carry the South in the November elections.³¹

In an editorial in March, the Petersburg Democrat argued that the South should unite against the abolitionist Republicans and Know-Nothings. The paper told voters to support any Democratic candidate over a former Whig or

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), February 27, 1856.

³¹Ibid., February 28, 1856.

support any Democratic candidate over a former Whig or Know-Nothing who did not firmly support slavery.³²

The Democratic papers almost daily featured editorials downplaying Fillmore's ability to carry the election. Of Fillmore's chances as the Know-Nothing nominee, an editorial in the Petersburg Democrat asserted:

No man nominated by that party can carry the South, and no party headed by that man can carry the North. His personal unpopularity will defeat him in one section, and the unpopularity of his politics in another.³³

The editorial argued that Fillmore could only hope for enough support to throw the election into the House of Representatives.³⁴

These papers were especially vindictive toward his running mate, Andrew Jackson Donelson, who was a former Democrat from Tennessee. Norfolk's Southern Argus made numerous personal attacks against Donelson. The paper frequently printed his name in very small letters, while printing his middle name, Jackson, using large letters. The paper asserted that the Know-Nothings nominated Donelson because he was related to former President Andrew Jackson, which helped Donelson's name recognition.³⁵

³²Ibid., March 11, 1856.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., March 5, 1856.

³⁵Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), March 18, 1856.

Fillmore did not escape the wrath of the Norfolk paper, either. Prior to Fillmore's acceptance of the Know-Nothing nomination, the Southern Argus announced that it was certain of Fillmore's affinity with Know-Nothing dogma. Thus, the paper tried to lure old-line Whigs away from Fillmore, arguing he was now intolerant toward Catholics and foreigners.³⁶

The Daily Richmond Enquirer was no less sympathetic toward the Know-Nothing nominees. One editorial stated that Fillmore would have to surrender his old-line Whig views if he accepted the Know-Nothing nomination.³⁷ On March 17, the paper printed a long letter from Governor Henry Wise, in which he claimed that the Know-Nothing candidates comprised a "mulatto ticket."³⁸ He used this phrase to compare the Know-Nothings with the pro-slavery Democratic party and the abolitionist Republican party. This letter was controversial, but the paper later defended it, saying that Wise used the term mulatto in reference to political parties and not people.³⁹

The Democratic papers portrayed Fillmore as indecisive, in fact, so indecisive that it took him months

³⁶Ibid., March 31, 1856.

³⁷Daily Richmond Enquirer, March 12, 1856.

³⁸Ibid., March 17, 1856.

³⁹Ibid., March 26, 1856.

to accept the Know-Nothing nomination. Fillmore was regarded by these newspapers as a puppet of the abolitionists, since the Twelfth Section had been removed from the party's platform. The papers made every attempt to convince former Whigs that the Democratic party offered the best hope for preserving both the Union and slavery.

During the first half of 1856, the Democratic papers focused on the race for the Democratic nomination and internal developments in the Know-Nothing party. While the candidacy of Fillmore was discredited by these papers, they appreciated his support among many Southerners and were concerned that the election might be decided in Congress, where Fremont would be a favorite.

The Know-Nothing Newspapers

The approach taken by the Know-Nothing newspapers during the first half of 1856 illuminates further the 1856 presidential campaign in Virginia. During the first half of the year, Know-Nothing newspapers devoted much space to the controversy over the Twelfth Section. These papers also focused their attention on the race for the Democratic nomination, but they were confident that Fillmore would defeat any Democrat.

Before the American party held its convention in Philadelphia, the Lynchburg Daily Virginian argued in an

editorial that Know-Nothings in Virginia should support the Twelfth Section and Southern rights if they expected to carry Virginia in the fall election.⁴⁰ A later news report announced that the Virginia Know-Nothing leadership was considering formally endorsing the Twelfth Section, as well as abolishing the party's secrecy requirements.⁴¹ These issues differentiated Virginia Know-Nothings from their Northern counterparts.

Throughout the campaign, the Know-Nothing newspapers emphasized their opposition to the abolitionists. However, the Twelfth Section controversy put Southern Know-Nothings in a difficult situation, since Democratic newspapers used the Philadelphia convention proceedings as evidence that the American party was an abolitionist organization.

Of the American party convention, the Lynchburg Daily Virginian reported:

There might have been an abler and more patriotic convention; they might have conducted their deliberations with more dignity and decorum; and they might have constructed a sounder platform; but they could not have nominated a better man.⁴²

The Richmond Daily Whig was also concerned about the image problem presented by the evident disunity at the Know-Nothing convention. This paper minimized the

⁴⁰Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), January 11, 1856.

⁴¹Ibid., January 18, 1856.

⁴²Ibid., February 27, 1856.

significance of the party platform, arguing that Fillmore's nomination was all that mattered.⁴³ Furthermore, the paper was not distressed over the "secession" of Northern Know-Nothings from the Philadelphia convention. In an effort to portray Fillmore as an ally of the slaveholders, the paper wrote that those fanatics who opposed slavery could never support a man like Fillmore, since he was a conservative who was loyal to the Constitution.⁴⁴ Significantly, this former Whig paper enthusiastically endorsed Fillmore's Know-Nothing nomination.

Although Fillmore did not accept the Know-Nothing nomination for months after it was offered to him, papers loyal to Fillmore stressed his personal integrity and proven competence to rally supporters to his side. Fillmore's record as an old-line Whig was emphasized in these papers, while Democratic newspapers charged that if Fillmore accepted the Know-Nothing nomination, it would mean that he had repudiated his old-line Whig ideology for the secrecy and bigotry of Know-Nothingism.

In an editorial on March 6, the Williamsburg Virginia Gazette published a substantial editorial which endorsed the nominations of Fillmore and Donelson and underscored their assets. Emphasizing Fillmore's previous experience as

⁴³Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), March 20, 1856.

⁴⁴Ibid., March 1, 1856.

President, the editorial argued that Pierce's administration had nearly brought disunion to the nation and that Fillmore could restore peace. The paper asserted that as President, Fillmore enforced the fugitive slave law which was initially devised by Senator James Mason.⁴⁵ This was aimed toward attracting pro-slavery Democrats to the Know-Nothing ticket.

