Robert J. Breckinridge: Views on Slavery to Emancipation

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ROBERT J. BRECKINRIDGE:

VIEWS ON SLAVERY TO EMANCIPATION

BY

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A THESIS

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Now that time has advanced beyond the turbulent years of slavery and the struggle necessary for its extermination, we may view the institution of slavery with frankness, with a mind devoid of personal prejudice, and with an earnest and sincere desire to place that institution in its proper perspective and relationship. Whosoever lends color, understanding, and comprehension to this enigmatic question, slavery, is worthy of mention.

It is the primary purpose of this thesis to resurrect the ideals, hopes, theories, and accomplishments of a man whose active years paralleled the stormy and provocative years of slavery. It is desired, in the resuscitation of these events, to connect them properly with the contemporary features of the period.

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CHAPTER I
A COLONIZATIONIST

The accomplishments, aspirations, and vicissitudes of Robert J. Breckinridge are characteristic of the bitter conflicts and trepidations of his time and of the great political controversy agitated by the anticipation of uncertain dangers and fears of the enigma, slavery. Robert J. Breckinridge was a member of that notable old Kentucky family whose name suggests and recalls to mind definite Kentucky and national events. His eminent father, John Breckinridge, moved from Virginia to Kentucky when the latter state had just acquired statehood. Henceforth he distinguished himself in the affairs of the nation as a senator from Kentucky and as attorney-general in the Jefferson administration. He is known as one of the prominent statesmen and lawyers in the early days of the West. John Breckinridge was a personal friend of Jefferson, and at the special request of Jefferson he named his son Robert Jefferson in honor of his distinguished friend.

"My Son: The Jefferson in your name was added by your sainted father; who also wrote the whole as you find it in the family Bible. And, moreover, you were named at the particular request of Mr. Jefferson. Laetitia Preston, now Mrs. Gene Floyd, of Virginia, was your godmother, and no doubt remembers your baptism. James Marshall, your godfather, (no relation of the Doctor's) studied law with your father. He is now dead."

Mary H. Breckinridge
March 22, 1841.

1Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, August 20, 1841 (Louisville, Kentucky, Prentice and Weissing, Printers, 1841), p. 32, pamphlet.
It was with great pride and reverence that Robert Jefferson Breckinridge related upon many occasions the constructive work of his father in the framing of Kentucky's second constitution.²

Robert J. Breckinridge was born at Cabell's Dale, Fayette County, Kentucky, March 8, 1800. His early education was directed and supervised by the celebrated teachers Dominie Thompson, Wilson, O'Hara, and Brock, of central Kentucky. This tutelage prepared him for entrance to Princeton College, New Jersey. After remaining two years there, he entered Yale; thence he went to Union College, Schenectady, New York, where he graduated in 1819. After his return to his mother's home in 1820 he became interested in the profession of law and occupied himself by reading law and managing his mother's large estate. From the administration of this estate developed the memorable controversy between Breckinridge and Robert Wickliffe. Later Breckinridge publicly explained the causes of the antagonism. The following quotation shows the nature of the controversy:

"There arose about ten years ago, two causes of open quarrel between myself and Robert Wickliffe, Sen.; the one purely personal, the other political. In regard to the former, I will say but a word. Mr. Wickliffe was the retained attorney of the administrators of my late honored father, and subsequently of the trustee of that estate, my late brother, Joseph Cabell Breckinridge. For a long course of years ending about 1824, I had nothing to do with any of those transactions; but about that time becoming trustee myself, I had much

²Robert J. Breckinridge, "Colonization Favorable to Emancipation," Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, April, 1834, p. 263.
intercourse with Mr. Wickliffe in the
relations stated above, till about the
year 1830 or '31, when my duty as trustee
for others, obliged me in my opinion to
come to an open rupture with him."²

The personal animosity was dismissed with no such mild
treatment; bitter speeches⁴ and correspondence, containing the
most caustic denunciations,⁵ passed between the two men for
years. Many of the speeches and defences were published by the
local newspapers and circulated within the community.

The political phase of the controversy was agitated by the
varied views of the two men on such questions as the importation
of slaves into Kentucky, the power of the legislature to control
the post office, and other public policies.⁶

With the young Charleton Hunt as a partner, Breckinridge
commenced the practice of law in Lexington in 1824. A year
previous to this he had married his cousin, Sophronisba
Freston, of Abingdon, Virginia, who was the granddaughter of
General William Campbell, a patriot commander at the battle of

³Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky,
October 12, 1840 (Lexington, Ky., N. L. and J. W. Finnell,
Printers, 1840), p. 5, pamphlet.

⁴Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky,
November 9, 1840 (Lexington, Ky., Lexington Observer and
Reporter, Printers, 1840), pamphlet.

⁵Reply of Robert Wickliffe to Robert J. Breckinridge
(Lexington, Ky., Kentucky Gazette, Printers, 1843), pamphlet.

⁶Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky,
October 12, 1840 (Lexington, Ky., N. L. and J. W. Finnell,
Printers, 1840), pamphlet.
In 1825 Breckinridge was elected on the Old Court ticket to represent Fayette County in the state legislature. The Old Court party was successful in electing its candidates in Fayette County.\(^8\) As a result of the August election, the Old Court party had 64 members in the House and 16 members in the Senate; there were 36 representatives and 21 senators representing the New Court party.\(^9\) Breckinridge served his constituents for four successive terms. It was during these sessions that the question of African negro colonization came before the legislature.

The American Colonization Society sent a memorial to the General Assembly of Kentucky, 1826, soliciting the patronage of the people of Kentucky.\(^10\) The memorialists stated the object of the Society, its work, and progress. The General Assembly resolved that they viewed with interest the work of the Society; they requested the United States senators and representatives from Kentucky to use their efforts to facilitate the operations of the Society.\(^11\)

Breckinridge locked upon the colonization movement with

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\(^7\) *The Courier Journal*, Louisville, Kentucky, January 3, 1872. [Quoted from the *Cincinnati Gazette*].

\(^8\) *Danville Advertiser*, Danville Kentucky, August 11, 1826.


\(^10\) *Senate Journal of Kentucky*, 1826, p. 244 ff.

the utmost optimism and gravity; he labored and pleaded for its success. He was confident that the new movement would afford a deliverance from personal and national evils; yet he was cognizant of the magnitude and the complexity of such a scheme.

The Lexington and Fayette County Auxiliary of the Colonization Society, at its annual meeting held in Lexington, July, 1826, elected Robert J. Breckinridge one of its managers. Breckinridge said:

"The scheme of African Colonization as exhibited by our National Society and its various auxiliaries is a most noble conception. It is a stupendous plan—spanning the Atlantic and encircling in its wide embrace a nation of slaves, and a continent of heathens."

Since 1816 there had been a gradual formation of societies organized for the purpose of the colonization of free negroes. The American Colonization Society, the parent society, was organized in 1816 by the Rev. Robert Finley, of New Jersey. The fifty charter members included John Randolph and Henry Clay. The idea of the colonization of free negroes even at this date was not new. In 1777 Mr. Jefferson proposed

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12 *Reporter, Lexington, Kentucky, July 23, 1823.*

13 Address of Robert J. Breckinridge, delivered January 6, 1831 (Frankfort, Ky., A. C. Hodges, Printer, 1831), p. 4, pamphlet.

14 *Miles Weekly Register, Vol. XLV, November 9, 1833, p. 107.*

15 *Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, June, 1833, p. 33.*

to the Virginia legislature that "all the offspring of slaves, born after that time, should be free at their birth—brought up at public expense—educated, according to their geniuses, to the arts, sciences, or tillage—and furnished with every convenience for emigration to such place as might be provided for them." 17

The attempts to suppress the African slave trade gave some impetus to the colonization movement. Congress passed an act in 1819 providing that negroes captured while being illegally imported into the United States were to be returned to Africa. In order to execute the principles of this act, Monroe appointed Samuel Bacon as an agent to Africa, whose duty it was to provide for the returned negroes. Mr. Bacon was instructed to form an establishment on the Island of Sherbro or elsewhere on the African coast, but Bacon was instructed "not to connect your agency with the views or plans of the Colonization Society." 15 The Society had purchased the site of Liberia in 1821, to be used for the purpose of the colonization of free negroes then living in the United States. Jonathan B. Winn was appointed as Bacon's successor, December, 1820. He transported his company from the Island of Sherbro to Cape Mesurado, January, 1822. From this time forward it appears that the agency operated in conjunction with the colony of Liberia. According to Amos Kendall this may have been preconceived by

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17. Intelligencer, Lexington, Kentucky, July 22, 1834, Extra.
the legislators who passed the Act of 1619:

"Connecting this act with the fact that the Colonization Society was then preparing to effect a settlement on the coast of Africa, with the view of affording an asylum for free people of color and emancipated slaves, it is probable Congress expected that some person or persons residing in the proposed settlement would be appointed to receive the re-captured negroes, and that the final disposition of them when they did not immediately return to their own countries, would be embraced in the benevolent plans of the Colonization Society."  

Winn left the colony in the following June. During the absence of a government agent Jehudi Ashmun, the agent of the Colonization Society, was appointed temporary agent, and he served in this two-fold capacity. Gradually the agency and the colony merged, and from this combination finally evolved the Republic of Liberia, 1847.

The roster of the American Colonization Society contained the names of some of the most prominent men of the country. Henry Clay, William R. Crawford, General Lafayette, James Madison, Daniel Webster, Richard Rush, and F. S. Key were officers of the organization at different times. Virginia was proud of the contribution of her famous sons to the membership of the Colonization Society, as is shown by the extract from an address by Gabriel F. Digway, Petersburg, Virginia:

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19 Ibid., p. 764.
21 Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, March, 1834, p. 323.
"She [Virginia] suggested the plan of this society as early as the administration of Mr. Jefferson. We rank at present, among our friends, some of the most influential, distinguished, and patriotic of the citizens of this state. Shall I name the late President of the United States, who now fills the first office of a promising Society in Loudon county, as he recently did the first office of our nation? a Marshall, the profound Chief Justice of the Union? a Washington, (Bushrod Washington) his venerable associate, and the presiding officer in the parent Institution? But while the removal of our free people of colour, is one of our leading objects, the suppression of the slave trade another,"22

The American Colonization Society grew rapidly in numbers and service during the first years of its existence. Auxiliaries were formed in many states. Kentucky's first auxiliary was formed in 1823, the second, 1827.23

By the end of the year of 1823 four hundred free negroes had applied to the Colonization Society for transportation to the colony in Africa, and two hundred slaveholders had expressed the desire to manumit their slaves as soon as the Society could furnish transportation.24

A great deal of prejudice existed in various parts of the country against the growing idea of colonization. This, in part, might be attributed to the fact that in some of the states the colonization movement had been preceded by various abolition

24Reporter, December 17, 1823.
societies. It became necessary for the Society to disclaim certain misconceptions of its true objects and character.

Certain resolutions were offered at the annual meeting of the American Colonization Society, January, 1826, which stated definitely and concisely the real object of the Society:

"Resolved, That its only object is what has been at all times avowed, the removal to the Coast of Africa, with their own consent, of such people of colour within the United States, as are already free, and of such others as the humanity or individuals, and the laws of the different States, may here-after liberate." 25

The following year the same idea was reiterated by Henry Clay in his speech before the Society. He said:

"The object of the Society was the colonization of the free colored people, not the slaves, of the country. Voluntary in its institution, voluntary in all its ramifications, all its means, purposes, and instruments, are also voluntary." 26

When the American Colonization Society was still in its infancy, the Presbyterian churches added their force to the movement. The Synod of Kentucky, in 1823, "appointed committees to further the American Colonization Society, and to promote the object by correspondence with influential men in different parts of the State." 27

The churches took an active interest in building churches in Liberia and providing religious instructions


for slaves in the state. By 1832 the question of slavery and colonization had become of sufficient interest to instigate a debate of two days' duration in the Synod. These questions were put before the Synod in the following form:

"Resolved, that in the view of this Synod, Slavery, as it exists within our bounds, is a great moral evil, and inconsistent with the word of God. And we do, therefore, recommend to all our ministers and members, who hold slaves, to endeavor to have them instructed in the knowledge of the Gospel; and to promote, in every peaceable way, the interests of the Colonization Society; and to favor all proper measures for gradual voluntary emancipation."28

Conciliation was reached when the Rev. Samuel Marshall introduced a resolution, "Inasmuch as, in the judgment of the Synod, it is inexpedient to come to any decision on the very difficult and delicate question of slavery, as it is within our bounds; therefore resolved, that the whole subject be indefinitely postponed."29

Robert J. Breckinridge was an opponent of slavery in the Synod; and when the above resolution was adopted, he arose and said as he left the assembly, "God has left you, and I also will now leave you, and have no more correspondence with you."30

It is evident that the originators of the colonization scheme expected either to solicit financial aid from both the state legislatures and the national government; or that the Society

28Ibid., p. 335.
29Davidson, op. cit., p. 335.
30Martin, op. cit., p. 54.
thought its scheme of sufficient importance to arouse the
interest of the country to the extent that Congress would adopt
the scheme and promote and supervise its movement. In the
constitution of the Society it is stated that the object of the
Society is "to promote a plan for colonizing (with their consent)
the free people of color residing in our country, in Africa, or
such other place as Congress may deem most expedient. And the
Society shall act to effect in co-operation with the General
Government, and such of the States as may adopt regulations on
the subject."\(^{31}\) As early as 1818 the American Colonization
Society succeeded in getting a memorial presented to Congress
seeking government aid for its project.\(^{32}\) Repeatedly these
memorials appeared before Congress during the active existence
of the Society. At the ninth annual meeting of the Society
these ideas were incorporated in the form of a resolution and
usually presented to Congress in a similar form.\(^{33}\) The Society
at this time provided for the necessary committee whose duty
it was to prepare and present to Congress a petition asking for
financial assistance. Memorials were to be prepared and
presented to the legislatures of the several states asking for
the adoption of such measures as would foster the progress of

\(^{31}\) *Constitution of the American Colonization Society*, Art. 2
Washington, C. Alexander, printer, 1848.

