Ohio and the World, 1753-2053

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early a century and a half after its conclusion, the Civil War remains the greatest crisis and most decisive turning point in American history. The Civil War era raised many questions that remain central to our understanding of ourselves as a nation. What should be the balance of power between local authority and the national government, who is entitled to American citizenship, what are the concrete meanings of freedom and equality in the United States? These questions remain subjects of controversy today.

The war’s most important consequences—the preservation of the Union and the destruction of slavery—permanently affected the future course of national development. The conflict changed the nature of warfare, gave rise to the modern American nation-state, and destroyed the greatest slave society the modern world has known. It was the first war to bring the full impact of the industrial revolution—the railroad, ironclad ships, and modern rifles—to bear on the battlefield. Beginning as a conventional contest of army versus army, the war by its end had become one of society against society, with slavery, the foundation of the southern social order, in ruins. In such a contest, civilian morale was as crucial to sustaining and winning the war as events on the battlefield, and the population’s will to fight became as much a military target as armies in the field.

Ohio and Ohioans played a central role in the Civil War era and in the momentous changes it brought to the United States. Politicians like Salmon P. Chase, Benjamin F. Wade, John Sherman, Clement Vallandigham, John Bingham, and Rutherford B. Hayes were major actors in the coming of the war, its conduct, and its aftermath. John Brown, although born in Connecticut, spent his formative years in Ohio. Many of the North’s most
important generals, including Ulysses S. Grant, William T. Sherman, Philip H. Sheridan, and George McClellan had either been born in Ohio or were living there when the war began. Edwin M. Stanton, from Steubenville, led the War Department for most of the war, and Ohio-born Jay Cooke did more than any other individual to mobilize wartime financing. Party politics bore the war's powerful imprint. Every Republican candidate for president from 1868 to 1900—including Ohio-born Rutherford B. Hayes, James A. Garfield, Benjamin Harrison, and William McKinley—had fought in the Union army. But if Ohioans helped to change the nation, the war era also witnessed sweeping changes in Ohio itself. It was a far different state when the Civil War era ended than when it began.

Ohio was still predominantly agricultural fifty years after statehood. It led the country in the production of corn and was second in wheat. According to the 1850 census, Ohio's population had reached two million, making Ohio the third most populous state in the union. Still, it had few cities of any significance. Toledo in 1850 had only 3,800 inhabitants and Cleveland only 17,000. With a population of 115,000, Cincinnati far surpassed Ohio's other cities. In 1853 it was the state's major commercial and manufacturing center. Cincinnati's chief industry was pork packing, giving it the nickname "Porkopolis." The city handled over 300,000 hogs per year, more than enough, said one observer, to produce a ring of sausages that circled the globe at the equator. It also manufactured allied products like lard, soap, and candles in large quantities. The city was home as well to flour and sugar mills, steam engine factories, and numerous small shops where tailors, furniture manufacturers, boot and shoe makers, and other artisans practiced traditional pre-industrial crafts. Although canals and railroads had created commercial links with the Northeast, most of the city's flour and pork was still shipped down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to both southern markets and the wider world.

In 1851, Ohio adopted a new constitution, the first since statehood in 1803. In a sharp reaction against the previous policy of state aid to internal improvements like canal-building, which had led to severe fiscal problems during the economic depression of the early 1840s, the new constitution strictly limited Ohio's debt and prohibited the state from loaning its credit to, or buying stock in, any corporation. Henceforth, improvements like railroad development would have to be financed privately. In most other respects, however, the constitution retained the structure of government established in 1803. This included universal suffrage—for white men. Racism, of course, was endemic throughout the North. Slavery did not officially end in states like Connecticut, New York, and New Jersey until well into the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, Ohio had been the first state to
enter the Union with the word “white” in its voting qualifications. This established an ominous precedent. Between 1803 and the Civil War, every new state, north and south, with the single exception of Maine, followed Ohio’s example and excluded blacks from the suffrage.

Like the nation itself, Ohio in the 1850s found itself divided between northern and southern regions. The National Road has been called the state’s Mason-Dixon Line. Southern counties shared a long border with slave states, had been populated from the South, and maintained close economic and social ties with Virginia and Kentucky. Northern counties, with a more rapidly growing population, were increasingly anti-slavery. Settled almost exclusively from New England, the Western Reserve, in the northeastern corner of the state, was, as one observer noted, “seemingly the residence, the home of the various isms”—especially religious revivalism and abolitionism.1 It was the site of Oberlin, one of the few antebellum colleges to admit black students. In 1855, the town of Oberlin elected John Mercer Langston to the position of township clerk, making him one of only two African Americans to hold public office in the United States before the Civil War. The young minister and antislavery orator Theodore Weld toured the Western Reserve in the 1830s. He converted to abolitionism Joshua Giddings, who would soon be elected to Congress, and Ben Wade, who would go on to become one of the era’s most prominent Radical Republicans. Both Giddings and Wade practiced law in Jefferson, Ohio.