From January through June, the Know-Nothing papers gave much attention to the race for the Democratic nomination. In a February editorial, the Lynchburg Daily Virginian analyzed the race and determined that Pierce's support in Virginia was growing and that his renomination seemed likely. The editorial stated:

These indications have alarmed the Hunter men greatly and determined them to open the campaign without further delay. Wise's prospects are blowing over, but his friends have not entirely despaired and the feeling existing between them and the Hunter party is believed to be very much that amiable entente which exists between cats and dogs.⁴⁶

As Buchanan's candidacy gathered momentum in Virginia during March and April, the Lynchburg paper ridiculed Virginia Democrats for not standing by Pierce.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Williamsburg Virginia Gazette, March 6, 1856.

⁴⁶Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg Va.), February 7, 1856.

⁴⁷Ibid., March 12, 1856.

The Richmond Daily Whig speculated frequently on the Democratic race. It asserted in January that Pierce and Wise were "political wrecks" and that Hunter would be the likely nominee.⁴⁸ By mid-March the paper believed Hunter's strength had dissipated to the point where the Democrats would have to nominate either Pierce, Douglas, or Buchanan. The Richmond paper thought the Democratic nomination would have to go to a Northerner to counter Fillmore's growing strength in that region.⁴⁹

The Democratic convention in June did not go unnoticed by the Know-Nothing press in Virginia. The Richmond Daily Whig said, "We will also add, that, personally, we consider Mr. Buchanan as the most reputable man amongst the aspirants."⁵⁰

The Lynchburg Daily Virginian emphasized the duplicity of the Democrats in their decision to both endorse the Kansas-Nebraska Act and to nominate a candidate who was not associated with it.⁵¹ It argued that in the North, Fillmore would easily defeat Buchanan.⁵² The Williamsburg Virginia Gazette called the selection of Buchanan "judicious" but

⁴⁸Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), January 7, 1856.

⁴⁹Ibid., March 10, 1856.

⁵⁰Ibid., June 7, 1856.

⁵¹Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), June 9, 1856.

⁵²Ibid., June 14, 1856.

that he would have to defend Pierce's record.⁵³

An old-line Whig newspaper, the Wheeling Intelligencer, did not endorse Fillmore in 1856. A March editorial in this paper called on former Whigs to wait until all parties had nominees in the field before making a decision for whom to vote.⁵⁴ The editorial encouraged compromise as the solution to the sectional crisis.⁵⁵ In response to the Democratic convention, the paper proclaimed that it would have to endorse Buchanan, due to his loyalty to the Constitution.⁵⁶ Thus, the Wheeling paper endorsed the Democratic nominee, a deviation from the standard set by other newspapers extolling the Whig ideology. The paper apparently believed Buchanan was the candidate best able to avert a civil war.

The race for the Democratic presidential nomination and the internal disarray in the Know-Nothing party were issues the Know-Nothing papers dealt with during the first half of the campaign. The Know-Nothing papers also carried news and editorials about the Republican party in the North. Since Democratic papers frequently labeled

⁵³Williamsburg Virginia Gazette, June 12, 1856.

⁵⁴Wheeling Intelligencer (Wheeling, Va.), March 7, 1856.

⁵⁵Ibid., March 7, 1856.

⁵⁶Ibid., June 13, 1856.

Know-Nothings as abolitionists, the Know-Nothing papers emphasized their opposition to the Republican party.

The Lynchburg Daily Virginian covered the organizational meeting which the Republicans held in Pittsburgh in February of 1856. In an effort to refute Democratic claims to the contrary, this paper printed a news report in March which stated that most "Black Republicans" believed the Know-Nothing platform approved in Philadelphia was pro-Southern, even with the Twelfth Section deleted.⁵⁷

The Wheeling Intelligencer featured lengthy news stories about the Republican meeting in Pittsburgh in February.⁵⁸ Know-Nothing coverage of the Republican proceedings contrasts sharply with such Democratic newspapers as the Southern Argus, which stated, "Of the Black Republicans we will not speak; of the Know-Nothings we will speak, and speak the truth."⁵⁹

Thus, the Know-Nothing newspapers took great effort to portray their candidates as friends of the South who would protect slavery in the territories. During the second half of the campaign, Democratic newspapers would continue their

⁵⁷Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), March 27, 1856.

⁵⁸Wheeling Intelligencer (Wheeling, Va.), February 25, 1856.

⁵⁹Southern Argus (Norfolk, Va.), March 17, 1856.

attempts to link Fillmore to the Republicans. On the Know-Nothing side, the newspapers would emphasize the electability of Fillmore and illustrate areas of agreement between Buchanan and Fremont.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CAMPAIGN'S SECOND PHASE: JUNE THROUGH ELECTION DAY

The Democratic Newspapers

The 1856 fall campaign for President featured a host of parties, tickets, and platforms. The Democratic party had decided on Buchanan and Breckinridge, while Fillmore and Donelson accepted the nominations of the Know-Nothing party in May. During the middle of June, the North Americans, Know-Nothings who opposed Fillmore, officially nominated John C. Fremont, the Republican nominee for President. Finally, in September, a national convention of former Whigs nominated Fillmore. Thus, the general election in the North featured a three ticket race. In Virginia the race was primarily between Fillmore and Buchanan, although the Republican ticket of Fremont and his running mate Senator William L. Dayton of New Jersey received some support in the western part of the state. The Democratic newspapers in Virginia enthusiastically supported Buchanan. By questioning Fillmore's motives in accepting the Know-Nothing nomination, the Democratic press urged former Whigs to join with the Democrats on election day.

The Daily Richmond Enquirer attacked Fillmore for accepting the Know-Nothing nomination. It wrote that his decision would "disgust" and "repel" most old-line Whigs.¹ On June 18, the paper wrote of the nomination of Fremont by the North Americans and it alleged that Fillmore was conspiring to get Fremont elected.² The Democratic newspapers would not accept the possibility that Fillmore and Fremont were not of the same ideological persuasion. The Richmond paper wrote of Fillmore and Fremont:

The supporters of Fillmore in the South will be very much puzzled to prove that he is more acceptable, in principle, than the candidate of the Black Republican party. We affirm and we challenge any opposition paper to contest the point that Fillmore and Fremont occupy precisely the same position in respect to the great issue which is to determine the result of the canvass.³

The paper argued that anyone opposing the repeal of the Missouri Compromise was a Black Republican. This, of course, was an attack on those who opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise. According to this paper, Fremont and Fillmore were both opposed to repeal.⁴ The paper concluded its

¹Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), June 14, 1856.

²Ibid., June 18, 1856.

³Ibid., June 25, 1856.