1772-1774.

\(^{33}\) *Western Luminary*, Vol. II, No. 30 (February 1, 1828),
p. 473.
the colonization movement. 34

A memorial was presented to Congress, February, 1827. 35 Mr. Hayne, of South Carolina, stated that the memorial proposed that the United States either appropriate money for the transpor- 
tation of free persons of color to Africa, or that the government take over the colony. Mr. Hayne immediately headed the opposition. He protested against the right of the federal government to aid the Colonization Society; he stated that the colonization scheme was "impracticable, wild and mischievous." 36 The memorial was not favorably considered; it was therefore laid on the table within a few days after its presentation. 37

The first colony founded under the auspices of the American Colonization Society on the coast of Africa was located on Cape Mesurado, June, 1822. Liberia, the land purchased and settled under the direction of the Society, consisted of 6 villages and 6 churches; and the colony had a population of a little more than 3,000 by 1833. 38 The colony extended about 150 miles along the African Coast and about 20 or 30 miles inland. Its chief city, Monrovia, consisted of 90 houses and stores, 3 churches; and its inhabitants numbered about 700. Liberia was governed by an agent, appointed by the Society, and two judges.

34 Loc. cit.
36 Loc. cit.
37 Ibid., p. 334.
38 Miles Weekly Register, Vol. XLIV, October 19, 1835, p. 122.
who met every month. As early as 1830 Monrovia printed its own newspaper, the Liberia Herald.

The general welfare of the emigrants was provided for by the Society. Each person who settled in Monrovia was assigned five acres of land and a building lot. The emigrant who settled in the country was allotted 50 acres of land, and he was given a deed to the property as soon as he built a permanent house and had 2 acres under cultivation. Land sold near Monrovia for fifty cents an acre.

The Society reported on April 12, 1826, that 253 emigrants had been sent to Liberia since the beginning of 1825. There were 790 negroes, 227 of whom were liberated slaves, transported to Liberia during the year of 1832. Kentucky sent her first ship of emigrants to Liberia in 1833, which numbered approximately 100 persons at the estimated transportation cost of $35 per person. On more than one occasion slaveholders manumitted their slaves on the condition that these freed slaves would be sent to Liberia. Many times slaveholders would furnish

39 Ibid., Vol. XLI, September 24, 1831, p. 71.
40 Ibid., Vol. XLV, October 5, 1833, p. 87.
41 Ibid., Vol. XXXVIII, May 16, 1830, p. 217.
42 Ibid., Vol. XLV, November 30, 1833, p. 213.
44 Miles Weekly Register, Vol. XLIV, April 15, 1833, p. 98.
45 Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, April, 1834, pp. 362-363.
their manumitted slaves with the necessary transportation cost to Liberia. The Rev. Richard Bibb, of Kentucky, liberated 32 slaves to be sent to Liberia, furnished them with clothing, and gave them $444 in money.46

There were 4,454 free negroes and manumitted slaves transported to Liberia from 1820 to 1843. In 1843 of this number there were 1,745 in Liberia. The death rate ran high. Of the 66 negroes transported in 1820, 15 of them died during the first year; and 170 of the 639 emigrants of 1833 died during the first year.47

Since Ereckinridge's affiliation with the Colonization Society he had made a thorough study of the history of the negro race, the introduction of slavery into the United States, and the entanglement of the institution of slavery and the economic situation of the country. He endeavored to impart his views and conceptions to the public, and usually this was accomplished through the medium of essays, conversation, and orations.

On January 6, 1831, Ereckinridge delivered before the Colonization Society of Kentucky an address resplendent and eloquent in expression, and dramatic in appeal.48 The short selections quoted from it will illustrate:

46 Kentucky Gazette, Lexington, Kentucky, November 28, 1839.
48 Address of Robert J. Ereckinridge delivered before the Colonization Society, Frankfort, Ky., January 6, 1831 (Frankfort, Ky., A. G. Hodges, Printer, 1831), pp. 3-24, pamphlet.
"If there be any that now hear my voice who have aided in working out the civil redemption of this large empire; if there be any whose kindred have poured out their blood in achieving the glories which have fallen upon us; if there be any who cherish the high exploits of our mighty ancestors, and cultivate an unquenching love for the free and noble institutions which have descended to us, I beseech them to couple with the lofty emotions belonging to such scenes, the solemn recollection, that we were bondmen.' If any who hear me have been led, by the power of the everlasting God, into the liberty of his own sons, and who rejoicing in the hope of eternal life, look back upon the bondage out of which their souls have been redeemed, with unutterable gratitude to Him who gave himself for them, I pray them to bring to the discussion which lies before us, those feelings which are produced by the deep and sacred assurance, that 'our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage.'"

After this invocation Breckinridge turned his attention to Africa, the continent selected as the future home of the free negroes and emancipated slaves residing in the United States. He visualized for his listeners the ethnic history of its population, the oppression of its people, the devastation of its country, and the periods of grandeur and intellectual decline. Thence he turned to the history and the inception of slavery in America. He related the fact that during the reign of Ferdinand and that of Charles V, of Spain, their Spanish subjects were permitted to import negroes into the Americas. The Portuguese and Genoese were among the first to derive a benefit from the indulgence in slave traffic between Africa and America. As soon as the London company no longer monopolized

49 Ibid., p. 3.
the commerce of the colony of Virginia, a Dutch trading vessel, availing itself of the opportunity, brought to Virginia and sold into bondage twenty Africans. In two centuries the negro population had grown from twenty persons to two millions. He stated further that men were not slow to recognize the evils of such a society. The Quakers of Pennsylvania were quick to recognize the injustice of it; many men since then have, by every motive of duty and advantage, expressed a desire to rid the country of this human bondage. He predicted:

"In better times their counsels will be heard. When the day comes, and come it surely will, when throughout this broad empire, not an aspiration shall go up to the throne of God, that does not emanate from a freeman's heart, they will live in story, the apostles of that hallowed reign of peace, and men will quote their names to adorn the highest lessons of wisdom, and enforce, by great examples, the practice of high and virtuous actions."

He added further that many of the American colonies took action against the slave traffic. New York in 1783 laid an import duty on slaves, and Pennsylvania and New Jersey followed her policy in a few years; the federal constitution prohibited the importation of slaves into the United States after the year of 1808.

Breckinridge maintained that the American Colonization Society merely followed in the footsteps of other nations when its scheme of colonization was put into operation; the English, Dutch, and Portuguese had already set into operation similar
schemes. The idea as advanced by the American Colonization Society since 1816 was by no means new to the citizens of the country. In 1802 President Jefferson, in compliance with the request of Gov. Monroe, of Virginia, entered into unsuccessful negotiations with the English and Portuguese governments to procure a site adaptable to the colonization of American blacks in Africa.

Mr. Breckinridge declared that the American Colonization Society had been "the object of many a bitter sarcasm, of various and contradictory accusations, of illiberal and most impertinent contempt, and of grave and deep reproach." But in the face of this opposition it had grown in numbers and instilled confidence in the hearts of men. There were over one hundred and sixty auxiliaries in the several states, eleven state legislatures had recommended the Society to Congress, and the leading churches had approved of its work. The Society had sent about one thousand eight hundred colonists to Liberia. As for the colony of Liberia he said, "The germ of a great and cultivated nation has already taken root in the midst of Africa." Breckinridge stated that the Society had probably already fulfilled its object. The Society had proposed to establish a colony in Africa to which the free blacks in the United States might be imported. Such operations were in progress. The plan had been called impracticable, and it had

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51 Ibid., p. 10.
52 Ibid., p. 11.
been predicted that the Society could not procure emigrants who would consent to their being removed to Africa. Time had proved that more emigrants had applied for transportation to Liberia than the insufficient funds of the Society could provide.

Breckinridge declared that the benefits derived from the operations and the labors of the American Colonization Society in Africa were many. It would bring about the political and intellectual regeneration of Africa. Secondly, it was certain that a pagan continent would be christianized. Already the little missionary band of Liberia had started to perform its sacred duties. Another benefit derived from the colonization movement was its influence upon the illicit slave traffic still in practice. As to the question of slave traffic he stated:

"And we have undoubted authority for believing, that at least sixty thousand negroes are yearly transported from Africa, under circumstances of as great cruelty as have ever marked that traffic. The slave trade can be not otherwise effectually abolished than by shedding a stream of moral light upon the dark regions where it flourishes, so broad as to reveal it in its naked atrocity, to all its wretched victims. Nor are there any other apparent means by which this can be effected, but the full accomplishment of the plan of African Colonization." 58

Breckinridge reiterated the statement that the American Colonization Society since its origin had anticipated the time when the state legislatures and the national government would bestow their patronage upon the Society. He exhorted the

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58Ibid., pp. 18-19.
citizens of Kentucky to aim at this accomplishment. "And I confess," he said, "it is this view of the subject, which, as a slaveowner and a citizen of this Commonwealth, appears to me, to draw it so peculiarly up to the exigencies of our situation, and to lay open before us a political moral above all others clear and explicit."$^{54}$

He contended that the rights of the slaveholders were not to be interfered with by the society; the society assumed the fact that slavery was a great moral and political evil, and anticipated and cherished the hope that the scheme of colonization might be influential in the enactment of gradual emancipation. The Colonization Society had demonstrated the method by which the country could rid itself of the curse of slavery.

As to the debated question of the power of the legislature over the post nati he explained as follows:

"He who is created free, cannot, in the view of reason, even by his own voluntary act, bind himself to slavery; because no compensation can be equivalent to that from which he has parted--his liberty;........ Still less can a man barter away the rights of his unborn offspring, except in a manner subject to their confirmation or rejection at the years of maturity. In this case, every reason applies that does in the other, and these in addition, that here there could be no pretence or necessity over a being not yet created and in any case, the parent could part with no greater right to control the child, than he himself enjoyed, that is, till the child was capable in mind and body.

$^{54}$Ibid., p. 19.
of controlling itself." He added to the list of the evils of slavery the migration of labouring whites from the state, and in their stead come more slaves; during this destructive migration the slave owner is only advancing the day of his own disaster. The increase of slaves will mean a decrease in the value of slaves and a diminishing value of the products of slave labor. Upon these basic facts Breckinridge outlined the following economic situation:

"Then comes the competition with free labour from the adjacent states. This region of country is already supplied to a great extent, with articles of the first necessity, from other states, which we ought to produce as cheap as any other people, and some of which we formerly exported in immense quantities. Other articles which we still look upon as among most valuable staple productions, are brought into this state, and sold at a profit, by auction, in the streets of our villages. All this must produce a continual decline in the value of slaves, which will still decline further as they steadily grow upon the whites, until they become themselves the chief article of export. Such is already the case in large portions of several of the slave-holding states. The value of the staples of the southern states, would, for some years, keep up the value of slaves. But when the progress of events shall produce the same condition of public necessity there, that is steadily advancing here, and they will no longer receive slaves as merchandise, it requires no gift of prophecy to foresee the calamitous condition that must ensue, over the whole slave-holding region. Never was there a more fallacious idea, than that slavery
contributed any thing towards the permanent resources of a state. It is an ulcer eating its way into the very heart of the state, and which, while it remains, cannot be mitigated by any change of constitution, but would work its effects with unerring certainty under every possible condition of society." 56

Long before the actual extermination of slavery Breckinridge said:

"Domestic slavery cannot exist forever. It cannot exist long, quiet and unbroken in any condition of society, or under any form of government. It may terminate in various ways; but terminate it must. It may end in revolution; bear witness Saint Domingo. The Greek and Egyptian took other methods, effectual each, if fully acted out, and differing only in the manner of atrocity. It may end in amalgamation; a base, spurious, degraded mixture, scarcely the least revolting method of the three." 57

Other than revolution and amalgamation, Breckinridge stated that there was one more solution for the termination of slavery, and that was the restoration of the colored race to the land of their fathers. He maintained that the last solution had proved to be practicable and effectual. He, as well as many other colonizationists, was of the opinion that gradual emancipation would be the ultimate result of colonization. This speech and similar ones won for Robert J. Breckinridge a place among Kentucky's foremost orators of his time.

At the instance of Elliott Greenon, a colonizationist,

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56 Ibid., p. 23.
57 Ibid., p. 24.
Breckinridge gave his view of the relation between colonization and emancipation. Breckinridge stated that he believed the slaveholders in slave states who opposed colonization did so because the operations of the Colonization Society naturally tended to create a hostile feeling toward the institution of slavery, and that originally many slaveholders were friendly to the movement because of the fact that colonization tended to remove the overflow, thus making the institution more secure. He contended that there was a growing sentiment in the slave states favoring gradual emancipation; many slaveholders retained their mastership over their slaves not for the advantage the slaveholders might realize but rather for the good of the slave himself. Breckinridge maintained that these slaveholders were willing to relinquish this authority at any moment. He predicted voluntary emancipation on the part of individuals, religious sects, and civil communities at a later date. He stated that there were about seven hundred thousand slaves in the states of Kentucky, Virginia, and Maryland, and that these three states would soon abolish slavery. He said that Baltimore was free and had only one slave to every four families. In Virginia the section west of the Alleghenies was for emancipation; that part between these mountains and the Blue Ridge favored emancipation, but not with such a large majority; the section from the Blue Ridge to the tide-water was about equally divided on the question; the district below the tide-water, excepting the cities, favored
Breckinridge's frequent visits to Virginia had acquainted him with the status of slavery in that state. As for the status of slavery in his native state, Kentucky, and his realization of his duty and responsibility in checking the growth of slavery he said,

"Since the year 1793, there has been a large party there hostile to slavery. In 1792, my father, the late Hon. John Breckinridge, drew up the existing constitution of that state, and perhaps by his influence, and that of the famous George Nicholas, slavery was prevented from being abolished in that year. It is at once an indication of the kind of change working in that state, and a signal instance of the retributive goodness of God; that I should have been called as much perhaps as any other man, to pull down the slavery built up there, by the influence of a parent at once the most revered, and in all things else among the wisest of mankind."  