During the 1850s, Ohio experienced slavery’s disruptive impact on its political system. But the decade’s political transformation also reflected underlying economic and social changes, notably the completion of the market revolution and the beginning of mass immigration from Europe. The years following the depression that ended in 1843 witnessed explosive economic growth. From 5,000 miles in 1848, railroad track mileage grew to 30,000 by 1860, with most of the construction occurring in the Old Northwest. With over 3,000 miles of track, Ohio led the nation in railroad mileage. Four great trunk railroads now linked eastern cities with western farming and commercial centers. The railroads completed the reorientation of the Northwest’s trade from the South to the East. In 1848, Cincinnati shipped 96 percent of its flour down the Ohio River. Ten years later, nearly all was transported east by railroad, at a fraction of the previous cost. The economic integration of the Northwest and Northeast created the groundwork for their political unification in the Republican Party.

By 1860, the North had become a complex, integrated economy, with eastern industrialists marketing manufactured goods to the commercial farmers of the West, while residents of the East’s growing cities consumed the food westerners produced. Northern society, including Ohio, stood
poised between old and new ways. The majority of the population still lived not in large urban centers but in small towns and rural areas, where the ideal of economic independence—owning one’s own farm or shop—still lay within reach. Especially in western states, including Ohio, manufacturing establishments were small and widely dispersed, and primarily served local needs. Yet the industrial revolution’s impact was spreading rapidly. Two great areas of industrial production had arisen. One, along the Atlantic coast, stretched from Boston to Philadelphia and Baltimore. A second centered in inland cities on or near the Great Lakes like Buffalo, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Chicago. Driven by railroad expansion, coal mining and iron manufacturing grew rapidly. By 1860, Cincinnati had become the nation’s third largest industrial center, after New York and Philadelphia. While the southern economy was also growing and the continuing expansion of cotton production brought wealth to slaveholders, the South found itself increasingly isolated from these broad economic changes.

Innovations in education paralleled changes in Ohio’s economy. As the market system expanded, the state sought to provide new educational systems to meet the demands for a growing population and the new economy. Ohioans, and midwesterners more generally, built more colleges than any other region between 1830 and 1890. By 1860, Ohio had established nearly two dozen colleges, more than any other state in the union. Most of these schools were small, private liberal arts colleges, affiliated with religious denominations but chartered by the state. These schools often created experimental programs, including co-education and manual labor, which allowed students who could not afford tuition to work for their education. A writer in the *North American Review* noted that these programs were an “innovation that would scarcely have been possible, except in a new country where social prescription had no existence, where manual labor was almost a necessary adjunct to study, and where economy made it advisable to forego any inconvenience that might be expected to spring from the intermingling of both sexes in the same classroom.” The population of the West was, the writer continued, “remarkable for its freshness and physical vigor, its passion for progress, and consequently its disregard for conventionality.”

Two examples of these new colleges were Kenyon College and the Ohio Mechanics’ Institute. Philander Chase, uncle of Salmon P. Chase, founded Kenyon in Gambier, Ohio in 1826. He saw colleges as crucial institutions in the West, institutions which could help develop and maintain the democratic republic. Chase thought of Kenyon as a place to educate all classes of Ohioans to be useful and productive. He believed, too, that western colleges should train teachers who could then spread education throughout the state. Chase accused colleges in the East of catering to the wealthy,
privileged few, a fact “in direct hostility to the nature of a republic.” But western colleges like Kenyon would challenge the undemocratic economic and political status quo of the East. Chase measured liberty in Ohio by the educational opportunity the state afforded its citizens. The standard was the ability of an average Ohioan to improve himself, to gain that economic independence so fundamental to political freedom.³

The Ohio Mechanics’ Institute, founded in 1828 in Cincinnati and today a part of the University of Cincinnati, was created to teach technical skills and virtuous behavior to the workers. Master workmen and leading manufacturers jointly founded the institute in order to instill “good moral character” in young apprentices, to “facilitate the diffusion of useful knowledge and to promote improvements in manufactures and the mechanical arts.” These goals celebrated the dignity of labor, encouraged both experienced and inexperienced workers to build the steady habits that the market rewarded, and offered a way for workers to improve their economic prospects by keeping current with technological change.⁴

Economic expansion not only influenced education but also fueled the demand for labor, met, in part, by increased immigration from abroad. Between 1790 and 1830, immigrants contributed only marginally to American population growth, but between that year and 1860, nearly five million people (more than the entire population of 1790) entered the United States, the majority from Ireland and Germany. Ninety percent headed for the northern states, where job opportunities were most abundant and where they would not have to compete with slave labor. By 1850, Ohio already had over 100,000 foreign-born residents, 5 percent of its total population, and the number continued to grow.