⁴Ibid.

editorial by asserting, "Fillmore is as bad as Fremont; Fremont is no worse than Fillmore."⁵

The Petersburg Democrat said of the Republican nominees, "The intellectual strength of the ticket is undoubtedly in its tail."⁶ After the Republican convention made its decision, the paper asserted that the election of Fremont would be a virtual "declaration of war" against the South.⁷

The Democratic newspapers argued that the national race was really between Buchanan and Fremont with Fillmore's only role as a potential spoiler. The Daily Richmond Enquirer reminded voters that a vote for Fillmore was really a vote for Fremont.⁸ The Petersburg Democrat, however, candidly admitted that the 1856 election was unique in that voters were confronted with an unstable political environment. It claimed that voters were not sure where the parties stood on the issues of sectionalism, slavery, and state rights.⁹

During the summer of 1856, Democratic papers lauded Buchanan as a Unionist. A Richmond editor wrote:

⁵Ibid.

⁶Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), June 21, 1856.

⁷Ibid., June 20, 1856.

⁸Richmond Daily Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), July 1, 1856.

⁹Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), August 18, 1856.

Does the election of Fremont promise to restore peace and quiet to the country? His election would be the triumph of that very mischievous faction and that very wicked spirit of agitation, which every patriot should resist with utmost energy.¹⁰

The editorial added that Fillmore's election would not bring peace to the country because Fillmore could only win if the election were decided by Congress.¹¹

The idea that the election was between Buchanan and Fremont is illustrated in a Petersburg editorial. The editorial asserted:

The contest is between Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Fremont, between the Constitution and the 'Higher Law.' The paramount issue in this campaign, that before which all others dwindle into utter insignificance, is, whether any more states shall be admitted into the Union tolerating and upholding the institution of slavery.¹²

By the end of August, the Richmond paper claimed that Northern newspapers considered Buchanan to be Fremont's only challenger.¹³

The Wheeling Intelligencer again is exceptional in that it had formally endorsed Buchanan but it made space available in its editorial page for letters endorsing the Know-Nothings. The editor, A. W. Campbell, stated that his

¹⁰Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), July 4, 1856.

¹¹Ibid., July 4, 1856.

¹²Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), September 18, 1856.

¹³Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), August 27, 1856.

editorial page was open to everyone.¹⁴ The other pro-Buchanan papers did not allow this exchange of views.

During the last week in September, the Richmond newspaper printed numerous stories linking Fillmore to abolitionists. The visit of Henry Winter Davis, a Republican, to a Fillmore rally in Richmond was a significant news story in this paper.¹⁵ Another editorial in late September warned readers of John Minor Botts's influence on Fillmore's campaign in Virginia.¹⁶ The Daily Richmond Enquirer was a fierce critic of Botts throughout the campaign. The paper went so far as to say in one editorial that Fillmore was essentially a good man, but he was supported by the abolitionist Botts, which would make him unacceptable to Virginians.¹⁷ Another editorial published two weeks before the election urged Virginians to vote Democratic to show their support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act and their opposition to Botts.¹⁸

As the election of November 4 approached, the Democratic papers were generally confident of victory. The

¹⁴Wheeling Intelligencer (Wheeling, Va.), October 18, 1856.

¹⁵Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), September 24, 1856.

¹⁶Ibid., September 29, 1856.

¹⁷Ibid., October 10, 1856.

¹⁸Ibid., October 24, 1856.

day before the election, however, the Petersburg Democrat was not letting its guard down. It published an editorial which argued that voting Democrat was a matter of "manhood" and "self-respect."¹⁹

It is worth noting that the Democratic papers of Wheeling and Richmond both reported on the rumor of the formation of a Fremont electoral ticket in Virginia. The Richmond paper urged readers not to believe the rumor, although, it said, if a Fremont electoral ticket in Virginia did exist, it was composed of Fillmore supporters.²⁰ The newspaper reported with alarm on October 17 the news that a Fremont banner had been erected in Portsmouth.²¹ This proved to be more than a rumor, but, again, Fillmore's supporters were indicted by the newspaper for the act.

During the second half of the 1856 campaign, Democratic newspapers in the state emphasized Buchanan's ability to defeat Fremont while Fillmore's candidacy was portrayed as a doomed effort that would only help the Republicans. Democratic newspaper editors used scare tactics in their efforts to keep undecided voters from supporting Fillmore.

¹⁹Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), November 3, 1856.

²⁰Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), September 13, 1856.

²¹Ibid., October 17, 1856.

These newspapers urged the South to secede if Fremont was victorious. Concurrently, they claimed to support Buchanan because of his devotion to the Union. Thus, the Democratic papers expressed secessionist sentiment while endorsing a candidate devoted to preserving the Union.

The Know-Nothing Newspapers

The Fillmore newspapers in Virginia were determined to give their candidate the image of a winner. These papers argued that it was Fillmore who would have to defeat Fremont, since Buchanan was unelectable. Know-Nothing newspapers portrayed Fillmore as a moderate who was positioned between two extremists in the presidential contest.

A major focus of the Lynchburg Daily Virginian during the 1856 fall campaign was its concern with foreigners exercising voting rights in this country. One reason the paper opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act was that it did not require immigrants to have full citizenship before they were eligible to vote in the territories.²² Furthermore, the paper was fearful that the entrance into this country

²²Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), August 8, 1856.

of immigrants who opposed slavery could ultimately prevent the formation of additional slave states.²³

The Lynchburg paper reported on some of the shared views of Fremont and Buchanan. For example, the paper pointed out that Fremont and Buchanan both thought that no changes were needed in American naturalization laws during this period.²⁴ Of the Know-Nothing papers, the Lynchburg paper was the only one which focused on the immigration issue during the campaign.

A June editorial in the Richmond Daily Whig was devised to counter Democratic charges that Fillmore and Fremont were alike on the issues. The paper reported that a group of "traitors" and "conspirators" had nominated Fremont. The paper warned of Fremont's likely strong showing in the North and added that only Fillmore, as a non-sectional candidate, could defeat the Republicans.²⁵ In contrast to the Democratic papers, this Richmond paper claimed the race was strictly between Fremont and Fillmore.

The Williamsburg Virginia Gazette argued in a September editorial that the Democratic party was worse than its Republican counterpart. While the paper was critical of the Republicans for being too sectional, it asserted that the

²³Ibid., August 4, 1856.

²⁴Ibid., September 15, 1856.

²⁵Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), June 23, 1856.