Of the large slave property left by his father Breckinridge stated that five-sevenths of it was free or such provisions were being made. He added further that about four-fifths of the voting population did not own slaves, and that one-third or one-fourth of those who did own slaves were favorable to colonization.

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58 Robert J. Breckinridge, "Colonization Favorable to Emancipation," Colonizationist and Journal of Freedom, April, 1834, pp. 366-367. This is a published letter of Robert J. Breckinridge to Elliott Cresson, February 4, 1834. Quoted.

59 Ibid., pp. 366-367.

60 Breckinridge ALS., Deed of Emancipation. On January 14, 1826, Breckinridge provided for the emancipation of his slaves. Of the twelve slaves manumitted three negro men and two negro women were manumitted December 31, 1837; one negro man, December 31, 1838; three negro men, December 31, 1847; three negro women, December 31, 1850; provisions were also made for the emancipation of the offspring of these manumitted slaves.
and emancipation. With the fervent belief that "no cruelty of bondage can suppress forever the yearnings for freedom," he assumed the duties of the emancipationist.

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Quite early in his career Breckinridge was cognizant of the existence of a certain beneficial relation between the colonization and emancipation movements to the extent "that the successful prosecution of its objects would offer powerful motives and exert a persuasive influence in favor of emancipation. And it is with this indirect effect of the society that the largest advantage is to result to America." ¹ He contended that if Kentucky was resolved never to emancipate her slaves, then the removal of the free negroes by the Colonization Society merely made room for more slaves.²

Gradually there had come into existence in Kentucky a sentiment favorable to gradual constitutional emancipation. It is not to be doubted that the colonization project gave it added impetus. Sentiment favorable and unfavorable to the new movement, that is, the calling of a convention for the purpose of amending the constitution to favor gradual emancipation, was publicly expressed in the current newspapers of the time. The pro-slavery arguments were advanced in 1830 by Robert Wickliffe in the form of a pamphlet. In order to refute these arguments

¹Address of Robert J. Breckinridge delivered before the Colonization Society of Kentucky, Frankfort, January 6, 1831, p. 10, pamphlet.
²Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Slavery," No. 4, Reporter, May 12, 1830.
and propagate other questions pertinent to slavery, Breckinridge wrote seven essays which appeared in the *Reporter*, April-June, 1830.

The arguments advanced by Wickliffe were characteristic of the pro-slavery attitude. He did not favor the calling of a convention for the purpose of amending the constitution; he believed that those who supported such a movement did so with the view in mind to perfect a provision for the emancipation of slaves. He expressed his doubt of the success of any attempt to emancipate slaves in Kentucky unless slaves were manumitted throughout the several states; he thought that the emancipation of slaves in Kentucky alone would tend to drive slaveholders with their slaves to the southern states, where slavery would continue indefinitely. He maintained that the general diffusion of slavery over an extensive territory, together with a fusion of races, would finally bring about the disappearance of the marks of color. Breckinridge bitterly denounced the amalgamation of the races. Wickliffe maintained that he was not an advocate of perpetual slavery; he would rather have the institution of slavery retained than to have slaves liberated among the freemen. He was desirous of supporting emancipation

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3 *Reporter*, February 17, 1830.


measures, but he did not think it the proper time to bring the question to an issue. He stated that the abolition of slavery would be the result of the calling of a convention at that time. In order to substantiate this argument, he cited the fact that there was not one slaveholder among ten voters in the state. If the slaveholders would maintain the slavery institution, he warned them of the dangers of calling a convention. Such arguments naturally challenged the opposition. Fortwith replies appeared from the pens of Robert J. Breckinridge, Judge John Green, and George Clark.

Judge Green, who used the pseudonym Philo C, answered Wickliffe in regard to the calling of a convention and the question of the importation of slaves into Kentucky. He stated that Wickliffe had used every opportunity to oppose the attempts in the legislature to prohibit the importation of slaves.\(^6\) Green informed the public that his desire was to show the people that the legislature had the power to prohibit the importation of slaves, except those brought in by immigrants into the state. He declared that all slaves imported contrary to these provisions became free persons. He declared that a large majority of the population was not interested in the slave trade. He maintained that Congress should not regulate the slave trade, as each state claimed and exercised the right to regulate the personal rights of individuals within its jurisdiction; Congress

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\(^6\) *Reporter*, March 3, 1830.
recognized slaves as men when they were freed; therefore, since
slaves were recognized as individuals, they were under the
jurisdiction of the state.\footnote{Report, March 10, 1830.}

George Clark expounded arguments in favor of the restriction
of the slave trade. He contended that Virginia was importing, in
large numbers, slaves from New Guinea, and that she was spreading
this pestilence over the entire country. In doing so she was
merely delaying her ultimate destruction. There were 8,000 slaves
sold from Virginia annually. He said that the restriction of
slave traffic should be enforced in order to open the way to
emancipation.\footnote{Reporter, December 16, 1829.}

Many slaveholders did not defend slavery as an economical
institution, but they did not wish to delegate to the legislature
the control of the slavery question. It was feared by these
citizens that at some future time the radical element might gain
control of the legislature, and subsequently the slaveholders
would be deprived of their slaves without compensation.

Breckinridge opposed the calling of a convention on the
ground that the existing constitution empowered the legislature
to provide for prospective emancipation in accordance with
certain stipulations.\footnote{Report, June 17, 1830.} He was of the opinion that if the
fathers of the constitution had desired to restrain the powers
of government to the extent that slavery would have been prohibited forever, the constitution would have been worded more stringently; instead, the constitution guarded to an extent the interests of the slave power. 10

He maintained that the constitution provided two methods whereby slaves might be emancipated 11 and gave the following interpretation of the debated clause:

"The General Assembly of Kentucky can never emancipate any slaves gradually, contingently, or in any case whatever; except, first, with the owners' consent, or secondly, having previously paid for them a fair price in money.

"The General Assembly is bound to pass laws for the emancipation of slaves with the consent of their owners; and has full power to pass laws for their emancipation without their consent, by first paying for them; having power also to collect the necessary funds to pay for them, by general taxation on all things subject thereto, or by special taxation of slaves only.

"The General Assembly has full power before the birth of those persons who by our constitution and laws can be held in slavery, so to modify existing laws as to allow them to remain as they are born--free.

"It follows, that the General Assembly has


11 Constitution of Kentucky, Art. III, Sec. I. "The General Assembly shall have no power to pass laws for the emancipation of slaves, without the consent of their owners, or without paying their owners, previous to such emancipation, a full equivalent in money, for the slaves so emancipated. They shall have no power to prevent emigrants to this State from bringing with them such persons as are deemed slaves by the laws of any one of the United States so long as any person of the same age or description shall be continued in slavery by the laws of this State. They shall pass laws to permit the owners of slaves to emancipate them, saving the rights of creditors, and preventing them from becoming a charge to any county in this Commonwealth."
In his fourth essay Breckinridge advocated a plan whereby the extermination of slavery might be perfected. Since it was legal to raise a revenue on luxuries, and slaves were a luxury, then in this manner sufficient funds could be raised to compensate slaveholders for their emancipated slaves and to transport these manumitted slaves annually from the country. Thus the country would be rid of slavery. The first step indispensable toward the removal of the slaves already in the United States was the prohibition of the domestic slave traffic. According to Breckinridge's observations the Traffic Act of 1815 had been disregarded, and slaves were being imported into the state as merchandise.

Another debated phase of the slavery question at this time was that of the post nati. Breckinridge advocated that the legislature exercised complete power over the post nati. "I think it is clear," he said, "that one unborn can in no sense

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13 Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Slavery," No. 4, Reporter, May 12, 1830.
15 Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Slavery," No. 4, Reporter, May 12, 1830.
He did not believe the constitution guaranteed to the slaveholder the right to hold in bondage the descendants of his slaves.

He believed that the constitution implied that there would be a time when those individuals who were slaves in other states would no longer be slaves in Kentucky. The constitution stated that the General Assembly "shall have no power to prevent emigrants to this State from bringing with them such persons as are deemed slaves by the laws of any one of the United States, so long as any person of the same age or description shall be continued in slavery by the laws of this State."17

It would necessarily develop that should the General Assembly enact legislation restricting the importation of slaves, immigrants would be compelled to conform to Kentucky's laws and would not be permitted to bring into Kentucky those persons who were slaves in other states.

He maintained that the Act of February, 1796, restricted slavery to those who were slaves in 1785 and to the descendants of the females of them.18 He did not doubt the constitutionality of the act, but he raised this question: Who were slaves in 1785?19

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16 Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Slavery," No. 5, Reporter, May 19, 1830.

17 Constitution of Kentucky, Art. VII, Sec. 1.


19 Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Slavery, No. 4, Reporter, May 12, 1830.
In the midst of the 1828–1829 session of the General Assembly Breckinridge had an attack of illness which impaired his health for the remainder of his life. In 1829 he retired from public service because of ill health. The following year he returned to public life as an independent candidate for a seat in the state legislature. The issues before the voters at this time were: the Sabbath mail question, a road bill altering the public highway system of Kentucky, and questions pertaining to the perpetuation of slavery. A communication issued from his country home, Braedalbane, dated June 8, 1830, expressed his sentiments in regard to these issues. A few days previous to this he had been asked these questions: "Are you opposed to Sunday mails?" and "Are you in favor of emancipation of slaves?" In answer to these questions Breckinridge stated that the post office establishment was a national affair; therefore, the state legislature had no power over its regulations. His views relating to the slavery questions were consistent with those he had set forth in the "Hints on Slavery." He acknowledged his authorship of these essays; he explained that the first object of the essays was to show that the legislature had the power to provide for prospective emancipation, although the legislature had no power to manumit slaves without the consent of the owners, unless the slaveholders were justly compensated for their liberated slaves. The second object of the essays was to prevent the calling of a convention by showing that the

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20 Kentucky Gazette, June 4, 1830.
existing constitution provided for the slavery issue. The closing lines of the communication summarized his sentiments thus:

"If it should hereafter be related of me, he was a man rejected by a religious people for believing that the Sabbath day should be kept Holy--by a republican community for believing that domestic slavery was a great political evil--whose children will blush at the recital."\(^1\)

A few weeks after the publication of Breckinridge's communication an article appeared in the Reporter signed "Voters" which informed the candidate that they would not support him, although on many questions they were of the same opinion as he, and that they would withhold their votes from him for fear that if elected he would oppose the existing mail regulation.\(^2\)

The labors of the candidate's supporters and Breckinridge's eloquent public discussions failed to add many to the list of his supporters. It became evident to him in the closing days of the campaign that his advocacy of gradual emancipation and his opposition to the Sunday mail regulations were robbing him of election. On August 3 he wrote an address declining the canvass of 1830, and the following day through the medium of the Reporter the voters of Fayette county learned of Breckinridge's withdrawal. He informed the readers thus: that he was convinced he could be elected only by voters who preferred to support another. He wished to avoid such a humiliation. He had

\(^1\)Report, June 10, 1830.
\(^2\)Report, June 30, 1830.
been under the false impression that his services were needed; but since the county did not need them, he would withdraw his offer to serve the people. "If my principles have overthrown me, I count it no shame to suffer in such a cause. They are true and necessary to your existence as a free people, and if God be not provoked to leave you to the government of your own blinded passions, they will surely prevail," he said.

Soon after his withdrawal from public life his interests were devoted to another calling. The West Lexington Presbytery licensed him to preach, and he removed to Princeton in 1832 in order to receive further preparation for his chosen work. While at Princeton he received a call to assume the duties as pastor of the Second Presbyterian Church, Baltimore, Maryland, where he was engaged for thirteen years. During this time he was employed in conducting controversies with Catholics. While he was in Baltimore, his labors were manifold. He was interested in furthering the temperance cause, and he engaged in many of the conflicts within the Presbyterian Church, being a leader of the Old School party. 24 He became a thorough Hebrew scholar and learned to read French, German, and Italian. He, together with the Rev. Andrew B. Cross and others, founded the Baltimore Religious and Literary Magazine. The Rev. James H. Thornwell was one of its contributors. He assisted Breckinridge in his attack against catholicism, and many of these arguments

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23 Reporter, August 4, 1830.
appeared in the magazine. The Rev. Mr. Thornwell was a professor of theology in the Theological Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina, and a Presbyterian minister who had attained a great deal of prominence in the South. These two ministers became intimate and devoted friends. B. M. Palmer, Thornwell's biographer, said of their friendship: "It is beautiful to see how they labored together in the propagation of similar views, and that no spark of rivalry or jealousy was ever struck out by their contact with each other." When Breckinridge gave up his position in Baltimore in order to accept the presidency of Jefferson College, Cannonsburgh, Pennsylvania, he unhesitatingly made it known that it was his desire to have Thornwell succeed him at Baltimore; he was disappointed when his wishes were not executed.

On the occasion of Breckinridge's visit to Kentucky in the fall of 1840, it became necessary, so he thought, to defend himself, his principles, and his church against the invectives of Robert Wickliffe. Just previous to his arrival Robert Wickliffe had delivered an address on August 10, 1840, at Lexington, in which he reviewed the Breckinridge-Wickliffe controversy and the slavery situation. On October 7, 1840, the attention of the readers of the Lexington Observer and 

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26 Speech of Robert Wickliffe, delivered at Lexington, Kentucky, August 10, 1840 (Lexington, Ky., Lexington Observer and Reporter, printer, 1840), pamphlet.
"TO THE FREE-MEN OF THE COUNTY OF FAYETTE

My Respected Countrymen—Being called in the providence of God, to visit this my native region, to which I have been for nine years almost a stranger, I have been greatly grieved and astonished to find in wide circulation, the most gross and calumnious attacks upon me by name; and in connection with my name upon systems of opinion, both political and religious, the Church of God, in which it is my lot to be a minister. I allude, as you cannot doubt, to the speech of Robert Wickliffe, Sen., made on the occasion of the defeat of his son in the late general election, and his own consequent resignation of his seat in the State Senate, and more recently printed in pamphlet form.