There is no need to trace here the series of events that led Ohio and the nation toward Civil War during the 1850s. What is important is that from a state so evenly divided between Whigs and Democrats that a tiny band of Free Soilers held the balance of power in the legislature between 1849 and 1851, Ohio became one of the most solidly Republican states in the North. The party’s first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont, carried Ohio in 1856, as did Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Ohio elected Salmon P. Chase its first Republican governor in 1855 and reelected him two years later.

As in other states, the Republican party that emerged in the aftermath of the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was a coalition of former Whigs and Democrats committed to opposing the further expansion of slavery, along with Free Soilers who had long sought to rally the North against the South. The party included many nativists alarmed by the rapid influx of immigrants, and a substantial number of foreign-born voters, especially Germans. The first internal battle within this complex coalition took place over
whether nativism or anti-slavery would be the party’s main rallying cry. Chase ran for governor in 1855 at the head of a ticket otherwise composed of Know-Nothings, as the nativists’ political organization was called. But as governor he nominated Germans for public offices and used his influence to reduce nativist influence in the party. By 1856, while those Chase called “liberal” nativists remained Republican, the party platform had been freed of anti-immigrant sentiment.5

It was fitting that Salmon P. Chase became Ohio’s first Republican governor. For no anti-slavery leader was more responsible for the development of a political program opposing the expansion of slavery. Chase turned to abolitionism during the 1830s in a reaction against the mob that destroyed the printing press of Cincinnati anti-slavery activist James G. Birney. Chase helped to popularize the idea that southern slaveholders, organized as a Slave Power, were conspiring to dominate the national government, reverse the antislavery policy supposedly inaugurated by the founding fathers, and make slavery the ruling interest of the republic. As a leader of the Liberty, Free Soil, and Republican parties, he developed the legal basis for antislavery politics in a constitutional system that recognized and protected the institution. Chase developed the program of separating the national government from slavery, leaving it entirely a state institution, a creature of local law. In the 1850s, he became a leader of the Radical faction in the Republican Party, a group he described as those who “believe slavery to be a great wrong and desire to promote its abolition by political action.”6 Radicals never constituted more than a minority of the party. But by 1856, by which time it was clear that Republicans, not Know-Nothings, would become the major alternative to the Democratic Party in the North, many of Chase’s ideas had worked their way into the party mainstream. To southern claims that slavery was the foundation of genuine liberty, Republicans responded with the rallying cry “freedom national”—meaning not abolition, but severing the federal government from the support of slavery.

In Republican hands, the antithesis between “free society” and “slave society” coalesced into a comprehensive world view glorifying the North as the home of progress, opportunity, and freedom. The defining quality of northern society was the opportunity it offered each laborer to move up to the status of landowning farmer or independent craftsman and businessman, thus achieving the economic independence essential to freedom. Slavery, by contrast, spawned a social order consisting of degraded slaves, poor whites with no hope of advancement, and idle oligarchs. Alexis de Tocqueville had observed that the Ohio River formed the boundary not simply between two states, but two distinct societies. Ohio, he wrote, had “become the entrepôt for the wealth that goes up and down the
Mississippi,” while because of slavery, “Kentucky, older and perhaps better placed, stood still.” Three decades later, the Cincinnati Gazette’s traveling correspondent in the South reported that he was astonished by the “lack of invention and resource, the clinging to old and now unprofitable ways” among southern laborers, and “a sort of sluggish inactivity” throughout slave society. The way to regenerate southern society, he added, was “by the introduction upon Southern territory of the Northern way of life.” Certainly, slavery must be kept out of the territories so that free labor could flourish. “Now is the beginning of the second American Revolution,” wrote a correspondent to Benjamin Wade in 1856. “The North is struggling for freedom—the South is the despotic power which wishes to enslave the North.”

In 1860, Lincoln carried Ohio by a 40,000 vote plurality. When war broke out in 1861, Ohioans, like young men throughout the North, rushed to enlist. By 1865, Ohio had sent more than 300,000 men to the Union army, the highest percentage of its population of any northern state. One was Marcus M. Spiegel, who in 1861 volunteered to fight for the Union. Born into a Jewish family in Germany in 1829, Spiegel took part in the failed German revolution of 1848. The following year, he emigrated to Ohio, where he married the daughter of a local farmer. In 1860, the nation’s 150,000 Jews represented less than 1 percent of the total population, but with eight synagogues, Ohio ranked third in the nation behind New York and Pennsylvania. Spiegel, therefore, felt at home there and shared wholeheartedly in American patriotism. He went to war, he wrote to his brother-in-law, to defend “the flag that was ever ready to protect you and me and every one who sought its protection from oppression.”