Democrats were to blame for the civil war in Kansas that resulted from the Kansas-Nebraska Act.²⁶

Solid Democratic victories in the Pennsylvania state elections in October made Fillmore's chances of victory in the November election seem less likely. However, the Know-Nothing papers did not give up the fight. The Lynchburg paper saw hope for Fillmore in the Pennsylvania returns, since, as the paper argued, Buchanan's supporters did not do as well as expected.²⁷ A later editorial asserted that the Pennsylvania election effectively eliminated Fremont.²⁸ The paper hoped this would counter the Democratic argument that a vote for Fillmore was a vote for Fremont. The Lynchburg paper reassured its Virginia audience that Fillmore's views on slavery were proper and that with Fremont no longer a factor no former Whig should feel compelled to vote for Buchanan.²⁹ Furthermore, the paper reminded its readers how the Democrats had aided the development of the Republican party through its support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The Richmond Daily Whig was concerned over Democratic strength in state elections in Pennsylvania and Indiana.

²⁶Williamsburg Virginia Gazette, September 18, 1856.

²⁷Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), October 18, 1856.

²⁸Ibid., October 25, 1856.

²⁹Ibid., October 30, 1856.

The paper agreed with the Lynchburg paper, though, that most former Whigs would support Fillmore, since Fremont was apparently no longer a threat.³⁰

Thus, the Know-Nothing newspapers were put on the defensive by their Democratic counterparts. They stressed Fillmore's loyalty to the Union and his understanding of the Southern way of life. As election day approached, these newspapers continued their efforts toward victory, although the odds were turning against them.

³⁰Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), October 21, 1856.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE RESULTS ARE IN: THE NEWSPAPERS ANALYZE THE ELECTION

The presidential election was held on November 4, 1856. In Virginia, Buchanan received 84,322 votes against Fillmore's 55,250 votes.¹ Buchanan carried the traditional Democratic areas in the state, while Fillmore's strength was in the areas formerly carried by the Whig party.² After the election, Democratic and Know-Nothing newspapers in Virginia offered commentary regarding the election of Buchanan. Democratic newspapers rejoiced in victory, while the Know-Nothing response varied from one paper to the next.

The Petersburg Democrat had this to say of the election results:

We publish enough returns this morning from the election Tuesday to decisively indicate the election of James Buchanan as the next President of the United States by a large majority of the electoral college. The Union and the constitution have been

¹Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), November 17, 1856.

²For a listing of election returns, see appendix 1 and 2.

sustained. Fusion and fanaticism have been signally rebuked.³

The paper claimed the election had "vindicated" President Pierce and had "endorsed" the 1856 Democratic platform.⁴ An editorial published in the Petersburg paper a few days following the election claimed that Fillmore lost because of his reluctance to state clearly where he stood regarding the controversy over the Twelfth Section.⁵ The paper added that Virginians would not support Fillmore in this campaign because of his membership in a party based on secrecy and bigotry.⁶ The Petersburg paper also featured an editorial condemning Maryland for being the only Southern state that gave Fillmore a victory.⁷

The Daily Richmond Enquirer was terse in its assessment of the election. The paper emphasized that the Union had been preserved and that peace would prevail. The paper proclaimed that "...the elements of faction and fusion of Know-Nothingism and Abolition have subsided."⁸

³Petersburg Democrat (Petersburg, Va.), November 6, 1856.

⁴Ibid., November 6, 1856.

⁵Ibid., November 8, 1856.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., November 6, 1856.

⁸Richmond Daily Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), November 7, 1856.

The Wheeling Intelligencer, which had endorsed Buchanan without great enthusiasm, was pleased with the election results. An editorial following the election praised the American people for following majority rule even under the most difficult circumstances.⁹ The editorial expressed hope that the Union would survive the controversy over slavery.¹⁰

Unlike the Democratic newspapers, the Know-Nothing papers interpreted the election results in different ways. In an editorial entitled "The Agony Over," the Williamsburg Virginia Gazette expressed regret that Fillmore would remain "in retirement."¹¹ The paper called for reconciliation to be restored between the major political parties during Buchanan's term in office. The paper warned, however, that it believed a sectional candidate would be elected in 1860 and that abolitionists of the North would bring this about.¹²

The Know-Nothing paper in Lynchburg was disappointed in defeat but expressed delight over Fremont's inability to win the election. One editorial asserted:

While we deeply lament the defeat of our noble and

⁹Wheeling Intelligencer (Wheeling, Va.), November 7, 1856.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Williamsburg Virginia Gazette, November 20, 1856.

¹²Ibid.

gallant candidate, Mr. Fillmore, we rejoice that the fanatics of the North have been thwarted in their incendiary schemes and that the conservative people of the Union have taught them a lesson which should be useful to them in determining their future course of action.¹³

The Lynchburg paper argued that Buchanan should be given time to prove his ability and that the "prosperity" and "safety" of the country was now his to protect.¹⁴

Of the Know-Nothing newspapers in Virginia, the Richmond Daily Whig was least able to reconcile itself to Buchanan's victory. The paper argued that while Buchanan had been victorious in the electoral college, it was unlikely he would win a majority of the votes of the American people.¹⁵ Of Buchanan's victory, the paper wrote:

That Mr. Buchanan will have a peaceful and successful administration may well be a matter of doubt. He has never shown himself to be the man for great occasions. In the secure retreat of the Senate he managed to preserve a respectable position, and to gain a reputation for cautious timidity, which, while it led him to do nothing great, preserved him from a fatal blunder.¹⁶

The Richmond paper questioned Buchanan's ability to handle the sectional problems that were on the horizon, but it admitted that Buchanan should be given a fair chance.

The paper added that Fillmore's defeat was to some degree

¹³Lynchburg Daily Virginian (Lynchburg, Va.), November 7, 1856.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Richmond Daily Whig (Richmond, Va.), November 11, 1856.

¹⁶Ibid.

expected, since Fillmore would not take part in the sectional controversy that was an integral part of the 1856 campaign.¹⁷

Another Know-Nothing newspaper, the Staunton Spectator, expressed disappointment rather than surprise regarding Fillmore's defeat. An editorial wrote:

The recent presidential canvass has resulted in the triumphant election of Buchanan and Breckinridge. While this result is not in accordance with our wishes, it is not entirely contrary to our expectations, as the reader has no doubt inferred from the tenor of our paper for some weeks past.¹⁸

The paper was not especially concerned about the prospects of a Buchanan presidency. The editorial asserted:

It is unnecessary for us to say that we are no political admirers of Mr. Buchanan, but at the same time we regard him as in most respects far superior to any Democratic President elected in late years. In point of intellect and experience in the public service he has decidedly the advantage of most of his recent predecessors in the presidential chair.¹⁹

In its post-mortem of the election, the Staunton Spectator expressed great surprise regarding the strong showing of John C. Fremont in the North. Like other Know-Nothing papers, it had argued that the race was strictly between

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Staunton Spectator (Staunton, Va.), November 12, 1856.