"It is more than ten years since I had the least connection with political life; and nearly as long since I had any personal intercourse with Mr. Wickliffe. The passions of men, especially of old men, ought to cool, and party bitterness to cease, after so long an interval. It cannot assuage the mortification of defeat, to traduce the dead, the absent, and those who no longer contend. I appear to myself to have a right to speak thus, if for no other reason, at least for this—that when, ten years ago, Mr. Wickliffe, as he still boasts, placed me in circumstances somewhat similar to those in which others have now placed his son, I submitted with composure, and without reproach, insult and slander, to the trials which he now finds it so hard to endure. The dealings of Providence are full of a sure and sacred retribution.

"It is therefore, in no spirit of personal animosity, that, after mature deliberation, extensive conference with my friends, and humble seeking of guidance from above, I have determined to defend myself, my principles, and the great interests involved in the accusations of Mr. Wickliffe; and to repel, in the very spot where they were made, charges and insinuations against myself, my friends and my church, which are equally false, malicious and injurious. I therefore desire to meet the freemen of Fayette county, my old friends and former constituents, at the Court-House, on Monday next, the 12th instant, at which time, if God permits, it
is my purpose to reply to so much of Mr. Wickliffe's speech, as it may then appear my duty to notice. With great respect,

Robert J. Breckinridge.  

Within a few days Wickliffe responded with a notice to the citizens of Fayette county. In his allusion to Breckinridge and the latter's notice he said, "Whether the gentleman has sought counsel from above or below, to assist him in concocting this specimen of tirade and vulgarity, I shall not descend to enquire." Wickliffe assured the Fayette county citizens that he would meet Breckinridge "not to hurl back upon him his gross, vulgar abuse but to satisfy both you and him, that his visions from above, of which he speaks, are from another quarter." He added further:

"No, fellow citizens, this cloak, which the gentleman wears, is not large enough to cover itself. Talk, as he may, of his being here by the providence of God and his seeking advice from above, he has come here for the very business he is enacting. He learnt that his Negro Bill has driven me from the Senate; that a new election is pending, and lo! he is here as quick as the stages will bring him, and commences a war upon me--all by advice and providence of God, of course!...........

How impious is this mere man, this mere being, to announce to you that he is here by the providence of God, and moved by his guidance in the war he wages upon me. What Christian, that feels the goodness and greatness of God, can read the boasting of this clerical chevalier, without shuddering at the impiety of the crusader. The gentleman who now

27 Lexington Observer and Reporter, Lexington, Kentucky, October 7, 1840.
28 ibid.
29 ibid.
announces himself, is not he who was once seen in places in Lexington and Frankfort where others sometimes are now seen. No. He comes bearing to you the counsels of God—a vicegerent from Heaven, charged with my utter ruin and desolation. But this boaster, fellow-citizens, will find, on Monday next, that he is a mere man, and among the same people he left in 1830—that he is just Robert J. Breckinridge, not much better than he used to be, and not a whit better than he should be, or I am much deceived."30

The above selections illustrate the bitter and caustic indulgences of these controversialists. Although in his speech of August 10 Wickliffe said, "Mr. Breckinridge has already my acknowledgments for the boldness with which he avowed his principles, and for the directness of his attacks,"31 yet he stated that Breckinridge was a "justly celebrated orator."32

This was the beginning, or rather the continuation, of a controversy between Robert J. Breckinridge and Robert Wickliffe. These controversialists became more and more unrestrained in their remarks as the accusations grew in number. Frequent indulgences had trained them to be quite liberal with their invectives, and the utterance of any caustic remark seldom failed to motivate the expected response.

The purpose of Wickliffe's address of August 10 was to discuss the negro law of 1843, or the non-importation of slaves into Kentucky, as to the constitutionality of the law and the evil effects of it. Wickliffe advocated the repeal of the negro

30Ibid.
31Speech of Robert Wickliffe, August 10, 1840, p. 4.
32Ibid., p. 16.
law on the ground that it was unconstitutional. He said, "And here I might defy any lawyer or sensible man living, to put his hand on his heart and say that the Constitution is not plainly, obviously and palpably violated." He continued: "The Constitution says that the Legislature shall have no power to prevent emigrants from bringing slave with them." He believed that the legislature had no power to prevent immigrants with their slaves from coming into the state whether the immigrants intended to become citizens or remain aliens. The act permitted immigrants to bring their slaves with them provided that the slaves were not brought into the state with the intention of their being sold; they were required to take an oath to corroborate their good intentions. Wickliffe dubbed this negro law the "abolition trap," and he maintained that the act was repeatedly being violated, as slaves were being brought in continually from the adjacent states, and many immigrants had failed to take the prescribed oath. The negro law tended to drain the slave population from the state and hindered immigrants from coming to Kentucky, and he thought that this in turn would raise the value of slave labor to such a standard that the poor white men could not profit by slave labor. The price of a slave had risen from $400 to $1,000 since the passage of the law; the manufactories of iron and salt and the

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33 Ibid., p. 9.
34 Loc. cit.
agricultural pursuits of the state were hampered. This discussion led to references to other controverted phases of the slavery question and occasioned the speech of Breckinridge on October 12, 1840.

Breckinridge welcomed this opportunity for arguing his principles. He informed his audience: "There is no spot so fit as this; no subject on which I am more willing to be tried; no man so appropriate as he who accuses me." Breckinridge contended that Wickliffe started the agitation of the slavery question in 1830 by the publication of a circular to his constituents, and again he began the agitation by attempting to get the act of 1833 repealed. Breckinridge maintained that there had always been diversities of opinion on slavery in Kentucky; they existed in 1793 and in 1796, and they still exist. Slavery was engrafted on the second constitution by no great majority and only after a bitter struggle. "The dogmas of the Abolitionists, which he now charges me with propagating," said Breckinridge, "bad as they are, are not more novel in the West, than those of Mr. Calhoun and his heated and clumsy disciple now under consideration." He maintained that the importation of slaves was the most important question relative to slavery. Those who would have slavery made eternal and those who opposed the institution desired to keep slavery

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37 Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky, October 12, 1840, p. 3, pamphlet.

38 Ibid., p. 2.
within manageable bounds. He believed that the question of the post natu was important in regard to the whole subject, "and that if decided in a certain way, it would afford a method, at once sure and safe, to make the most just and gradual solution to the case." The post natu were the source of argument in 1830, but ten years later it was the question of the importation and accumulation of slaves in Kentucky. He stated that his constitutional argument on the former question had disturbed his opponents most, and that they had been unable to meet it; its meaning had been misconstrued and misrepresented by them. Wickliffe had interpreted Breckinridge's principles on this question and related them as follows:

"The first is, that God has created all men free and equal and no power on earth can make an unborn child a slave, hence, that all negro children are, by the laws of God and nature, born free. The second is, the constitution of Kentucky does not apply to any but slaves existing at its date, and therefore masters have no authority, derivable from the constitution, over slaves born since the constitution was made."  

In answer to these allegations Breckinridge declared that he had never thought or maintained that slaves were born free when viewed in relation to the existing laws, "but only that the constitution did, and that the laws might recognize, that in the eyes of God and of reason, slavery was of human, not of

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39 Ibid., p. 9.

40 Speech of Robert Wickliffe, Lexington, Kentucky, August 10, 1840, p. 17.
He stated further that his arguments in substance were as follows:

"The constitution comprehends under the single word 'slave,' the total interest of the owner protected by it; and allows his total interest, whatever it may be, to be purchased and paid for by the State. Now, if the possibility that a female will have children, is such an interest that it vests in the master, then it is such an interest, as by the force of the terms the State can pay for and control. If it is not such an interest, then there is no question the State can control it without pay. So that either way, the power of the State over the post matri is complete; according to one construction with pay, to the other without it." 42

He maintained that the aim of the opposition to the importation question was an attempt to change an established policy, and to separate Kentucky from the policy of the central slave states in order to embrace the Southern policies; "to cut her loose from Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee and Missouri and make her a satellite of South Carolina; a faubourg of the lower Mississippi; to take, in short, a mighty step in advance against the white race, and in favor of eternal slavery." 43

Wickliffe had singled out Breckinridge as being the author


42 Ibid., p. 9.

43 Ibid., p. 16.
of the non-importation act. Breckinridge endeavored to
disprove this statement. He declared that the act was passed
after his retirement from the legislature, and at the time of its
passage he was not a resident of the state. But he continued, "I
confess I have always desired to see slavery in Kentucky kept
within manageable bounds; and therefore would have aided
cordially in preventing the importation of slaves, by all proper
means, allowed under the Constitution."  

Wickliffe had called the 1833 act an "abolition flag" and
said that it was an implement in the hands of the abolitionists.
It is apparent that these disputants differed also on the
definition of abolitionism. Wickliffe defined an abolitionist
as "one who intends to abolish negro slavery, by an immediate or
a slow process—by a direct attack upon the tenure of slavery,
or by an indirect mode." Breckinridge declared that
abolitionists stood for immediate emancipation. He contended
that the second fundamental of modern abolitionism was the
claim of all political and civil rights and privileges for the
blacks; abolitionists had the most hostile feeling against all
schemes for the removal of any of the blacks, by colonization

44 Speech of Robert Wickliffe, Lexington, Kentucky, August 10, 1840, p. 35.
45 Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky, October 12, 1840, p. 16.
46 Speech of Robert Wickliffe, Lexington, Kentucky, August 10, 1840, p. 17.
or otherwise. In his endeavor to show that he was not an abolitionist Breckinridge declared, "Against all this, I have written, spoken, printed and acted from the moment the party was organized." He asserted that both he and Wickliffe were of the same opinion on some phases of their hostility to abolition. Both were against immediate emancipation, and both opposed equal rights for the blacks and whites; but on the question of colonization they differed. "But he is a cold, and I a very warm, friend of African colonization; he would prevent and I would encourage the immigration of the black race from Kentucky; and to the whole extent of this difference, his is with and I against Garrison, Thompson, Birney and abolition." The third principle of abolitionism is the advocacy of amalgamation. "Against this horrid doctrine," he said, "I have fought without intermission. For it Mr. Wickliffe is deliberately and fully committed." Breckinridge repeated that in 1830 he had spoken against such a doctrine; Wickliffe had advocated it.

In the spring of 1847 Breckinridge had received a call to accept the pastorate of the First Presbyterian Church, Lexington, Kentucky. While considering the acceptance of this invitation, he kept in mind the slavery situation in that state. If he

47 Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Lexington, Kentucky October 12, 1846, p. 23.
48 Ibid. cit.
49 Ibid., pp. 23-24.
should return to his native state, he realized that he would have a part, perhaps no small part, in organizing and guiding those men of the same political opinions who sincerely believed that the proper time had arrived to invest the legislature with the power to provide for the gradual emancipation of slaves. The value of such a leadership was acknowledged by Breckinridge’s friends, who did not hesitate to inform him.

At this time a friend wrote Breckinridge: “Have you made up your mind about the call to Lexington? Kentucky will draw you home some day, even if you should not hear her voice now. Those who are trying now to prepare the people of the State for the gradual emancipation of slavery, will turn to you for help; and if your residence were among them, you might have it in your power to afford them essential aid.”

By accepting the pastorate, Breckinridge was not only accepting the call from his church, but he was also answering the call of his fellow emancipationists. As soon as he established his residence in Lexington, this conscientious leader set about the realization of the plans and desires of a hopeful minority. The ideas advanced by the emancipationists were by no means new, but the emancipationists as a party lacked unity and leadership. The party had never taken any concerted action

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50 Breckinridge to Samuel Steel, Hillsborough, Ohio, dated March 17, 1847.
worthy of attention. Plans for emancipation had rather enthusi-
astically accompanied the colonization movement. Many prominent
citizens of Kentucky had favored gradual or immediate emancipation
in the early days of the colonization movement. This idea was
supported by the churches of Kentucky and especially so by the
Presbyterians as a religious organization. This religious
denomination issued an address in 1835, proposing plans for the
instruction and emancipation of slaves. The address declared
that emancipation should be gradual and systematic. A specific
period should be set for each slave at the end of which a
termination of his servitude should result. 51

From 1830 to 1840 many of the advocates of emancipation
lost interest in the movement or withdrew entirely. According
to Henry Clay, who was a friend of emancipation and colonization,
the activity of the northern abolitionists was partially
responsible for this reaction. He said:

"Instead of advancing that cause (emancipation)
by their efforts, they have thrown back for a half
century, the prospect of any species of emanci-
pation of the African race, gradual or immediate,
in any of the states. The proposition in Kentucky
for a gradual emancipation, did not prevail; but
it was sustained by a large and respectable minority." 52

He stated further that the growth of this minority was arrested
by the operations of the abolitionists. Consequently, all

51 R. L. Stanton, The Church and the Rebellion (N. Y., Derby &

52 Calvin Colton, Life and Times of Henry Clay, 2 vols.
prospects had been abandoned for the promotion of gradual emancipation. The abolition movement had alarmed many of the followers of emancipation. Henry Clay attributed to the Northern abolitionists the failure of the emancipationists to succeed in getting a constitutional convention called in 1836. 53

The preliminary work of the emancipationists was to gain the approval of the voters of Kentucky to call a convention for the purpose of amending the existing constitution. The constitution provided that the calling of a convention should be twice sanctioned by the majority of the people of the state. As soon as a majority of the people had approved the convention bill, the General Assembly directed a similar poll the following year during the general election. If the people approved the convention bill for the second time, the General Assembly was then authorized to issue a call for the election of delegates to the constitutional convention. In August, 1847, 92,639 voters of the total 137,511 persons voting approved the calling of a convention. The following year the question was again submitted to the people, and 101,828 persons out of a total of 141,620 individuals voting favored the convention bill. 54

Subsequently an act was passed by the General Assembly, January 13, 1849, which provided that the convention should convene October 1, 1849; there were to be as many delegates to the

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53 *Hib.* , pp. 194-195.
convention as there were representatives in the General Assembly. 55

At the time the convention bill was before the voters Breckinridge wrote to a friend in Pennsylvania: "We are about to have a great conflict in this State, over our new constitution; and the war is already begun about slavery." 56 As to the outcome he said: "It is impossible to foresee any result of an agitation, that will last from this time, till next August; but the prospects, at present, are not satisfactory to those who desire some serious amelioration of the institution of slavery in this State." 57

Breckinridge understood the seriousness and the immensity of the task about to be performed. "I shall have," he wrote, "a very difficult part to perform; and am not yet decided what to do. On the one hand, we might gain all we could desire; on the other we might set things back a century; and perhaps some wise compromise may be our wise and safe course." 58

It was evident that the Emancipation party would have a terrific struggle. The party organization was small, and it had the opposition of two strong parties. Breckinridge informed his

55 Acts of Kentucky, 1848, pp. 3-4.
56 Breckinridge MSS., Letter from Robert J. Breckinridge to S. R. Williams, Cannonsburg, Pa., dated November 17, 1848.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
correspondent, Samuel Steel, as to the status of the parties of
the state in regard to the slavery question. "There are three
parties in this State," he said, "the pro-slavery party--the
emancipation party--and the party hostile to both and middle to
both, favoring no increase of slavery and no measure to put it
beyond future control--but hostile to every thing looking to
present action, in the way of emancipation." He stated
further that the third named party composed the bulk of the
state and that the Democrat party had, for the most part, united
with the pro-slavery party.