Spiegel rose to the rank of colonel in the 120th Ohio Infantry and saw action in Virginia, Mississippi, and Louisiana. He corresponded frequently with his wife Caroline. “I have seen and learned much,” he wrote in 1863. “I have seen men dying of disease and mangled by the weapons of death; I have witnessed hostile armies arrayed against each other, the charge of infantry, [and] cavalry hunting men down like beasts.” But he never wavered in his commitment to the “glorious cause” of preserving the Union and its heritage of freedom.

Spiegel’s changing views about slavery mirrored the transformation of a struggle to preserve the Union into a war for emancipation. Spiegel was an ardent Democrat. He shared the era’s racist attitudes and thought Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation a serious mistake. Yet as the Union army penetrated the heart of the Deep South, Spiegel became increasingly antislavery. “Since I am here,” he wrote to his wife from Louisiana in January 1864, “I have learned and seen . . . the horrors of slavery. You know it takes me long to say anything that sounds antidemocratic [opposed to Democratic
party policies], but . . . never hereafter will I either speak or vote in favor of slavery.” Marcus Spiegel was killed in a minor engagement in Louisiana in May 1864, one of 620,000 Americans (and 34,591 Ohioans) to perish in the Civil War.10

Ohio shared in the sweeping changes, and powerful internal divisions, brought about by the war. Begun to preserve the old Union, the Civil War brought into being a new nation-state. To mobilize the North's economic resources, the Lincoln administration instituted the first national banking system and national currency, the first national taxes on income, and the first highly protective tariffs, and laid the foundation of the first transcontinental railroad. The economic policies of the Union forged a long-lasting alliance between the Republican Party, the national state, and the emerging class of industrial capitalists.

Yet as recent historians have emphasized, a nation is not merely a physical locale or a set of institutions, but a state of mind. The Civil War forged a new national self-consciousness. Before 1860, many Americans, North and South, could speak with no sense of irony of their slaveholding republic as an empire of liberty, but the war, as Frederick Douglass recognized as early as 1862, merged “the cause of the slaves and the cause of the country.”11 The scale of the Union's triumph and the sheer drama of emancipation fused nationalism, morality, and the language of freedom in an entirely new combination. Public and private institutions actively promoted the new patriotism: in May 1863, Cleveland hosted the national convention of the Union Leagues, local organizations that flooded the North with pro-war, pro-emancipation, and anti-southern pamphlets.

The new national consciousness had other roots as well. Even before the attack on Fort Sumter, Jay Cooke, who had moved east from Sandusky, Ohio as a teenager, wrote to his brother Henry, owner of the influential Republican newspaper, the Ohio State Journal: “I see Chase is in the Treasury. Now what is to be done—can't you inaugurate something whereby we can all safely make some cash?” The war provided the opportunity: in 1862, Chase granted Jay Cooke and Co. the exclusive right to market the government's $500 million “five-twenty” loan. The bonds were made available in denominations as low as fifty dollars and sold to ordinary persons, not simply to banks and wealthy individuals. Cooke employed over 2,500 agents to sell the bonds and launched an advertising campaign based on the theme, “Patriotism and Profit.”12 By the end of the war he had raised $1 billion for the government and millions for himself in commission fees. But more than raising these enormous sums, the bond campaign illustrated the federal government’s growing presence in Americans’ lives catalyzed by the war.
The nation that emerged from the Civil War was transformed not only in terms of the power of the national state but also in the newly expanded boundaries of its “imagined community.”

It is a singular fact,” Wendell Phillips wrote in 1866, “that, unlike all other nations, this nation has yet a question as to what makes or constitutes a citizen.” But from the Civil War emerged the principle of a national citizenship whose members enjoyed the equal protection of the law, regardless of race. Not simply the logic of liberty but the enlistment of 200,000 black men in the Union armed forces during the second half of the war placed black citizenship on the postwar agenda. The inevitable consequence of black military service, one senator observed in 1864, was that “the black man is henceforth to assume a new status among us.” The principles of birthright citizenship and equal protection of the law without regard to race, today central elements of American understandings of freedom, were products of the antislavery struggle and Civil War.

Like other northern states, Ohio experienced changes in race relations. Cincinnati organized a “black brigade” to work on fortifications when threatened by Confederate troops. By the end of the war, some five thousand Ohio blacks had served in the Union army. Like their counterparts
elsewhere, Ohio black leaders staked a claim to citizenship. They won a few small victories: Cincinnati and Cleveland desegregated their streetcars during the war, and a state Equal Rights League was established in January 1865.