¹⁹Ibid.

Fillmore and Buchanan. The paper was "astonished" that Fremont had won in eleven states.²⁰

Some historians argue that under different circumstances, Millard Fillmore could have carried Virginia in 1856.²¹ To Fillmore's misfortune, too many Virginians believed a vote for Fillmore would help Fremont's chances for victory.²² In his analysis of the 1856 presidential election, John Minor Botts argued in hindsight that Fillmore was actually "nowhere in the race."²³ Botts asserted that in 1856 the Democrats succeeded in both electing a president and in making Southerners aware that secession was a viable alternative to a Republican victory at the national level.²⁴

Thus, it appears neither side was surprised by the election results, as Buchanan's strength had been growing since mid-October. As Southerners, both Democrats and Know-Nothings in Virginia were able to accept Buchanan's victory as a victory for conservatism.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party" (Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1974), p. 114.

²²Ibid.

²³John Minor Botts, The Great Rebellion: Its Recent History, Rise, Progress, and Disastrous Failure. The Political Life of the Author Vindicated (New York: Harper and Bros., 1866), p. 163.

²⁴Ibid., p. 166.

CHAPTER 6
THE ROLE OF VIRGINIA'S POLITICAL
LEADERSHIP IN THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

As the newspapers of the period illustrate, political leaders in Virginia played prominent roles in the 1856 presidential election campaign. Among Virginia Democrats, Governor Henry A. Wise and Senator R. M. T. Hunter were major players in both the nominating and general election phases of the 1856 campaign. As will be seen, both men were considered dark horse candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1856. Wise and Hunter were significant figures at the Democratic convention in Cincinnati and they were both active in their support for the Democratic ticket in the 1856 general election.

The inability of the Know-Nothings to win the gubernatorial election of 1855 presaged an uphill battle for their ticket in 1856. Since the Democratic party was in control of the major offices of the state government in 1856, the leaders of the Know-Nothing party in Virginia were reduced to playing the role of voices of opposition and they wielded less influence nationally than their Democratic counterparts. John Minor Botts and Alexander H.

H. Stuart, two prominent Virginia Know-Nothings, provided the voices of opposition in Virginia to the Democrats in this election.

The political rivalry that existed between Governor Wise and Senator Hunter during the 1850s was evident during the nominating phase of the 1856 campaign. However, as one scholar has pointed out, "The rivalry was more political than personal, and more between their partisan followers than the two leaders."¹ This statement seems especially true when the political views of the two men are compared. Wise and Hunter had long public service careers and they often changed their views on issues.² During the 1850s, their differences on political issues were matters of degree. The two men always seemed to be on opposite sides regarding Democratic presidential nominations in the 1850s. However, as loyal Democrats, Hunter and Wise rallied behind the nominees of their party in general elections during the decade.

After Wise's victory in the gubernatorial contest, the attention of Virginia Democrats focused on the presidential election. Hunter's national prominence in the Senate and Wise's impressive election victory in 1855 over

¹John E. Fisher, "Statesman of the Lost Cause: R. M. T. Hunter and the Sectional Controversy, 1847-1887" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1968), p. 151.

²F. N. Boney, John Letcher of Virginia (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 60.

the Know-Nothings made both men attractive as "favorite son" candidates for Virginia's Democratic party, causing division among the Democrats of the state. As one scholar has asserted, the overwhelming victory of Wise over the Know-Nothings concerned the followers of Hunter, since Hunter's supporters aided Wise in the campaign and were now faced with a formidable competitor within the Democratic party.³ This concern is illustrated in a letter written to Hunter from Isaac Edward Holmes, a friend of Hunter who served in Congress. Holmes wrote "...I hope that his [Wise's] ambition may not be so stimulated by his late Triumph [sic] as to aspire to the purple."⁴

Another of Hunter's supporters, James A. Seddon, wrote to the Virginia Senator and expressed his concern with the ascendancy of Wise. Seddon wrote:

It is plain to me there is imminent danger of jealousy and discension [sic] arising, if not between Wise and yourself, at least between your respective friends and adherents, and in consequence the loss of the favorable contingency of elevating a true Southern States Rights man to

³John E. Fischer, "Statesman of the Lost Cause: R. M. T. Hunter and the Sectional Controversy, 1847-1887," p. 153.

⁴Isaac Holmes Stuart to R. M. T. Hunter, June 8, 1855 in Charles H. Ambler, ed., "Correspondence of Robert M. T. Hunter, 1826-1876." Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1916, 2 vols. (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1916), 1:164-165 (hereafter cited as Charles H. Ambler, ed., "Correspondence of R. M. T. Hunter").

the Presidency...⁵

Seddon also wrote that Wise should remove himself from consideration as a presidential candidate and endorse Hunter, in light of Hunter's efforts in support of Wise in 1855.⁶ In the letter, Seddon advised Hunter of the need to find mediators to end the rivalry prior to the Cincinnati convention in June of 1856.⁷

In his biography of Wise, Craig M. Simpson states, "Wise never relinquished his presidential aspirations."⁸ As a realist, however, Wise knew he faced a difficult battle for the nomination against such prominent Democrats as Franklin Pierce, Stephen A. Douglas, and James Buchanan. Wise also became convinced early in 1856 that the Democrats would need to place a Northerner at the top of the ticket to help the party's chances in that region.⁹ Wise endorsed Buchanan for the nomination in March of 1856, but continued to hope that a deadlocked convention might

⁵James A Seddon to R. M. T. Hunter, December 3, 1855 in Charles H. Ambler, "Correspondence of R. M. T. Hunter," 1:172.

⁶Ibid., 1:173.

⁷Ibid., 1:173-174.

⁸Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 122.

⁹Barton H. Wise, The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, 1806-1876 (New York: Macmillan, 1899), p. 208.

ask him to be the nominee. Wise believed Buchanan was the most electable of the Democratic candidates, since he was not directly involved with the controversy surrounding the Kansas-Nebraska Act and was from Pennsylvania, a state with twenty-eight electoral votes.¹⁰

As governor, Wise received numerous letters urging him to run for president. One of these was sent to Wise in February of 1856 from S. S. Smith. In this letter, Smith congratulated Wise for his gubernatorial victory and wrote:

I hope the gubernatorial chair will prove to be the last step to the presidential; and should you obtain the nomination of any party, to the latter, no one will give you a more hearty vote than your humble servant.¹¹

Hunter's choice for the Democratic nomination in 1856 among the major contenders is difficult to determine. Buchanan was not Hunter's first choice, since Buchanan was from a state that supported high tariffs and was, in Hunter's mind, ambiguous on the slavery issue.¹² Hunter was troubled by certain aspects of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, making it difficult for him to support either Pierce or Douglas, who were largely responsible for devising and

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹S. S. Smith to Henry A. Wise, February 15, 1856, Henry A. Wise Papers, Virginia State Library.