The House of Representatives expressed the sentiment of
the state on the slavery question in the form of resolutions
during the month of February, 1849. These resolutions were
in general hostile to emancipation.

The exciting canvass was launched early in the year. A
meeting was held in the first congressional district early in
February, with James Guthrie, of Louisville, as chief speaker.
He was an opponent of emancipation.

In many counties the Whig and Democrat parties united in
their efforts to oppose emancipation. The press usually
referred to the meetings of these allied parties as anti-

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60 Breckinridge MSS., Letter from Robert J. Breckinridge to
Samuel Steel, dated April 17, 1849.
61 Loc. cit.
63 Daily Commonwealth, Frankfort, Kentucky, February 6, 1849.
64 Louisville Daily Journal, April 26, 1849.
emancipation meetings. Such a meeting convened at Jeffersontown, April 7, and nominated William C. Bullitt and David Meriwether as candidates for the convention from Jefferson county.\

The Mason and Boyle county Emancipation meetings raised only the question of the importation of slaves, which they regarded as being a compromise measure. Garrett Davis, who believed no change should be made in the relation of master and slave, was a Bourbon county candidate.

Meetings favoring emancipation were held throughout the various counties during April for the purpose of advancing the emancipation cause and appointing delegates to the state Emancipation convention to be held at Frankfort, April 25. The citizens of Fayette county, who were opposed to the perpetuation of slavery in Kentucky, assembled at Lexington, April 14. Henry Clay and Robert J. Breckinridge addressed the meeting. Breckinridge prepared and offered for adoption resolutions to the effect that the existing hereditary domestic slavery was contrary to the rights of mankind—"opposed the fundamental principles of free government—Inconsistent with a state of sound morality—hostile to the prosperity of the Commonwealth, it ought not to be made perpetual"; and that the convention

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64 Ibid., April 9, 1849.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., April 10, 1849.
67 Louisville Daily Journal, April 16, 1849.
68 Ibid.
which would meet to amend the constitution would afford the opportune time to provide for the amelioration of slavery conditions "in such way as shall be found practicable to the slaves themselves." These resolutions were adopted unanimously. There were thirty delegates appointed to attend the Frankfort state Emancipation convention; Breckinridge was included in this number. Twenty-one of these thirty delegates were ministers, and most of them were slaveholders.  

In the intervening period between the Lexington meeting and the Frankfort Emancipation convention Breckinridge made a careful survey of the political situation and the general attitude of the people in regard to emancipation. He observed that the newspapers of the state were hostile to emancipation. Most of them he thought were under pro-slavery influence. From his study of the situation he believed that the Frankfort convention would adopt these principles to be engrafted on the new constitution: Absolute prohibition of the importation of any more slaves into the state; the reservation of the power by the people to effect a system of gradual, prospective emancipation when the community should desire it. Breckinridge repeated that personally he was of the opinion that some system of emancipation should be inserted in the constitution; then if the Emancipation party was successful, they would have gained what they thought right. If they lost, they still had a chance of obtaining the

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69 Loc. cit.
70 Martin, op. cit., p. 130.
next best thing, that is, a provision empowering the legislature to effect emancipation at some future time. 71 He said, "If we go for all we desire, our opponents, in order to defeat us, will be apt to concede to the popular wishes, as much as possible, and may come up, even to our second ground." 72 Later, when the question arose as to whether a specific plan for emancipation should be incorporated in the constitution, he spoke against it. In consideration of the public sentiment and the hostility of many Democrats and Whigs, he thought that a more conciliatory course should be pursued. 73

The Frankfort Emancipation meeting, with Ben Monroe as chairman, appointed delegates to the state Emancipation convention. Resolutions were adopted favoring gradual emancipation and colonization, but the existing slave population was not to be affected by emancipation and colonization, "and that the new constitution be so framed that whenever public sentiment should demand such a change it might be effected without calling a convention to change the constitution." 74 The assembly also favored the incorporation of the non-importation law of 1833 in the constitution, and those slaves brought into the state contrary to these provisions were to be set free.

71 Breckinridge MSS., Letter from Robert J. Breckinridge to Samuel Steel, dated April 17, 1849.
72 Ibid.
73 Louisville Weekly Courier, May 8, 1849.
74 Louisville Daily Journal, April 25, 1849.
Emancipation meetings were held in various counties, and all adopted similar resolutions in regard to the question of slavery.

One hundred fifty emancipation delegates assembled at Frankfort, April 25, 1849, for the purpose of uniting the party and adopting a platform relative to the slavery question. Twenty-three counties were represented. Henry Clay was elected president of the state convention. The convention was divided in opinion as to whether the Emancipation party should draw up a specific plan for gradual emancipation to be engrafted on the new constitution, or whether the legislature should be empowered to provide for emancipation at some future date. Breckinridge, as one of the spokesmen for the latter plan, spoke on the debated subject as follows:

"It is I believe, a hopeless task to strive to get a specific plan engrafted in the new Constitution; but it is, I verily believe, a most promising and hopeful task, to look to the plan by action hereafter through the Legislature. Let us struggle to make the policy since 1833, the policy of the State in all future time, and to provide in the new constitution, for the adoption of such plan as may be deemed wisest by the Legislature--Is it not indeed as bold to demand the right to do the thing at a proper time and in a proper way, as it is to demand the right that it shall be done at once in the constitution? If we have the power to do the latter now--may we not hope to accomplish the former at a future day? It is infinitely more easy to attempt to carry out the plan proposed by the committee, than to move 140,000 voters now to the proposed amendment.

Ibid., April 28, 1849.
to the Constitution. To ask that the measure we desire may be engrailed in the Constitution now, and to ask that the right and power to do the same thing be given to the Legislature are very different things. The latter may be hoped for, the former I regard as impossible."70

Breckinridge stated further that the Emancipation party was opposed by the united forces of both of the great parties as far as party organization was concerned. It was to be considered that a large majority of the slaveholders were opponents of the Emancipation party, though a few had joined the ranks of the emancipationists. "A large majority of the voters of the State," he said, "are non-slaveholders. They too as a class have been poisoned against us."77 These citizens had been appealed to, and they had been told that the emancipationists proposed to rob the slaveholder of his property. "They have been told that we disregard the vested right of the master in the slave--all these things are told the non-slaveholder,"78 but he said that their opponents failed to inform him that the highest property a person can have is the property in himself. He explained to the convention delegates that they could not hope to attain success unless the emancipationists could dissociate the slaveholder from the non-slaveholder. He believed that it was their duty to convince the non-slaveholder that emancipation would add prosperity and glory to Kentucky. "Emancipation," he

76 Louisville Weekly Courier, May 3, 1849.
77 Ibid.
78 loc. cit.
asserted, "can never be accomplished otherwise--yet we are asked to go for emancipation at once--to strike boldly and blindly for a clause in the Constitution for prospective emancipation." 79

The convention was also addressed by W. L. Breckinridge, C. M. Clay, and others.

The Louisville Weekly Courier said of Breckinridge's address before the convention: "There seems to be but one opinion of the speech of the Rev. R. J. Breckinridge, before the Convention of Emancipators and that is that it was the most eloquent, impressive and forcible address ever heard by those who were fortunate enough to be present." 80

Breckinridge prepared and presented a document to the convention, which served as a platform for the party. 81 After being amended it was adopted with only one dissenting vote. The amended document reads as follows:

1. "Believing that involuntary hereditary slavery, as it exists by law in this State, is injurious to the prosperity of the Commonwealth, inconsistent with the fundamental principles of free government, contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and adverse to a pure state of morals--we are of the opinion that it ought not to be perpetuated in the Commonwealth." 82

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79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
82 Louisville Daily Journal, April 28, 1849.
2. "That any scheme of emancipation ought to be prospective, operating exclusively upon negroes born after the adoption of the scheme, and connected with colonization."

3. Recommended the following points:

1. The absolute prohibition of the importation of any more slaves to Kentucky.

2. The complete power in the people of Kentucky to enforce and perfect, in or under the new Constitution, a system of gradual prospective emancipation of slaves.

The greater part of the discussion and debate centered in the clause concerning a system of gradual emancipation. Finally the debated question was left in the form of the second part of No. 3. Thus the Emancipation convention was adjourned without agreeing upon or adopting a definite scheme of emancipation. In substance the convention had reached the agreement that the new constitution should authorize the people of the state to perfect a system of gradual emancipation, which was to operate exclusively upon negroes born after the adoption of an emancipation scheme; the new constitution was to prohibit the importation of any more slaves into Kentucky.

Following the state Emancipation convention many meetings were held in the different counties to further the principles

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Louisville Weekly Courier, May 5, 1849.
of emancipation. Another emancipation meeting was held in Lexington, May 12. Breckinridge again addressed the assembly. He presented resolutions, which were adopted, to the effect that the Lexington meeting adopt those resolutions concurred in by the Frankfort meeting, and that Henry Clay ought to allow his name to be used in Fayette County as a candidate for the constitutional convention. Clay expressed his approval of the emancipation cause, but he declined the nomination on the plea that he was then serving as United States Senator. A committee was appointed, and Clay was a member of the committee, which nominated Robert J. Breckinridge and Col. William Rodes as candidates to the constitutional convention.

The Louisville emancipation candidates were Captain Coleman, David L. Beatty, and James Speed.

As soon as the Frankfort convention adjourned, the leaders began to canvass the state in order that the emancipationists might be successful in getting their candidates elected to the constitutional convention.

During the canvass Breckinridge wrote an essay on "The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution," in which

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84 Louisville Weekly Courier, May 26, 1849.
85 Ibid.
86 Louisville Weekly Courier, June 23, 1849.
he reviewed the principles put forward by the Emancipation party; he stated arguments favoring the non-importation of slaves into Kentucky, outlined a plan whereby the Constitution could perfect and enforce a plan of emancipation, which he regarded as being a moderate concession to the pro-slavery party. Also in the address he stated that slavery ought not to be increased, nor should the Commonwealth perpetuate it through the medium of a convention to meet presently for the purpose of amending the constitution.

"But, on the other hand, people of Kentucky ought, by means of that convention, 1. Absolutely to prohibit the importation of any more slaves into this State. 2. And, through it, retain in their own hands the complete power, now held by the call of the convention, to enforce and perfect, in or under the new Constitution, a system of Emancipation." And further still he said, "This power of Emancipation, thus retained, should be so guarded, in the Constitution itself, that it shall be exercised, 1. Only prospectively; 2. Only gradually; 3. Only in connection with the removal from the State of the emancipated slaves." He maintained that the power of emancipation, and the exercise of it, should be by the community itself, and not by ordinary legislation, but as an expression of the sovereign will of the community:

1. "Either by means of a provision in the Constitution, allowing specific amendments, 89
if such a clause should be inserted, according to the original plan of the Convention party:

2. "Or, under the constitution by means of an express provision in it, allowing the sense of the people to be taken in the question, if the new Constitution should be found without what is called the new Clause." 90

He said, "I oppose, absolutely, the importation of any more slaves into Kentucky. He maintained that the act of 184991 was part of a system designed to terrify and defeat the Emancipation party of the state. 92 He gave the reasons for his opposition to the importation of slaves into the state as follows: there were already enough slaves in Kentucky; an unlimited importation would necessarily diminish the value and injure the quality of slaves; it would endanger the pecuniary interests of the state; since seven-eighths of the people of Kentucky did not own slaves and a majority of the whites sought their maintenance by toil, the domestic slave trade would naturally reduce the whites to poverty. He maintained that in the new constitution the power over slaves should be retained by the people. He believed that the people should express themselves on the subject in the constitution about to be framed. It was generally estimated that one person out of seven in the state was a slaveholder, or

90 Loc. cit.
91 Acts of Kentucky, 1848, p. 21. This act repealed the non-importation act of 1833.
20,000 out of 140,000 voters were slaveholders. These 20,000
slaveholders held slaves to the value of about $60,000,000. He
did not believe that these people should be deprived of this
wealth, but the new constitution should protect this property.
He declared that the Emancipation party should support "no other
emancipation than that which should be prospective, and operate
exclusively on slaves born after the plan had been matured,
voted by the people and commenced its legal existence." He
contended that the institution of slavery did not benefit those
who did not own slaves; in fact, it was usually considered an
evil by them. The rights of laborers were as sacred as the
rights of property. These people should guard their political
power and means of livelihood.