For other northerners as well, the conflict opened new doors of opportunity. Hundreds of thousands of women took part in organizations that gathered money and medical supplies for soldiers and sent books, clothing, and food to the freedmen. The United States Sanitary Commission emerged as a centralized national relief agency to coordinate donations on the northern home front. Women played the leading role in organizing Sanitary Fairs—grand bazaars where military banners, uniforms, and other relics of the war were displayed and goods sold to raise money for soldiers’ aid. Lucy Webb Hayes was one of many Ohio women who cared for wounded soldiers (including her husband, Rutherford) at army field hospitals. Many men understood women’s war work as an extension of their “natural” domesticity and capacity for self-sacrifice. But the very act of volunteering to work in local soldiers’ aid societies brought numerous Ohio women into the public sphere and offered them a taste of independence. From the ranks of this wartime mobilization came many of the leaders of the postwar movement for women’s rights. Women also took advantage of the wartime labor shortage to move into jobs in factories and into certain largely male professions, most prominently nursing. Many of these wartime gains proved temporary, but in white-collar government jobs, retail sales, and as nurses, women found a permanent place in the workforce.

Despite Lincoln’s political skills, the war and his administration’s policies divided northern society. Ohio Republicans labeled those opposed to the war or to administration policies Copperheads, after a poisonous snake that strikes without warning. Strongest among the large southern-born population of the lower part of the state, disaffection arose not only from mounting casualties but also from the rapid changes the conflict produced in Ohio life. The growing power of the federal government challenged traditional notions of local autonomy. Workers resented the profits reaped by manufacturers and financiers while their own real incomes dwindled because of inflation. Wartime prosperity largely bypassed farmers in southern Ohio. And the prospect of a sweeping change in the status of blacks called forth a racist reaction in Ohio and other parts of the North. Throughout the war, the Democratic Party subjected Lincoln’s policies to withering criticism, although it remained divided between “War Democrats,” who supported the military effort while criticizing emancipation and the draft, and those who favored immediate peace. Democrats had long
used appeals to racism against the Republicans. One Ohio newspaper predicted in 1856 that Republican triumph would “turn loose millions of negroes, to elbow you in the workshops and compete with you in the fields of honest labor.” Democrats now opposed emancipation with lurid warnings that Ohio was about to be “Africanized,” as an address by Congressman Samuel S. Cox put it in 1862.

Ohio also became a battleground in the controversy over civil liberties in wartime. With the constitution unclear as to who possessed the power to suspend the writ of habeas corpus, Lincoln claimed the right under the presidential war powers and twice suspended the writ throughout the entire Union for those accused of “disloyal activities.” The courts generally gave the administration a free hand. They refused to intervene when Clement L. Vallandigham, a leading Ohio Democrat known for his blistering antiwar speeches, was convicted and sentenced to prison by a military court for violating a military order that forbade expressing sympathy for the enemy. Lincoln changed the sentence to banishment to the Confederacy, from where Vallandigham made his way to Canada. Ohio Democrats nominated him as their candidate for governor in 1863. The campaign witnessed assaults, brawls, and at least two murders. Reports of secret societies, midnight meetings, and conspiracies proliferated. In the end Vallandigham was defeated in a landslide by John Brough, running as the candidate of the newly rechristened Union Party.

In November 1864, General William T. Sherman, born in Lancaster, Ohio, led his army of 60,000 (including many Ohioans) from Atlanta on their March to the Sea. Cutting a sixty-mile-wide swath of destruction through the heart of Georgia, they destroyed railroads, buildings, and all the food and supplies they could not use. After reaching Savannah, Sherman met with a delegation of black leaders and in January 1865, at their request, issued Special Field Order 15, which set aside the Sea Islands and a large area along the South Carolina and Georgia coasts for the settlement of black families on 40-acre plots. He also offered them broken-down mules that the army could no longer use. In his order lay the origins of the phrase “40 acres and a mule” that would reverberate across the South in the next few years. By June, some forty thousand freedpeople had been settled on “Sherman land.” Among the emancipated slaves, Sherman’s order raised hopes that the end of slavery would be accompanied by the economic independence that they, like other Americans, believed essential to genuine freedom.

The end of the war placed at the forefront of American life the issue of the status of the former slaves in the reunited nation. This question became
the crux on which turned the political crisis of post-war Reconstruction, which saw the Constitution rewritten to establish the principle of a national citizenship whose rights, protected by federal authority, would be enjoyed equally regardless of race. This was followed by the unprecedented, if short-lived, period of Radical Reconstruction, an experiment in interracial democracy in the South in which former slaves, within a few years of emancipation, enjoyed a genuine share of political power. Ohio played a crucial role in the development and abandonment of the North’s commitment to equality for the emancipated slaves.