¹²John E. Fisher, "Statesman of the Lost Cause: R. M. T. Hunter and the Sectional Controversy, 1847-1887," p. 156.

enforcing the bill.¹³ Like Wise, Hunter hoped a dark horse candidate such as himself might be nominated at the convention. Hunter was a loyal Democrat, however, and, as will be seen, he had little trouble campaigning for Buchanan against Fillmore and Fremont after the Democratic convention.

In his biography of John Letcher, F. N. Boney describes how Virginia Democrats divided their loyalties during the contest for the 1856 Democratic presidential nomination. A state convention of Democrats met at Harrisonburg in April of 1856 to allocate delegates to the national convention in June. The state convention was fought between the supporters of James Buchanan who were led by Henry A. Wise, another group favoring the nomination of Hunter, while a third smaller group existed which favored Stephen A. Douglas.¹⁴ Wise was able to secure a victory for Buchanan at the convention and, under the unit

¹³See Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 123. Simpson points out that at the Cincinnati convention, Hunter's allies pushed through a resolution which stated that only a state constitutional convention, not a territorial legislature, could opt to prohibit slavery. Through this proposal, Southerners hoped to better protect slavery under the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Governor Wise encouraged Buchanan to endorse this view during the campaign.

¹⁴F. N. Boney, John Letcher of Virginia, p. 64.

rule, Virginia's delegates would vote as a block for Buchanan.¹⁵

The results of this convention, however, did not discourage Hunter supporters from continuing the fight. A letter from Alexander S. Dandridge written to Hunter a month after the state convention said in part, "From present indications I am strongly inclined to the opinion that Hunter will get the nomination."¹⁶

A letter written to Hunter from a former Congressman, George W. Thompson, stressed that Hunter should continue his efforts for the benefit of the South. Thompson wrote:

The state-rights party all over the South must prefer you, if there is any reason in mens preferences, before any other man named either north or south and I have been inclined to think that the Pierce movement was for your benefit only.¹⁷

A letter written to James Lawson Kemper, a prominent Virginia Democrat in Madison county, from D. W. Wood of Washington D. C., illustrates the support Hunter maintained even in late April of 1856. While Wood recognized that

¹⁵Ibid. Boney points out that Congressman John Letcher was the leader of Hunter's faction at the Harrisonburg convention. Like Hunter, Letcher would not support Buchanan because his political base was in a high tariff state.

¹⁶Alexander S. Dandridge to R. M. T. Hunter, May 11, 1856, Hunter Papers (Accession #38-45), University of Virginia.

¹⁷George W. Thompson to R. M. T. Hunter, May 24, 1856 in Charles H. Ambler, ed., "Correspondence of R. M. T. Hunter," p. 195.

Hunter's chances for the nomination were not good, he wrote:

My opinion is that Hunter is the strongest man of our party, and the only one that can carry New York certainly. He is modest, wise, safe and experienced.¹⁸

Regarding Virginia's role at the Cincinnati convention,

Wood wrote:

There is much interest held here in regard to the delegation from Va. The Pierce men think Virginia might go for him, as he was her choice in 1852 and has carried out her platform of democratic principles. On the other hand, Buchanan's friends say that as Va. voted 58 times in 1852 for him that she must now show her renewed sincerity in again voting for him.¹⁹

When the Democratic convention opened in Cincinnati on June 2, 1856 Virginia's delegation led by Governor Wise was prepared to play an important role in securing the nomination of James Buchanan. A two-thirds majority of convention delegates was needed for the nomination, and through sixteen ballots Buchanan's delegates were unable to muster enough votes to overpower the Pierce and Douglas delegations.²⁰ Wise served Buchanan well during the convention, as scholars argue that Virginia's support was

¹⁸D. W. Wood to James Lawson Kemper, April 27, 1856, Kemper Papers (Accession #4098), University of Virginia.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Philip Shriver Klein, President James Buchanan: A Biography (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), p. 255.

necessary in order for Buchanan to be nominated.²¹ However, Philip Shriver Klein, Buchanan's biographer, asserts that historians have placed too much emphasis on the role played by Southerners in Buchanan's nomination. As proof, Klein cites convention statistics showing that Buchanan's real strength was found in the Northern and Western delegations, while Douglas was the favorite of most Southern delegates.²²

Wise's victory over the Know-Nothings in 1855 and his numerous speeches during the early phases of the 1856 presidential contest earned him the gratitude of the convention delegates.²³ As one newspaper reported, Wise was warmly greeted at the Cincinnati convention:

In response to vehement and persistent calls, Gov. Wise appeared on the platform, and his presence was greeted with an acclamation which attests his strong and irresistible hold on the hearts of the Democracy.²⁴

The results of the Cincinnati convention were disappointing

²¹Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 123.

²²Philip Shriver Klein, President James Buchanan: A Biography, p. 255.

²³See Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 122-123. During March and April of 1856, Democratic newspapers in Virginia and around the country reported on a speech Wise made in which he referred to the Know-Nothing party as a "mulatto party," since it stood between the Democratic and Republican parties. His analogy was generally supported by Democrats, while Know-Nothing papers denounced the speech.

²⁴Richmond Daily Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), June 17, 1856.

to the followers of Senator Hunter. In a letter to Hunter written just after Buchanan's nomination, Erastus T. Montague expressed the sentiments of those who wanted Hunter as the nominee. Montague wrote:

I presume you have heard ere this of the action of the Cincinnati Convention and its utter abandonment of most of the great cardinal principles of the Democratic party.²⁵

Montague argued that with Buchanan leading the ticket, there was "little hope for the future."²⁶ He indirectly attacked Wise for his role in obtaining Buchanan's nomination by writing, "That Virginia should have contributed to such a result is too bad to think about."²⁷

After Buchanan's nomination, Hunter's followers in Virginia urged him to support the Democratic ticket in the fall campaign. Roger A. Pryor, a Virginia Congressman from 1859-1861, wrote to Hunter and urged him to attend the state ratification meeting for Buchanan in Richmond. Pryor wrote:

Bring Mr. Mason [Senator James M. Mason of Virginia] and others of our friends. By all means come yourself. Write me an affirmative reply. Don't disappoint me and neglect your own interests.²⁸

²⁵Ernest T. Montague to R. M. T. Hunter, June 9, 1856 in Charles H. Ambler, ed., "Correspondence of R. M. T. Hunter," p. 196.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Roger A. Pryor to R. M. T. Hunter, June 11, 1856 in Ibid.