In his appeal to the Commonwealth he said, "Should Kentucky
perpetuate an institution that the civilized world, except
fifteen slave States, condemn and denounce?" As to the status
of slaves he said, "They are property; but still they are our
fellow-men, our fellow-sinners." According to Breckinridge
slavery as it existed represented these aspects: the rights of
property were abolished, as to slavery; the rights of slaves as
individuals were entirely unknown except as to the interest of
the master and the public; there was no recognition of the

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93, 94, 95, ibid.
institution of marriage among the slaves, and the relation
between parent and child was recognized only when determining
the question of property; yet God had ordained all these rights.

He maintained that the Emancipation party was willing to
concede in the new constitution the principle of slavery, and
let it exist in Kentucky upon certain reasonable concessions
and compromises. "For my part," he said, "I so greatly desire
to see this noble State made the exclusive abode of the free
white man, that one of the leading motives of all my conduct
connected with this subject, has been the hope of substituting
the race of negro slaves with the race of free whites."96

Henry Clay sustained Breckinridge's views on emancipation.
He wrote to Richard Pindell, February 17, 1849, and outlined
a plan of emancipation and colonization. He maintained that
emancipation should be gradual; the manumitted slaves should
be removed to a colony; the transportation costs to such a
colony should be defrayed by a fund to be raised from the
labor of each emancipated slave. He believed that a definite
time should be specified, and at that time the emancipation
of slaves should be effective. Clay suggested the year of
1855 or 1860 for the definite period when gradual emancipation
should be put into operation.97

96Ibid.
97Calvin Colton, Last Seven Years of the Life of Henry Clay
A vigorous campaign was conducted throughout the state under the leadership of such emancipationists as John C. Young, Robert J. Breckinridge, William L. Breckinridge, George Robertson, James Speed, T. F. Marshall, John R. Underwood, and many other prominent persons. The ranks of the emancipators were composed of all classes of the opponents of slavery. Cassius M. Clay represented the more radical group, while Robert J. Breckinridge and Henry Clay represented the more moderate and rational groups respectively. But this able leadership was not sufficient to lead the party to victory. The Emancipation party polled over 10,000 votes in the state, but it did not elect a single candidate. It was estimated that not more than a dozen delegates elected to the convention favored emancipation in any form. The Louisville weekly Courier attributed this failure to the "present prospects of emancipation" and the hostility of both Whig and Democrat parties.

The convention convened October 1, 1849; James Guthrie was elected president. The new constitution retained most of the provisions pertaining to slavery; a new free negro clause was


99 Young, op. cit., p. 54.

100 Louisville weekly Courier, August 15, 1849.
For a time after the election the Emancipation party was left in a state of defeat. There was an attempt to reorganize the party and resume its work. The interest in the emancipation movement cooled, and many withdrew from the party, for the constitutional method of amendment would defer too long the operations of emancipation. It is true that Cassius M. Clay made the gubernatorial race in 1851 on the emancipation ticket, but the important part played by the party at this time was its position as a balance between the Whig and Democrat parties of the state. The party at this time polled only 3,000 votes.\textsuperscript{102} The emancipationists were destined to await the extermination of slavery by a far different method.

\textsuperscript{101}Constitution of Kentucky, Article X, Sec. 2. "The General Assembly shall pass laws providing that any free negro or mulatto hereafter immigrating to, and any slave hereafter emancipated in, and refusing to leave this State, or having left, shall return and settle within this State, shall be deemed guilty of felony, and punished by confinement in the penitentiary thereof."

CHAPTER III
A UNIONIST

It was perhaps during the eventful and turbulent days when the country was bewildered by those unanswerable questions of state rights, nullification, secession, and then finally the great crisis, the war, that Breckinridge rendered the greatest service to his state. He took a decided position on each of these enigmatic questions; he was a devoted citizen and an ardent unionist. Kentucky, so strategically located, was destined to play a precarious role in the theatre of the war, and Breckinridge, a man with so active and versatile a mind, had a part to play.

The defeat of the Emancipation party was followed closely by the organization and the formation of the Know-Nothing party in Kentucky. Breckinridge, as a leader of the Emancipationists, and the leaders of the old Whig party welded their ranks into a strong party machine for the campaign of 1856. Breckinridge was sought now not so much for his slavery views as for his bitter attacks against catholicism. Breckinridge said of this party:

"What I behold is a vast and apparently spontaneous uprising of American nationality. Beneath that we behold the restoration of that primeval spirit of protestant civilization in which the country itself was originally created; and still beneath that the renewal of that profound sense of overwhelming necessity of our national union which

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This old Whig and Know-Nothing group produced the constitutional Union party and supported John Bell, of Tennessee, as its presidential candidate. Breckinridge said that in this 1860 election a minority in the free states voted against Lincoln and that this minority was thoroughly against the principles of the Republican party. He believed that there were far more Whigs and members of the American party who voted for Lincoln than there were Republicans. He said that it was true the Republican party was made up of many patriotic men who preferred the peace and security of the country to the triumph of their party. He explained that John C. Breckinridge, then vice-president and senator elect, was supported by the southern wing of the Democrat party as presidential nominee in 1860; he maintained that this acceptance had caused John C. Breckinridge to identify himself with the secession party, "to which we are satisfied he did not at that time belong. They who nominated him neither expected nor desired to elect him." The object of such a scheme was to

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3 Coulter, op. cit., p. 174.


provide a means by which the party might carry the electoral votes of the Border States, "and in this manner draw closer to the South the Democrat party in those States." He asserted that John C. Breckinridge's acceptance of the nomination was a grave political mistake; it ultimately sealed his destiny, "and to us, who were bound to him by so many ties, it may be permitted to believe that his fall was not premeditated, and to say that it was a national calamity." In the election of 1860 he was beaten by a large majority. The vote of the state went for Bell. He declared that Breckinridge was "seduced into accepting a nomination for the presidency by a disloyal faction." He contended that many were mistaken in their estimate of the presidential candidates of 1860. Douglas had proved to be a far more patriotic man than had been supposed, while Bell had proved unworthy of the support of his party; "Major Breckinridge proved to be a mere instrument used for a special purpose by the leaders of a conspiracy, instead of the leader himself of the great State Rights party." He declared that Lincoln was far less a partizan than those who elected him had supposed him to be, and he was a greater patriot than his opponents had believed. The principles of a free government required that the country accept him as the choice of the American people.

6Loc. cit.
7Loc. cit.
8Ibid., p. 115.
9Loc. cit.
Breckinridge was always ready to defend ably his attitude and his advocacy of certain principles which he deemed to be right. When any one expressed conflicting views or attacked his views, a defense of his attitude and principles could be expected to follow. At this particular time it happened to be W. H. Seward, then senator from New York, who unhesitatingly attacked Breckinridge in an address before a meeting of the Republican party, 1855. Breckinridge's defense appeared in the form of a letter in which he said, "You have seen fit to devote an entire paragraph to me, a private person, as if I were of myself a power to be classed with the principalities and dominions amidst which you expatiate." The letter was devoted to a defense of the accusations exposed in the following quoted paragraph from Seward's address:

"Last comes one who, with seeming meekness asks us to consider whether it is wise to jeopard the safety and happiness of twenty-five millions of white men in vain effort to mitigate the sufferings of only three millions of negroes. Humane, cautious, paternal, conscientious man! I might join issue and ask where, in the ethics either of Government or Christianity, you find authority to hold three millions of men in bondage, to promote the welfare or even to secure the safety of twenty-five millions of other men? But that argument belongs to the Abolitionists of slavery, who do not reckon me in their number, and whose objects in this election are far more comprehensive than those of the Republican Party, which I defend. I leave

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10 This is a published letter from Robert J. Breckinridge to W. H. Seward, dated November 5, 1855. A copy of the letter is in the Kentucky Library, Western State Teachers College, Bowling Green, Kentucky. The clipping is probably taken from a Louisville paper.
the rights and the interests of the slaves in the states to their own care and that of their advocates; I simply ask whether the safety and the interests of twenty-five millions of free non-slaveholding white men ought to be sacrificed or put in jeopardy for the convenience or safety of three hundred and fifty thousand slaveholders! I hear no answer."\textsuperscript{11}

Breckinridge reiterated the question whether or not the interests of twenty-five millions of free American should be sacrificed for the interest of the slave population. "I put the question to you," he said, "not as if I were a defender of slavery and you its mortal enemy, but I put it as one patriot to another, as one freeman to another," and it was a question he maintained that "nothing but desperate fanaticism on your side, or desperate necessity on ours, will ever permit to be answered except in one way."\textsuperscript{12} He continued further that it was a question that had required an answer many times and would be answered again and again, and so far it had been answered in such a manner as to save the country. He added:

\begin{quote}
"The exposition of the ethics of Government ought not to be wholly strange to you; and there I take issue with you--if you mean what you insinuate, but shrink from uttering. Is it so, that any conceivable end of Government, much less the grand and immediate ends of it as truly held by the American people, demand that slavery as it exists amongst us shall be abolished in defiance of the 'welfare,' and in utter disregard of the 'safety' of the Nation? Do you mean that? I so understand you. That I understand to be treason against\textsuperscript{12}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}
if not under the Constitution; and, what is worse, treason against the country. And the end or it must be that the North must sweep your 'Great Republican Party' into the Besom of destruction, or we must settle your ethics of government with the sword.\textsuperscript{13}

He maintained that if these were the doctrines of the Republican party, then the North was more deeply concerned in abolishing the party than in abolishing slavery. He did not believe that any people could endure or any form of government could tolerate such a party without clothing itself in despotism; safety was the first condition on which society was based; its welfare was the second. He declared thateward denied the principles of both of these conditions in his ethics of government. "If you do not mean all this, you have either falsely stated the principles and aims of your party, or you are ignorant of the forces of the terms you use, and your personal taunts degenerate into mere impertinences,"\textsuperscript{14} he said. Breckinridge declared that it was only the ethics of tyrants that could induce sixteen Northern States to degrade and oppress the fifteen Southern States, and all because a fraction of the southern population was reduced to a condition of servitude, which the Republican party did not like as well as the condition of servitude existing in the North. He asked:

"What is it you profess to blame us for, but that which you are yourself striving to accomplish, to a far greater extent, and in a far more aggravated form; for is not the independence of the South as utterly

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid.
incompatible with your principles, as the freedom of the slave can possibly be with ours. You speak with great bitterness of the repeal of the Missouri compromise, as an act covering all who took any part in it, and especially the South, with dishonor. And why? Because, as you allege, it was an act of bad faith committed by one party to a compact to the injury of the other party. And pray, sir, what then shall be said of your Great Republican party, the very instinct of whose action—sole end of whose existence—as interpreted by yourself, is eternal bad faith to the Constitution itself and to eleven Commonwealths, for the single purpose of securing its own supremacy and that of the North, in utter disregard of the interests of the whole Confederacy considered as one great nation, and with the deliberate purpose to destroy the whole South, if that shall be necessary to the accomplishment of your object? It needed but two aggravations to give to your principles a cast utterly revolting; and you have added both. For you carefully teach that the principles of this party are not the product of modern times, or of any sudden outburst produced by any recent events; but that, stimulated, indeed, of late, they are, nevertheless, fundamental, primeval, and perpetual at the North, running side by side with all their sacred pledges to a contrary intent, from the earliest period of our history. And then to gloss over this transcendent, hereditary pervidy, which you seek to fasten on the memory of your ancestors and the character of your people, you profess immense piety towards God, and boundless fraternity for the poor slave."

Breckinridge considered the repeal of the Missouri compromise a grave error on the part of both the Democratic party and the South. He explained that he did all he could as a private citizen to prevent the error. As a constituent he prevailed upon his congressman and kinsman to exercise his
influence in this direction. He was of the opinion that this congressman, if he had desired, could have exercised as much influence as any other congressman in preventing its passage. But he believed that the repeal of the compromise was nothing compared with the principles and purposes that Seward avowed. He contended that Seward attempted to make the people believe that there was no difference in allowing all the territories to do as they thought best in regard to slavery, or in dissolving the Union on the slave line.

Seward maintained that he was not an abolitionist and made a distinction between the abolitionists and the Republican party. Breckinridge asserted that the distinction was this:

"That the Abolitionists will not allow of any slavery, while the Great Republicans will not allow of any more. They, with Mr. Sumner at their head, will attack it everywhere; you, at the head of the Great Republicans, will attack it everywhere, except in the present Slave States."16

Or he said that Sumner would oppose slavery at all hazards; Seward would oppose it at the hazard of the dissolution of the Union. He asked Seward if he believed that the Southern states, who believed that their existence was being threatened, "which have arms in their hands, and guarantees as old as the country, and as firm as common blood and common glory can make oaths, compacts, and constitutions, will permit sixteen other Commonwealths to degrade and destroy them on such a distinction

16 Ibid.
as this?"  

On the supposition that the Southern states were wrong, should these states consent to restrictions and repressions? He asked, "Did any fifteen States ever permit any sixteen States to smother them in this delectable way, and upon such precious distinction as this, upon the face of our earth?" 

Breckinridge stated that it was the doctrines of men, and not the slavery question which were moving the country to a certain ruin; slavery did not afford any ground for civil war and the separation of the states, "and every good, wise and patriotic man, let his opinions about slavery be what they may, ought to be ready to crush every political party which intimates that it does." 

Breckinridge reminded Seward that the two different postures of the North and South must be remembered, the North as having no slaves and the South with slaves. Therefore, the South was liable to a pressure from the North, and under this pressure "the South may not only be expected to do, but may be obliged to do, what she would gladly avoid if she were fairly and justly treated."  