“What is freedom?” asked Ohio congressman James A. Garfield in 1865. “Is it the bare privilege of not being chained? If this is all, then freedom is a bitter mockery, a cruel delusion.” Did freedom mean simply the absence of slavery, or did it imply other rights for the emancipated slaves, and if so, which ones: civil equality, the suffrage, ownership of property? Most insistent on identifying and protecting the basic rights of the freedpeople were the Radical Republicans. Radicals tended to represent constituencies in New England and districts like the Western Reserve of Ohio that had been home to religious revivalism, abolitionism, and other reform movements. Although they differed on many issues, Radicals shared the conviction that Union victory created a golden opportunity to institutionalize the principle of equal rights for all regardless of race. The Radicals fully embraced the expanded powers of the federal government born of the Civil War. Traditions of federalism and states’ rights, they insisted, must not obstruct a sweeping national effort to protect the rights of all Americans. Among their leaders in Congress were two Ohioans—Congressman James M. Ashley and Senator Benjamin Wade.

Ohio also provided a leader of the more numerous moderate Republicans, Senator John Sherman. He feared that advocacy of black suffrage would prove fatal to the party’s prospects. “It is apparent to any sensible man,” Sherman declared, “that its agitation will do harm.” He was prepared to meet President Andrew Johnson more than halfway. The fact that Johnson alienated such a man and united the entire Republican Party against him is an index of his political extremism and incompetence.

By 1866, a consensus had emerged within the Republican Party that civil equality was an essential attribute of freedom. The first statutory definition of American citizenship, the Civil Rights Act of 1866, declared all persons born in the United States (except Native Americans) national citizens and spelled out rights they were to enjoy equally without regard to race. Equality before the law was central to the measure, as were free-labor values: no state could deprive any citizen of the right to make contracts, bring lawsuits, or enjoy equal protection of the security of person and property.
But it was the Fourteenth Amendment, approved by Congress in 1866 and ratified two years later, that for the first time enshrined in the Constitution the ideas of birthright citizenship and equal rights for all Americans. The Amendment prohibited states from abridging the “privileges and immunities of citizens” or denying them the “equal protection of the law.” Although most immediately intended to raise former slaves to the status of equal citizens, the Amendment’s language did not apply only to blacks. The principle of equality before the law affected all Americans, including, as one Congressman noted, “the millions of people of foreign birth who will flock to our shores . . . to find here a land of liberty.” The major architect of the Fourteenth Amendment was Congressman John A. Bingham of Ohio. “Equality of the law,” he declared, “is the very bedrock of American institutions.” Soon afterward, the Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, barred the states from making race a qualification for voting.

The Amendments and civil rights laws reflected the intersection of two products of the Civil War era—the newly empowered national state and the idea of a national citizenship enjoying equality before the law. The Reconstruction amendments transformed the Constitution from a document primarily concerned with federal-state relations and the rights of property into a vehicle through which members of vulnerable minorities could stake a claim to substantive freedom and seek protection against misconduct by all levels of government.

A number of Ohioans took part in the southern experiment of Radical Reconstruction. Ohioans were among those dubbed by southern Democrats “carpetbaggers,” implying that they had packed all their belongings in a suitcase and left their homes in order to reap the spoils of office in the South. Some carpetbaggers were undoubtedly corrupt adventurers. The large majority, however, were former Union soldiers who decided to remain in the South when the war ended, before there was any prospect of going into politics. Others invested in land and railroads. They saw in the postwar South an opportunity to combine personal economic advancement with a role in helping to substitute, as one wrote, “the civilization of freedom for that of slavery.” Albert T. Morgan, a young army veteran from Ohio, failed in cotton planting in Mississippi immediately after the war. He went into politics in 1867 when local blacks urged him to run for the state constitutional convention. This was the beginning of a career that took him to the state legislature and the post of sheriff of Yazoo County. Morgan later wrote one of best first-person accounts of grass-roots Reconstruction, *Yazoo, or, On the Picket Line of Freedom in the South: A Personal Narrative.*

The civil rights laws and constitutional amendments of Reconstruction applied to the North, as well as the South. They voided Ohio’s
discriminatory legislation. Thanks to the Fifteenth Amendment, Ohio blacks voted for the first time in 1870. Emancipation did not unleash the flood of black newcomers of which Democrats had warned. But the state’s black population rose 72 percent between 1860 and 1870, to 63,000. This represented only 2 percent of Ohio residents, but the state now ranked second in the North in black population after Pennsylvania. During Reconstruction, Ohio blacks continued to be barred from places of public accommodation and from skilled employment, but they also challenged and eliminated discrimination on railroads and won admission to hospitals, asylums, and, in some communities, schools.