Both Governor Wise and Senator Hunter campaigned for the Democratic ticket in 1856, though Wise was the more active of the two. Hunter's major contribution in behalf of Buchanan and Breckinridge was a speech he delivered in Poughkeepsie, New York, which was reprinted in its entirety in the Daily Richmond Enquirer and other newspapers around the country.²⁹ In this lengthy speech, Hunter presented the Southern view of the slavery controversy and tried to improve the image of the South among Northerners. One Virginia newspaper editorial wrote of the speech:

Mr. Hunter appeals to the judgment and the hearts of the Northern people; and if they be not given over to fanatical blindness, his arguments and his eloquence will produce a telling effect upon the prospects of sectional disunionism.³⁰

The paper credited Hunter for treating his Northern audience with respect and for his sensitive approach in dealing with the slavery issue.³¹

Henry A. Wise's activities in the fall campaign were more extensive and controversial than Hunter's. Wise made a number of speeches throughout Virginia during the campaign which attacked Know-Nothingism and Republicanism. Demagoguery characterized his speeches, as Wise would

²⁹See Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), October 6, 1856.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

frequently argue that Fillmore's supporters in Virginia were not ideologically different from Fremont's supporters in the North.³²

Historians have debated the degree to which Wise endorsed the concept of secession during the 1856 campaign. A speech delivered by Wise in Richmond on September 22, 1856 had a secessionist tone. Wise argued that the South should remain loyal to the Union only if fanatics in the North were unsuccessful in the upcoming election.³³

The New York Times used this speech to portray Wise as a secessionist. The paper argued that Wise was now prepared to give up the Union in order to protect slavery. It condemned Wise for this, since he had previously been associated with those in the South who were moderate on the slavery question.³⁴

On September 15, 1856 Wise sent a letter to the Southern governors asking them to meet with him to discuss contingency plans in the event Fremont was victorious in the

³²Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 126.

³³Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise and the Virginia Fire-Eaters of 1856," Mississippi Valley Historical Review 21 (March 1935): 502.

³⁴New York Times, October 1, 1856.

election.³⁵ This provides historians with further evidence of Wise's gradual move to a more radical position as the 1856 election approached.

Clement Eaton argues that Wise did not favor secessionism in 1856, but allied himself with the extremists to give himself a greater profile in the campaign.³⁶ Craig M. Simpson, however, asserts that Wise would have "done something" if the Republicans had been victorious in 1856.³⁷ According to Simpson, Wise feared being labeled a traitor, but if Fremont had won, Simpson believes Wise would have pushed for secession.³⁸

Thus, Virginia Democrats played significant roles in the 1856 campaign. Hunter and Wise were important figures in the campaign and their rivalry made the race all the more interesting for Virginia Democrats in 1856.

Know-Nothing leaders in the state were also able to attract national attention as they carried out their roles in the campaign. John Minor Botts and Alexander H. H. Stuart were Virginia Know-Nothings who maintained

³⁵Clement Eaton, "Henry A. Wise and the Virginia Fire-Eaters of 1856," p. 509. According to Eaton, only the governors of North Carolina and South Carolina met with Wise in Raleigh on October 13, 1856.

³⁶Ibid., p. 512.

³⁷Craig M. Simpson, A Good Southerner: The Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia, p. 132.

³⁸Ibid.

prominent profiles in the campaign. Both men had distinguished records of public service and were controversial figures in the campaign, as Democratic newspapers frequently mentioned their names in editorials. Both men added partisan flavor to the campaign and played significant roles, considering that neither man held political office in 1856.

John Minor Botts served in the Virginia General Assembly from 1833 to 1839 and in Congress from 1839 to 1843 and again from 1847 to 1849. In both legislatures, Botts was a Whig and a follower of Henry Clay. He ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1854 as a Know-Nothing.³⁹

In the 1856 campaign, Botts was an outspoken critic of Democratic policies, especially Democratic support for the Kansas-Nebraska Act. However, he was also a maverick in his own party. Unlike most Southern Know-Nothings, Botts favored removing the Twelfth Section from the party platform in 1856, since he believed it was best for the Know-Nothing party to avoid direct references in the platform to the slavery issue.⁴⁰ Democratic leaders and newspapers attacked his position on the Twelfth Section,

³⁹Dumas Malone, ed., Dictionary of American Biography, 11 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), 1:473.

⁴⁰See John Charles Randolph Taylor, "Virginia Know-Nothings: Whigs in Search of a National Party" (Masters thesis, University of Virginia, 1974), p. 66. Taylor's thesis provides detailed analysis of how Virginia Know-Nothings divided over slavery in the mid-1850s.

arguing that Botts had essentially become an abolitionist. As one Richmond newspaper asserted, Botts was in total disagreement with almost every Southern Know-Nothing.⁴¹ The paper argued that the position taken by Botts could only endear him to Northern Know-Nothings who might want him as their nominee for president.⁴²

Botts made many speeches during the campaign in which he attacked the Democrats and endorsed Fillmore's candidacy. His most widely acclaimed speech of the campaign was delivered in Richmond on August 8, 1856. In this speech he presented his views regarding party differences in the election. He stated:

The difference between the parties is this, that Buchanan is the representative of a party - the Democratic party of the South - whose object and whose interest is to keep up the agitation of the slavery question, for the purpose of perpetuating the power they have already acquired and now hold.⁴³

Botts also outlined in the speech why he could not support the Republican ticket in this campaign. He asserted:

Fremont is the representative of a party, the purpose and interest of which is to keep alive the agitation of the slavery question for the purpose of forming a

⁴¹Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), January 18, 1856.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³John Minor Botts, speech delivered at the African Church in Richmond, Virginia on August 8, 1856, in political pamphlets collection, Virginia State Library.

Northern anti-slavery party, in order to obtain power.⁴⁴

Thus, Botts faulted both parties for exacerbating sectional tensions in order to obtain political power. Botts asserted that Fillmore was the only candidate who could ameliorate these sectional strains.⁴⁵ In this speech, however, Botts was more critical of the Republicans than he was of the Democrats. He faulted Fremont's candidacy, arguing it was "the wildest and most insane yet attempted."⁴⁶ This statement countered Democratic charges that Botts was sympathetic to the Republicans in 1856.