This was not the original situation. Under the Confederacy and then under the federal constitution slavery bore no obstacles to the growth of the Union. The North

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17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
has changed her opinions about slavery; she felt that she was entitled to the privilege of subjugating the South to her will. For this purpose the North originated parties and dominated legislation in a manner wholly devoid of the interests of the South. It became a "contest for supremacy at the North; for safety at the South. It is a mere accident that slavery should be the immediate subject of the conflict; an extremely dangerous accident, indeed, from the nature of that institution." He predicted that these policies of the North when put into effect would make civil war the only outlet for the South. He asked Seward whether it was best to fight the North immediately, or to fight both the North and Slavery at some time in the future. He said, "It is for the North to say whether she values her supremacy over the South at such a rate as this, and whether making slavery the pretext, she will pursue it into blood." The people of Kentucky had refused to initiate a system of gradual emancipation because they would not separate themselves for the slave states of the South; there is no reason for believing that they had changed, and that they would not stand by each other. "At the last extremity they will perish sword in hand, but they will never submit to be dishonored or subjugated. They will never subvert the institutions of their country, nor will they permit you to do it, without a struggle worthy of

\[21\text{Ibid.} \]

\[22\text{Ibid.} \]
their great descent." He asserted that these were not threats, but they were solid arguments, and thoughts that should be carefully meditated and sincerely considered.

The President had proclaimed January 4, 1861, the day of National Humiliation. On that day in Lexington, Kentucky, Breckinridge delivered an address in view of the impending evils threatening the nation. He believed that the first of these evils, which the people of the country should beseech God to avert, was the annihilation of the nation itself; the chief aim of the people should be the preservation of the American Union. There were illimitable blessings connected with the preservation of the Union; while the process of destruction involved many evils. He maintained that the evils of destruction had been demonstrated by South Carolina's attitude and actions, or the exercise of those disputed rights, nullification and secession. According to him the power of nullification, providing it existed, would be a right exercised within the Union; it was temporary, and it would ultimately end the difficulty upon which it arose. The action for the termination of the difficulty might be accomplished through the medium of compromises, by repeal, the modification of some obnoxious law, or by a judicial decision; "or--which is the true remedy--instead of Nullification.

23 Ibid.
by an appeal to the people at the polls, who are the source of all power in free governments." 25 Breckinridge believed that state rights in its original form was indispensable to the preservation of the political system, "and that the opposite mode of interpreting our political duties and rights and remedies, terminates in subjugating the States to the General Government, and in subjugating both the General Government and the exposition of every political principle to the Supreme Court of the United States." 26 He stated further that secession was the extreme reaction between the several states and between an individual state and the national government; when an interpretation was contrary to immense parties and interests, society became excited to such a degree that it was difficult to manage. He said, "You have therefore this perilous and extraordinary claim of the right of secession under this extreme reaction; differing absolutely from the idea of the old States Rights party, and differing absolutely even from nullification itself." 27 He defined secession as being a process which began by tearing to fragments the whole fabric of government, by provoking war; its aim was to annihilate established institutions and divide the nation into many parts. He maintained that no state had any independent sovereignty except as it was a part of the United States. There was no such thing as returning to the sovereign

25 Ibid., p. 324.
26 Ibid., p. 325.
27 Ibid., p. 326.
status as United Colonies; these entities were colonies, not
dates, and as such they revolted and united to form a continental
government. In this complex system of government of the United
States there is to be recognized the government common to all
and the particular institution of the separate sovereignties.
He said:

"I have attempted, while repudiating the
doctrine of nullification, to vindicate
that doctrine of State Rights, which, as
I firmly believe, is an integral and
indispensable part of our political system;
yet, on the other hand, the doctrine that
we are a nation, and that we have a national
government, is and always was just as truly
a part of our system as the other. And our
political system always stood as much upon
the basis that we are a nation, as it stood
upon the basis that that nation is composed
of sovereign States. They were born into
both relations; so born that each State is
equally and forever, by force of its very
existence and the manner thereof, both a
part of this "American nation, and also a
sovereign State of itself. The people,
therefore can no more legally throw off their
national allegiance than they can legally
throw off their State allegiance; nor can
any State any more legally absolve the
allegiance due by the people to the State
they live in. Either attempt, considered
in any legal, in any constitutional, in any
historical light, is pure madness."

Since the right to alter the constitution was invested in
the majority, it was absurd for South Carolina to attempt such
an action. The assumption of such authority by a minority power
was tampering with the rights of others; moreover, such action
was impossible. He believed that there were no reasons why the

\^2Ibid., pp. 327-328.
Slave States and the Northern States could not abide together in peace just as they had from the beginning. He stated that he did not believe that anything had occurred which would justify South Carolina's revolutionary actions, or were the other states, who were contemplating such action in order to rid the people of their impending dangers, justified in following South Carolina. He declared that the existence of the slavery institution was made more secure under the Union and the federal power than it could be maintained otherwise by secession or rebellion.

In view of the step initiated by South Carolina and the impending crisis in the other Southern States, Breckinridge was cognizant of the unanswered question in the minds of Kentuckians that must be answered before many days. He assumed the responsibility to outline some possible solutions of the existing state of things, and he mapped the course Kentucky should adopt in order to save herself and other states similarly situated, and thereby preserve the Union.

He asserted that the action taken by South Carolina did not alter the relation between Kentucky and the Union. Yet because of slavery Kentucky was more closely allied to the Southern States than to the Northern States. Slavery as it existed represented three entirely different aspects. "What I assert is," he said, "that the relation of slavery to the community, and the relation of the community by reason of slavery to the General Government and the world, is widely different in all
three of these classes of States.” The Border States, the Cotton States, and the Mixed States (part farming and part planting states), represented the three different aspects. He recognized the existing ties and sympathies between the Southern States, but he said, "It is extremely easy to carry this idea to a fatal and a false extent, and to ruin ourselves forever under the illusion begotten thereby.”

In Kentucky there was about one slave to every four white persons, while in South Carolina there were approximately five slaves to every three white persons. He said:

"In the Cotton States, I know of no way in which the institution of slavery can be dealt with at all, except by keeping the relation as it stands, as an integral portion of the body politic, unmanageable except in the present relation of the negro to the white man: and, in his posture, it is the duty of the nation to protect and defend the Cotton States. In regard to Kentucky, the institution of slavery is in such a position that the people can do with it whatever they may see fit, both now, and at any future period, without being obliged, by reason of it, to resort to any desperate expedient, in any direction.”

He warned the people not be blinded by the fact that Kentucky was a slave state and thus lose sight of every other consideration in her movement. Should Kentucky ally with the Cotton States, it would be utterly impossible for her to exercise or protect her rights, as everything would be dominated and regulated by

29 Ibid., p. 334.
30 Ibid., p. 335.
31 Ibid., p. 335.
the supreme interest of cotton. Such an alliance would mean direct taxation, free trade, unlimited broadcast of African negroes throughout the whole slave state. He said that if the slave line were made the line of division, then the possibility of the perpetuation of slavery within the Border States would be terminated at once. In the desire to maintain slavery, Kentucky had adopted the most effectual means of extinguishing it; "and that in the most disastrous of all possible ways. On the contrary, if this Union is to be saved, it is by the cordial sympathy of the border States on one side and on the other side the slave line that it must be saved."32 There is nothing to be hoped for from the extreme states, but it is in those states along the slave line that the nation must seek its safety.

Those border free states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and the border slave states: Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri, are competent to save the Union. In order to wield this power these central states must work in sympathy and confidence and act in concert. Thus the preservation of the Union is dependent, first, upon the recognition of the central states of the great mission committed to them; secondly, upon the failure of the Cotton States to follow the initial step of South Carolina and the willingness of the Northern States to render a peaceful adjustment. He said:

"But even in that case, the mission of these great States is not ended. If under the curse of God, and the madness of the extreme

32Ibid., p. 337.
Northern and Southern States, the preservation of the Union should be impossible; then it belongs to this immense central power, to reconstruct the nation, upon the slave line as its central idea; and thus perpetuate our institutions, our principles, and our hopes, with an unchanged nationality. For even they who act in the mere interests of slavery, ought to see, that after the secession of the Cotton States, the border slave States are obliged, even for the sake of slavery, to be destroyed, or to adhere to the Union as long as any Union exists; and that if the Union were utterly destroyed, its reconstruction upon the slave line, is the solitary condition on which slavery can exist in security anywhere, or can exist at all in any border State."

Breckinridge named two possible positions Kentucky might assume in the crisis. He mentioned neutrality as being one of these. Later, when Kentucky adopted a policy of neutrality, Lincoln disapproved of such a course. He said that it would make disunion complete and it would take all the trouble off the hands of the secessionists except what trouble the external blockade might give them. President Lincoln believed that those citizens supporting the policy were loyal, but the policy was very injurious in effect.34

Breckinridge explained the possible courses Kentucky might adopt as follows:

"The first of these is that in the progress of events it may well become the border slave States to unite themselves into a separate confederacy; the second is, that it may well become Kentucky, under various contingencies, ...

\[33^{ibid.}, \text{pp. 358-359.}\]
\[34^{Kentucky Statesman, Frankfort, Kentucky, July 1, 1861.}\]
to assume a separate sovereign position, and act by herself."

The first of these he recommended only as an alternative to be preferred to more perilous actions. He added:

"For my unalterable conviction is, that the slave line is the only permanent and secure basis of a confederacy for the slave States, and especially for the border slave States, in the same confederacy, is the indispensable condition of the peaceful and secure existence of slavery. As to the possible isolation of Kentucky, this also, it seems to me, is not a result to be sought. If it should occur as the alternative to evils still greater, Kentucky ought to embrace it with calmness and dignity, and, awaiting the progress of events, show by her wisdom, her courage, her moderation, her invincible rectitude, both to this age and to all that are to come, how fully she understood in the midst of a gainsaying and backsliding generation, that no people ever performed anything glorious who did not trust God, who did not love their country and who were not faithful to their oaths."

Kentucky's immediate duty Breckinridge declared was to stand by the constitution and the Union, to withstand all attempts to terrify and seduce her in taking any movement inconsistent with the constitution, "to settle in her heart that the rending of this Union on the slave line is, for her, whatever it may be for others, the most fatal issue that the times can have"; it would mean her subjection to the Cotton States.

Breckinridge declared that the Cotton States should reject

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36 Ibid., p. 340.
37 Loc. cit.
the course dictated by South Carolina for these reasons: 1. South Carolina's method of secession destroyed the common government over sovereign states and established the inherent possibility of future anarchy. 2. The method of secession was founded on the fatal illusion that the people were to be loyal only to local authorities. 3. The sovereignty of the people was annihilated by the adoption of the acts of secession without permitting the will of the people to be expressed in the procedure. 4. South Carolina's disregard and refusal to consult other states rendered impossible any peaceful or decorous arrangements, and thus she had jeopardized the profitable perpetuation of slavery. 38

He believed that the destiny of the country could be retrieved by appealing to that immense mass of people in the Slave States who were meditating on the course they should pursue; the destiny of the country was also dependent upon the successful attempt to secure the treatment of secession by the federal administration in such a manner as to make the laws effective, and to persuade the Free States "to put an end to the reign of that atheistical and relentless fanaticism, which is the original cause of the ruin that stares us all in the face." 39

According to Breckinridge, for years the general impression was that negro slavery was the direct cause of the existing


39 Ibid., pp. 32-33.
state of conditions in the country. That was true as far as the religious and moral elements of slavery were concerned. Other than that phase negro slavery was the indirect cause of the commotion and not the direct cause as was generally conceded. A few years previous the nullification question in South Carolina had no direct connection with slavery, but it was then a question of revenue, taxation, commerce, tariffs, and wealth. 40 Neither was the commotion in the territories directly caused by the slavery question; it was a struggle for political power, increased and aggravated in the North by emigrants in their clamor for cheap land," and at the present moment the States which have seceded, are of all the slave States the very ones which would not have seceded, and the slave States which would have promptly seceded if the current impression of the case was true and complete."41 He explained further:

"If at any time within the last thirty years, a revolution in production, in trade, in commerce, in any thing, had brought a thorough change in the general opinion of the South, touching—not the essential nature—but the incidental advantages of slavery in a political and a financial point of view; of course no one would ever have heard of secession in the South—or even seen the remotest approach to the existing state of opinion at the North. It is the idea of power—power to be diminished by remaining in the Union and to be incalculably augmented by leaving it; the idea of wealth, of conquest, of advancement—all of them, we are thoroughly convinced, in the highest degree illusive and fatal; but it is these

40Ibid., pp. 85-86.
41Ibid., p. 86.
ideas--far more than any disgust that the North condemns slavery as immortal, or any apprehension that slavery will be disturbed, or slaves stolen, or the South annoyed in the Union—that pervades the present dominant party in the cotton States, and enabled it to precipitate them into revolution."42

Breckinridge declared that the presidential election of 1860 demonstrated to the secessionists that they were lost if they were to be guided by the popular will, but they did not heed this warning. He explained as follows:

"They immediately initiated a reign of universal anarchy and violence, and by fraud and terror, violating all laws and trampling constitutions under their feet proclaimed State after State out of the Union, consummating their work in the organization of the provisional Confederate Government. The whole procedure was a naked and atrocious series of audacious usurpations. What is of the utmost importance to observe, is, that the whole secession movement has nowhere any foundation but this: and this was resorted to because disunion was not attainable in any other way. We escaped in Kentucky simply because it was perfectly understood that it would be necessary to conquer us first."43

Breckinridge maintained that the basic idea on which rested the existing difficulties was a question whether the Union existed at all and whether the nature of the constitution was similar to a league which was merely a gathering together of sovereignties with a superior. He also maintained that our complex system of government consisted of individuals and subordinate sovereignties,

42 Loc. cit.

called states, and that it was "a nation made up of States and having no existence but as those States exist, and States constitute a nation which have no existence as States, but as States constituting that nation." He explained as follows:

"We constitute one nation, whose people, however, are divided into many sovereign States. We have no nation but as we have these States; and we have no States but as they make this nation; and our people are citizens both of the nation and of some particular State—and strictly speaking, to be one involves the other. The fundamental principle of our liberty is the sovereignty, not of governments, but of society itself—the people; and the deepest foundation of his sovereignty of the people, is their right to change, to order, and to interpret, their political and civil institutions, by voting; to do this as separate States where the matter relates exclusively to the particular State—to do it in concert where it relates to the nation."  