Race still proved a dangerous issue for the Republican Party. In 1867, a referendum on eliminating the word “white” from Ohio’s voting qualifications failed by over 38,000 votes—every part of the state rejected it but the Western Reserve. During the campaign, Democratic processions featured wagons carrying girls dressed in white bearing a banner, “Fathers, save us from Negro equality.” Partly because of the measure’s unpopularity, Democrats won control of both houses of the legislature in 1867 and Republican Rutherford B. Hayes squeaked in as governor by only three thousand votes. The legislature proceeded to rescind its previous ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment and rejected the Fifteenth. The Democratic victory meant that Ben Wade would not be reelected to the Senate. Thus ended the career of one of the most colorful figures of mid-century Ohio politics. Wade advocated not only black rights, but women’s suffrage and the rights of labor. His speech in Kansas in 1867 insisting that “a more equal distribution of capital must be wrought out” so impressed Karl Marx, then living in London, that Wade became the only American to be quoted—in the preface, no less—in volume one of Das Kapital (published in Europe in the same year as Wade’s speech). On the other hand, as president pro tem of the Senate (the highest political post held by an Ohioan to that date), Wade stood next in line to the presidency—a fact that helps explain why seven moderate Republicans in 1868 voted to acquit Andrew Johnson during his impeachment, preventing his removal from office.

Wade’s Kansas speech drew attention to the far-reaching changes in northern life wrought by the Civil War and its aftermath. Like the South, the North experienced a social transformation after the war, visible in a boom in railroad building and the triumph of the factory system in manufacturing. In 1873, the nation’s industrial production stood 75 percent higher than in 1865, and second only to that of Great Britain. It was an era of close ties between business and politics and also widespread corruption.

For Ohio, the postwar period witnessed the transition from an agricultural to an industrial economy. In 1870, Ohio ranked fourth among the
states in manufacturing, the value of its industrial output having more than quadrupled in twenty years. Ohio led the nation in the manufacture of agricultural implements and was second in iron. The heartland of the second industrial revolution lay in the region around the Great Lakes, with its factories producing iron and steel, machinery, and packaged foods. In Ohio, Cincinnati remained the leading manufacturing city. Its large factories now employed as many workers as its thousands of small shops combined. No longer Porkopolis, Cincinnati had a diversified manufacturing base. It had become the “foundry city” of the West, the national center of machine tool production. The post-war years witnessed the rise of new firms representing investments of money far beyond prewar levels, such as Procter and Gamble, capitalized at $800,000. These developments helped to inspire the growth of the labor movement after the Civil War. The Cincinnati Trades
and Labor Assembly rallied for the eight-hour day. With Democratic support, a Workingmen’s Party elected Cincinnatian and former general Samuel Cary to Congress in 1867.

Meanwhile, Cleveland, whose population approached 100,000 in 1870, had emerged as a major industrial center and leading shipping port on the Great Lakes; it was as well a center of oil production and iron and steel manufacturing. The city provided the base of operations for John D. Rockefeller, who had moved to Ohio from his native New York before the Civil War and who was a 21-year-old commission merchant when fighting began. Rockefeller profited handsomely from wartime government contracts. After the war, he dominated the oil industry by driving out rival firms through cutthroat competition, arranging secret deals with railroad companies, and fixing prices and production quotas. He soon established a vertically integrated monopoly, which controlled the drilling, refining, storage, and distribution of oil. By the 1880s, his Standard Oil Company controlled 90 percent of the nation’s oil industry.

Men like Rockefeller inspired among ordinary Americans a combination of awe, admiration, and hostility. Depending on one’s point of view, they were “captains of industry,” whose energy and vision pushed the economy forward, or “robber barons,” who wielded power without any accountability in an essentially unregulated marketplace. Most rose from modest backgrounds and seemed to exemplify how inventive genius and business sense enabled Americans to seize opportunities for success. But many Americans feared their dictatorial attitudes, unscrupulous methods, repressive labor policies, and exercise of power without any democratic control. Concentrated wealth degraded the political process, Henry Demarest Lloyd would later declare in Wealth against Commonwealth (1894), an exposé of how Rockefeller’s Standard Oil Company made a mockery of economic competition and political democracy by manipulating the market and bribing legislators. “Liberty and monopoly,” Lloyd concluded, “cannot live together.”

The North’s commitment to Reconstruction waned during the 1870s. Many Radicals, including Thaddeus Stevens, who died in 1868, had passed from the scene. Within the Republican Party, their place was taken by politicians less committed to the ideal of equal rights for blacks. Nationally, both parties came under the control of powerful political managers with close ties to business interests. Increasingly, northerners felt that the South should be able to solve its own problems without constant interference from Washington. The federal government had freed the slaves, made them citizens, and given them the right to vote. Now, blacks should rely on their...
own resources, not demand further assistance. When the Fifteenth
Amendment was ratified, the Cincinnati Commercial, a Republican newspa-
paper, declared: “Beyond this government cannot go. The negro must take care
of himself. . . Left to themselves, under impartial laws, both whites and
blacks, natives and adopted citizens, must work out their own salvation.”