However, Botts was critical of Buchanan, as well. In a speech delivered in Petersburg, Virginia on September 27, 1856 Botts claimed that Buchanan was a "demagogue" and that, if elected, even he would recognize the dangers to the Union posed by allowing slavery to expand in the territories.⁴⁷

The efforts of Botts to undermine Democratic support in Virginia were aided by Alexander H. H. Stuarts endeavors in support of Know-Nothingism in 1856. Although Stuart did not hold a political office in 1856, his prior

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), October 17, 1856.

service as a congressman and Millard Fillmore's Secretary of the Interior earned him the respect of his fellow Virginians. Stuart's close relationship with Fillmore continued into the mid-1850s, as the two men corresponded about political developments in the nation. Stuart's decision to join the Know-Nothings was largely at the urging of Fillmore. In an 1855 letter to Stuart, Fillmore argued that he was urging his political allies to join the Know-Nothings and encouraged Stuart to become a member.⁴⁸

The correspondence between the two men continued during the 1856 campaign. When Fillmore opted to accept the Know-Nothing presidential nomination, he sent a letter to Stuart announcing his decision.⁴⁹ Fillmore again corresponded with Stuart after a convention of former Virginia Whigs endorsed Fillmore for President. Fillmore wrote that he was reassured by the decision of the old-line Whigs to endorse the Know-Nothing ticket.⁵⁰

Stuart's main contribution to the Know-Nothing cause in the election was in the form of a regular newspaper column carried by the Richmond Whig and published by other

⁴⁸Millard Fillmore to Alexander H. H. Stuart, January 15, 1855, Stuart Papers (Accession #345), University of Virginia.

⁴⁹See Millard Fillmore to Alexander H. H. Stuart, May 21, 1856, Ibid.

⁵⁰Millard Fillmore to Alexander H. H. Stuart, August 7, 1856, Ibid.

Fillmore newspapers around the country.⁵¹ His articles discussed the tenets and aims of the Know-Nothing party. Democratic newspapers ridiculed the content and style of his articles, claiming they were "unread" and "unreadable."⁵²

Thus, the political leadership of Virginia played important roles in the 1856 presidential campaign. Botts, Stuart, Hunter, and Wise were, to one degree or another, nationally prominent during the campaign. They were recognized as influential members of their respective parties. Since Buchanan's victory in the state always seemed assured, the participation of these men in the campaign helped to enliven the 1856 election for Virginians.

Since Hunter and Wise both held important political offices during the campaign, they were in a better position to influence the election than were their Know-Nothing counterparts. Hunter and Wise were able to clearly articulate Democratic positions in the campaign. In spite of the best efforts of Botts and Stuart, voters were unsure of Fillmore's stand on a number of issues, and this helped to defeat him in the election. Virginians of the period

⁵¹Alexander F. Robertson, Alexander Hugh Holmes Stuart (Richmond: William Byrd Press, 1925), p. 58. Robertson includes the text of Stuart's columns in his biography. During the campaign, Stuart's articles were also published in pamphlet form.

⁵²Daily Richmond Enquirer (Richmond, Va.), April 3, 1856.

held Senator Hunter in high esteem and Governor Wise commanded the respect of many voters, as well. Their influence on voters was certainly greater than that of either Botts or Stuart, neither of whom held political office during the 1856 campaign.

CONCLUSION

Democrats and Know-Nothings in Virginia faced each other for the last time in the 1856 election. The Democratic victory in that year ended the Know-Nothing challenge to the Democrats in Virginia. As the Civil War approached, those former old-line Whigs who supported the Know-Nothings in 1856 expressed their preference by supporting moderate Democrats for office.¹ As their newspapers illustrated, Virginia Know-Nothings were always Southerners first and their differences with the Democrats were often subtle.

In the 1856 campaign, Virginia Know-Nothings had to contend with two issues that harmed their campaign. The controversy over the Twelfth Section gave Democrats an excellent opportunity to question the Know-Nothing commitment to slavery. Fillmore's reluctance to firmly state his position on the slavery issue did not help the Know-Nothings in the state, either. The other issue that was detrimental to the Know-Nothings was the widely held

¹Louis D. Rubin Jr., Virginia: A History (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), p. 124.

view that the Know-Nothing party was a secret society of bigots. As some of the newspapers pointed out, many former Whigs did not feel comfortable in the Know-Nothing party for this reason. Thus, Buchanan's campaign was aided by those former Whigs who could not accommodate themselves to Know-Nothingism.

The efforts of the Democrats to convince voters that Fillmore was not a dependable supporter of Southern rights were successful. The scare tactics used in Democratic editorials designed to question Fillmore's devotion to slavery were effective campaign tools. The Democrats were clear about where they stood on the issues of the campaign, a fact which contrasts sharply with the ambiguous nature of Know-Nothing ideology. Governor Henry Wise and Senator R. M. T. Hunter were able spokesmen for the Democratic ticket in 1856. Their national prominence and stature within Virginia was not matched by Virginia's Know-Nothing leaders. All of these factors figured in Virginia's solid support for Buchanan in 1856.

The 1856 presidential election campaign signaled the demise of Know-Nothingism in Virginia. As sectional tension increased during the years leading up to the Civil War, former Whigs and Know-Nothings had to reconcile themselves to Democratic leadership as the South waged its battle with the abolitionists of the North.

APPENDIX 1

NATIONAL ELECTION RESULTS: 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

Popular Vote:

Buchanan, 1,838,169

Fremont, 1,335,264

Fillmore, 874,534

Electoral Vote:

Buchanan, 174 (14 slave and 5 free states)

Fremont, 114 (11 free states)

Fillmore, 8 (1 slave state, Maryland)

Source: Richard B. Morris and Jeffrey B. Morris, eds.,
Encyclopedia of American History, 6th ed. (New York:
Harper and Row, 1982), p. 263.

APPENDIX 2
 VOTE TALLIES OF
 SELECTED VIRGINIA COUNTIES IN THE 1856 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

<u>COUNTY</u>	<u>BUCHANAN</u>	<u>FILLMORE</u>
Bedford	1,015	1,044
Chesterfield	845	330
Fairfax	727	650
Fluvanna	309	263
Gloucester	383	268
Goochland	377	198
Henrico	709	755
Matthews	270	186
Norfolk (co.)	1,230	1,008
Petersburg	836	672
Richmond (co.)	225	291
Rockingham	2,733	510
Williamsburg	57	56
<u>STATE-WIDE TOTAL:</u>	84,322	55,250

Source: Richmond Daily Whig, November 17, 1856.

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