He was of the opinion that the sovereign states could withdraw only through a fraudulent method; they could return to the Union only as territories and upon the conditions imposed by the majority of the states. The whole efforts of the nation should be concentrated on the preservation of the Union. He denounced secession as being anarchy which was spreading over the entire Union; should it prevail, it would destroy the Union. He came to the conclusion that the existing state of the country would demand "that the war in which we are engaged, ought to be prosecuted, and prosecuted to the end with the whole energy of

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[44 Breckinridge MSS., Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 20, 1862.]

the nation; ought to be pursued to the last extremity."\textsuperscript{46}

Secondly, the condition of the country should have taught the people "that we should labor and look before us all the time to the restoration and preservation of the Union, and the perpetuation of the social and political system of the country and the sublime career which is before us--whatever collateral object there is--whatever other purposes may exist."\textsuperscript{47} He declared that errors were being committed daily by attempting to bring about conciliation with those who were in rebellion. "I know that these men who seek to subvert the Constitution are not capable of being conciliated," he said, "and the only way to treat them is to crush them, and to crush them is the only thing to be done."\textsuperscript{48}

He made the following observation in regard to the loyal people in the Southern states:

"There is another idea connected with this matter, and that is, to connect the great mass of quiet and peaceable citizens, who, so to speak, were called upon to take up arms against us without taking any particular part in the circumstances in which they were involved in fighting against us--that is, confounding the loyal portion of the people, who were ready to risk all for the good of the country, in the same category with the people who never can be conciliated, and will be always ready to rise again whenever they have a favorable opportunity. We are not in the habit of making these distinctions. We are in the habit of thinking hard, very hard of the loyal portion in

\textsuperscript{46}Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge, Cincinnati, Ohio, May 20, 1862.

\textsuperscript{47}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48}Ibid.
Breckinridge stated further that Kentucky escaped such a fate through the fidelity and united action of her neighboring states, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Kentucky asked Ohio for 10,000 men, and aid was also requested of Indiana and Illinois in order that Kentucky might be preserved. It was this concerted action that was Kentucky's salvation.

Breckinridge declared that the North and the South held entirely different positions in their relation to slavery and their basis for adjustment. The North regarded the whole affair as a sentiment or an opinion. Slavery with the South was an affair of life and death. The North had nothing at stake financially, while the South had millions of dollars invested in slave property; the South was dependent upon this investment for its annual income. There were no negro slaves among the nineteen millions of people in the eighteen free states, "so that all questions of a national aspect tending to influence slavery, are perfectly void of force as to the interior peace, quiet, and security, of all of the eighteen states"; the Southern States had four millions of slaves dispersed among the eight millions of her white population, "and every national question that can, in any of its bearings, either agitate or

49-51 Ibid.

quiet their vast slave population, is of itself a question, between different nations, of war or peace." Still further he said that slavery had no bearing upon the social, economic, or political status of the North. In the South it was interwoven with every fibre of society, "and as an institution is so pervading in its effects wherever it exists, that a community long trained in the forms of life connected with it, does not incur the change involved in its destruction, except under some most powerful impulse." In 1860 Lincoln had few supporters in Kentucky, but gradually the people of that state had come to believe that Lincoln was the best man for the presidency, and that the safety of the nation depended upon his re-election.

The names of James Guthrie, George D. Prentice, and others were attached to a notice issued for the purpose of calling a state Union convention to meet at Louisville, May 25, 1864. Breckinridge said, "The call contained in its terms a betrayal of the loyal party in the State, which its signers professed to represent." On May 25, 1864, two state conventions convened at Louisville, the Guthrie-Prentice and the Loyal conventions. The former sent delegates to Chicago and the latter sent delegates to Baltimore. The Democratic leaders who failed to

\[\text{52} \text{Loc. cit.}\]

\[\text{53} \text{Loc. cit.}\]


\[\text{55}\text{bid., p. 416.}\]

\[\text{56} \text{Tri-Weekly Commonwealth, June 8, 1864.}\]
meet with the Guthrie-Prentice party held a separate convention, and they "issued a characteristic platform, distinctly the opposite of so much of the relapsed Union platform as could be construed in any patriotic sense; and more distinctly favorable to the insurgents than the disloyal portions of the other." 57 He explained further that it was believed that the leaders of the relapsed Union party, which embraced the bulk of the Kentucky members of Congress, favored "an organic union with the openly disloyal Democrats, but they were afraid to organize as Democrats, and the Democrats would not organize as Conservatives." 58 Delegates from both factions attended the Chicago convention and returned from the convention as National Democrats. Breckinridge said that the platform issued at the Chicago convention could not be effective without giving complete success to the rebellion; "with a candidate for Vice-President on it, the representative of principles upon which no national life worth preserving could exist, either in war or peace; and a candidate for President, who can not accept the platform without repudiating and condemning all his own principles and acts that had any importance, or showing, by that acceptance, that the gratification of his vanity, and the chance of gratifying his ambition, have all along dictated his principles and regulated


58 Loc. cit.
his conduct, and that they do so still." He stated further:

"The Chicago Convention, in effect, exhibited most of the symptoms of a seditious conspiracy, in the midst of civil war; and barely coming short of avowals that they were ready to encourage open acts of treason, they provided, on the motion of Mr. Wickliffe, of Kentucky, by a unanimous vote, for a called meeting, at which they would decide whether or not they would take arms against the Government." 59

Erekinridge maintained that the question about negro soldiers which had agitated Kentucky during the war was excluded from the Chicago platform, nor was there the "remotest intimation in it about slavery, in any aspect, past, present, or future; not a syllable, even, about the right of secession, or the guilt of rebellion!" 60 He was of the opinion that there were three courses open to a honest and patriotic party under such existing conditions. The party might support the government and the cause; it might sustain the cause and endeavor to change the administration, or it might oppose both the administration and the cause. Erekinridge declared that the Chicago convention did not publicly commit itself on any of these. He said:

"It traduced Mr. Lincoln, and sought to defeat him, by the combination of all dissatisfied and all dissident factions; it evaded all commitments it possibly could, that necessarily signified anything of serious importance, upon every topic that is vital to the safety of the nation." 62

59 Loc. cit.
60 Loc. cit.
61 Ibid., 418.
62 Loc. cit.
He asserted that there was no reason why any peace man or pro-slavery man should vote for McClellan, "without any platform; nor any, why any man who has any convictions at all, for peace or for war, for Union or for disunion, for slavery or for freedom, should vote for any body at all, in such a time as this, on such a platform as that." 63

In his address to the Loyal state convention at Louisville, May 25, 1864, Breckinridge said:

"Taking the posture of the negro question as it is, and the nation as it is, my conclusion is, that the Government of the United States is absolutely bound, by every consideration of statesmanship and of safety, to do one of two things: It is bound to use its whole power, both of war and of peace, to put back the negro, as far as possible, into the condition he occupied before the war; or it is bound to exterminate the whole institution, by all the powers the Constitution gives it, or that can be obtained by an amendment of that instrument. If I were a pro-slavery man, I would say: Put back the negro to his former position. But, as I am an antislavery man, I say, Use the whole power of the Government to extinguish the institution of slavery, root and branch." 64

This convention elected delegates to attend the National Union convention to convene June 7, 1864. Some of the delegates were Robert J. Breckinridge, F. M. Bristow, C. A. Preston, J. Harman, W. W. Trimble, J. W. Finney, and G. D. Blakey.

The National Union convention which nominated Lincoln for

63Ibid., 424.

64Stanton, op. cit., p. 359.

the presidency and Andrew Johnson for the vice-presidency met at Baltimore, June 7, 1864. Breckinridge was made temporary chairman; Governor Dennison, of Ohio, was made chairman. 66

In his speech before the convention Breckinridge reiterated his theory, as to which should be supreme, the nation or the states, as follows: We are a nation—no doubt a peculiar one—formed of States, and no nation except as these States form it; and these States are no States except as they are States in that nation." 68 He maintained that the states were no more authorized to repudiate the nation than the nation was authorized to repudiate the states. He continued:

"Not one of them had even the shadow of a right to do this, and, God help us, we will vindicate that truth, so that it shall never be disputed any more in this world. It is a fearful alternative that is set before us, but there are great compensations for it." 69

He said that the convention was composed of the Democratic, Whig, Abolition, and Republican leaders. "I myself am here," he said, "who all my life have been a party to myself." 70 He declared that as a Union party he would willingly follow it, but as a Republican, Abolition, or any other of the parties composing the

66 Tri-Weekly Commonwealth, June 10, 1864.
68 Speech of Robert J. Breckinridge delivered before the Nominating National Union Convention, June, 1864, Tri-Weekly Commonwealth, June 24, 1864.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
Union party he would never give it his support. He was of the opinion that it was "the original sin and folly of treason and secession" that had brought the country to its existing status.

He continued:

"We are prepared to demand not only that the whole territory of the United States shall not be made slave, but that the General Government of the American people shall do one of two things, and it appears to me that there is nothing else that can be done, either to use the whole of the government, both the war power and the peace power, to put slavery as nearly as possible back where it was—for although that will be a fearful state of society, it is better than anarchy—or else to use the whole power of the government, both of war and peace, and all the practical power that the people of the United States will give them, to exterminate and extinguish it.

"I have no hesitation in saying for myself that if I were a pro-slavery man, if I believed this institution was an ordinance of God and was given to man, I would unhesitatingly join those who demand that the government should be put back where it was. But I am not a pro-slavery man. I never was. I unite myself with those who believe it is contrary to the highest interests of all men and of all government; contrary to the spirit of the Christian religion, and incompatible with the natural rights of man. I join myself with those who say 'away with it forever,' and I fervently pray God that the day may come when throughout the whole land every man may be as free as you are, and as capable of enjoying regulated liberty."\(^7^2\)

The substance of the platform adopted by the convention is as follows:

\(^7^1\text{Ibid.}\)

\(^7^2\text{Ibid.}\)
"Upon the matter of the rebellion, a resolution sets forth an unqualified determination to accept of nothing short of unconditional surrender. Upon the manner of prosecuting the war, a resolution declares for the utmost possible vigor. Upon Slavery, a resolution demands its utter and complete extirpation from the soil of the republic. Upon the paramount authority of the Constitution and laws of the United States, and the necessity of bringing rebels and traitors to due punishment, none but positive terms are employed."

Breckinridge stated later that the nomination for Lincoln's re-election was made without a struggle and without opposition in the national convention. Lincoln said in reply to the notification of his nomination:

"I will neither conceal my gratification, nor restrain the expression of my gratitude, that the Union people, through their convention, in the continued effort to save and advance the nation, have deemed me not unworthy to remain in my present position. I know no reason to doubt that I shall accept the nomination tendered; and yet, perhaps, I should not declare definitely before reading and considering what is called the platform. I will say now, however, that I approve the declaration in favor of so amending the Constitution as to prohibit slavery throughout the nation."

The services rendered by Breckinridge during the progress of the war were valued highly, and his advice was sought by state and military officials. He was frequently called to the


75 The Courier Journal, January 3, 1872.
military headquarters in the state, and the military officials
often went miles to interview him, as he was considered one of
the wisest men of the state. 76  He had been paid this tribute:

"One of the most remarkable men who ever
lived in Kentucky was Robert J. Breckinridge.
............ He had abundant opportunity for
information, for he was in the counsels of
the leaders of the Union Cause, and one of
the prime leaders himself." 77

Breckinridge became affiliated with the Danville Seminary in
1853, and he became one of the chief contributors to the organ of
that institution, the Danville Quarterly Review, 1861 to 1864.
He devoted his time and efforts during the closing days of his
life to the advancement of religion.

The following quoted passages give a resume of Breckinridge's
personality, work, and position:

"His great moral and intellectual worth gave
strength to the cause of the government, not
only in his own state, but also abroad, and
during the great conflict he rose to his greatest
height as a writer, statesman and patriot. He
was a man of indomitable will and unquestioned
courage, profound and sincere in his convictions,
of ardent, intense nature, a singularly quick,
active intellect, quick impulses, and was a warm
and generous friend, and probably not always a
just enemy. His information covered every depart-
ment of knowledge, his memory was almost perfect
and his capacity for labor, with an enfeebled
body, was apparently without limit. Hardly an
enterprise or movement that has promoted the
material, intellectual or moral worth of Kentucky,

76 Lewis Collins, History of Kentucky (Louisville, Ky., John
P. Morton and Co., 1924), 1, 182.

77 Thomas Speed, The Union Cause in Kentucky, 1860-1865
(New York, G. P. Putman's Sons, The Knickerbocker Press, 1907),
does not bear the impress of the genius and wonderful character of Dr. Breckinridge, and to him is largely due the establishment and growth of the common-school system of education in Kentucky.

"In his personal manner, habits and tastes Dr. Breckinridge was plain, simple, frugal and severe; but as a friend and host was indulgent and exceedingly attractive, having uncommon conversational powers and a free, unaffected hospitality, displaying himself to as great advantage among his friends as in his great contests before the people. Although his continued ill health through many years bent his once tall and graceful form, he maintained his great mental vigor to the last and displayed all the noble traits of his character."78

It has been said of him:

"Dr. Breckinridge was in many respects an extraordinary man. His family—ancestry and cotemporary—is remarkable for many great qualities, genius, education, culture, eloquence, energy, will, popularity, prominence, success. It was not alone in conversation that Dr. Breckinridge was versatile. He was great and brilliant in many departments of human learning and experience. His published writings—newspaper, magazine, and review articles, travels, controversies, and theological works—if collected, would probably fill twenty octavo volumes."79

On December 27, 1871, at Danville, Kentucky, "the lion-hearted old man whose life was a grand battle ground upon which transpired some of the most stirring conflicts of the age, has been conquered at last by a stronger combatant than he. There is quiet now upon the battle-field since the king is dead."80


80 Frankfort Commonwealth, December 29, 1871.
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