In 1872, an influential group of Republicans alienated by corruption
within the Grant administration formed their own party. Calling them-
selves Liberal Republicans, they gathered in Cincinnati and nominated
Horace Greeley, editor of the New York Tribune, for president. Initially, their
alienation had little to do with Reconstruction. The Liberals claimed that
corrupt politicians had come to power by manipulating the votes of immi-
grants and workingmen, allowing men of talent and education like them-
selves to be pushed aside. Democratic criticisms of Reconstruction, howev-
er, found a receptive audience among the Liberals. As in the North, they
became convinced, the “best men” of the South had been excluded from
power while “ignorant” voters controlled politics, producing corruption and
misgovernment. Power in the South should be returned to the region’s “nat-
ural leaders.” Greeley suffered a devastating defeat by Grant. But his cam-
paign placed on the northern agenda the one issue on which he, the reform-
ers, and the Democrats could agree—a new policy toward the South.

The Liberal attack on Reconstruction, which continued after 1872, con-
tributed to a resurgence of racism in the North. Other factors also weakened
northern support for Reconstruction, above all, a severe economic depres-
sion in 1873. Ohio was particularly hard-hit. Half the state’s iron furnaces
went out of business during the depression that lasted until 1878. Labor
strife proliferated. In 1877, the national railroad strike spread to Ohio and
transportation throughout the state ground to a halt. Mobs in Columbus
and Cincinnati closed the cities’ factories. The governor called on citizens
to organize themselves into volunteer police forces. One businessman said
the scene reminded him of “the days of the Paris Commune,” which had
been widely reported in the American press, including Cincinnati, which
styled itself “the Paris of the West.”

Distracted by economic problems, northern voters were in no mood to
devote further attention to the South. Democrats made substantial gains in
the elections of 1874, including in Ohio, and, for the first time since the
Civil War, took control of the House of Representatives. Two state elections
in the following year symbolized the retreat from Reconstruction. One took
place in Ohio, where Rutherford B. Hayes ran for governor. The campaign
stressed not Reconstruction but fiscal respectability (Hayes claimed that
Democrats planned to flood the country with paper money) and
Protestantism (he warned that Catholics posed a threat to the Ohio public school system). The campaign helped to solidify a new image for the party, independent of the issues arising from emancipation.

In Mississippi, in the same year, Democrats organized rifle clubs and vowed to carry the state election by force. When Governor Adelbert Ames, a Maine-born Union general, frantically appealed to the federal government for assistance, President Grant responded that the northern public was “tired out” by southern problems. Black Mississippi Congressman John R. Lynch visited Grant in the White House to plead for aid. If the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments could be nullified, he insisted, “then the war was fought in vain.” But Grant explained why he could not send troops. Northern public opinion would no longer support federal intervention. There was no sense in trying to save Mississippi if the attempt to do so would lose Ohio. Control of the Buckeye state was far more important to the national Republican Party than Reconstruction in the South.

On election day, armed Mississippi Democrats destroyed ballot boxes and drove former slaves from the polls. The result was a Democratic landslide and the end of Reconstruction in Mississippi. “A revolution has taken place,” wrote Ames, “and a race are disfranchised—they are to be returned to . . . an era of second slavery.” In Ohio, however, Hayes emerged victorious. His margin was only 1 percent, but it represented a dramatic reversal of the Democratic sweep of 1874. The campaign demonstrated the declining importance of Reconstruction in northern politics. Hayes would run for president in 1876 and preside over the ending of Reconstruction, symbolized by the withdrawal of federal troops from the South in 1877.

To some, it seemed that the nation had put the bitterness of the 1860s behind it. But the road to reunion was paved with black Americans’ shattered dreams. By the turn of the century, the Solid South, now uniformly Democratic, nullified the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments and imposed a new racial order based on disenfranchisement, segregation, and economic inequality. But the Reconstruction amendments remained embedded in the Constitution, sleeping giants to be awakened by the efforts of subsequent generations, including Ohioans, to redeem the promise of freedom for the descendants of slavery.

NOTES

The Civil War Era


6. Ibid., 115.


22. Ibid., 296.

Chapter 3

30. Ibid., 562.
“The Exodus to the Cities.” This post office mural at Bedford (Ohio), painted by Karl Anderson in 1937, suggests the centrality of urbanization as Ohioans created new communities and new forms of politics during the Progressive Era. The change is wrenching, as witnessed by the anxious embrace of a mother and daughter parting ways, by whole families being uprooted from the land, and by the aged Civil War veteran being ignored. The future lies with cities, factories, and, in the deep background, baseball. The original is oil on canvas, 6 1/8 x 5 1/2 feet. Courtesy, The Ohio Historical Society, AV 48, box no. 1, folder 3.