

2023

## Mississippi and the Missouri Controversy

M. Philip Lucas  
*Cornell College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh>

---

### Recommended Citation

Lucas, M. Philip (2023) "Mississippi and the Missouri Controversy," *Journal of Mississippi History*. Vol. 85: No. 3, Article 2.

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/jmh/vol85/iss3/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Mississippi History* by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact [aquilastaff@usm.edu](mailto:aquilastaff@usm.edu).

# Mississippi and the Missouri Controversy

By M. Philip Lucas

When the U.S. House of Representatives took up the Missouri Territory's application for statehood in February 1819, two surprises jolted southern congressmen out of any complacency they might have had. Representative James Tallmadge Jr. of New York delivered the first surprise when he proposed stifling the growth of slavery as a condition of statehood. Specifically, Tallmadge moved "that the further introduction of slavery or involuntary servitude be prohibited . . . and that all children of slaves, born within [Missouri] . . . shall be free, but may be held to service until the age of twenty-five years."<sup>1</sup> Even his ally, John Taylor of New York, who would carry the fight in the House for the next two years, was taken off guard. The second shock was that so many northern representatives supported the amendment. If statehood had passed on these terms, Missouri would have witnessed a process of gradual abolition of the approximately ten thousand slaves already there.<sup>2</sup> Northern congressmen joined Tallmadge challenging the assumption that slavery should spread above Louisiana. Their southern colleagues roared back that the right of slave ownership was not a topic for debate.

In retrospect, the Missouri controversy was a milestone on the road to the Civil War. The arguments of 1819-1821 were rehashed and broadened in the late 1840s when the nation questioned the status of slavery in newly acquired territories from Mexico. In 1854, the political eruption was more poignant because Senator Stephen A. Douglas's proposal extended popular sovereignty into the Kansas Territory, which was an area supposedly covered by the Missouri Compromise.

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Glover Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1953), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Moore, 32, 39-40; Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The South and Three Sectional Crises* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), 15.

*M. PHILIP LUCAS is a professor of history at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa. He earned a B.A. from the University of Virginia, and both an M.A. and Ph.D. in history from Cornell University. His research interests lie in antebellum Southern politics and military justice during the Civil War.*

In assessing the impact of the Missouri debates, historians have been of two minds. Their differences lie in the context that they provide for the controversy and its consequences. One approach often embraces former President Thomas Jefferson's anguished letter to Congressman John Holmes of Maine: "This momentous question, like a fire-bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union."<sup>3</sup> The subsequent debate in Congress, Richard E. Ellis notes, "uncovered the bankruptcy of Jeffersonian policy on the slavery issue."<sup>4</sup> In its place, according to Don Fehrenbacher, "the votes of southern congressmen . . . indicated that the South had made the most important decision in the whole history of the slavery controversy. . . . The Slaveholding South by 1820 had rejected the possibility of gradual emancipation." Such a "commitment to the permanence of slavery . . . made sectional conflict irrepressible and disunion increasingly probable." Southerners recoiled against "the antislavery solidarity of so many northern Republicans," such that it "inspired a new surge in the development of southern consciousness."<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Varon carefully tracks the use of disunion rhetoric from the Constitutional Convention onward. She asserts the Missouri controversy "significantly transformed the discourse." More specifically, in 1819 both sides employed "disunion rhetoric . . . as a kind of political gamesmanship," and had no "process or program . . . to foment a disunion movement." The debate, however, "racialized the discourse of disunion." That is, before Missouri "the focus on national security" led Northerners and Southerners to compromise. But after 1821 that had forever changed.<sup>6</sup> In the years following the Missouri Compromise, Robert Pierce Forbes perceives "the seething sectionalism beneath the surface," that politicians would be unable to dissipate.<sup>7</sup> The implication

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, in Paul L. Ford (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), Vol. XII, 158.

<sup>4</sup> Richard E. Ellis, "The Market Revolution and the Transformation of American Politics, 1801-1837" in Melvin Stokes and Stephen Conway (eds.), *The Market Revolution in America* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 165.

<sup>5</sup> Fehrenbacher, 23, 14.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion!: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 44-45, 53.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 11. William W. Freehling gives "the Slavepower" a distinct identity and agency in resolving the Missouri controversy to its advantage. At the same time, he foretells later anguish by noting a split between the border slave states and "the tropical South." William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists at Bay, 1776-1854* (New

of these interpretations is that the path to the Civil War has greater clarity and predictability.

A slightly different approach gives greater emphasis to a larger complex of factors surrounding the issue of Missouri statehood. Heated words indeed flew about the House and Senate chambers, but they did so within a context peculiar to the late 1810s. John R. Van Atta, for example, reminds us of the confluence of developments after the War of 1812 which included rapid westward movement, economic expansion and contraction, nationalistic decisions from John Marshall's Supreme Court, and political fragmentation, that all made fertile soil for a vigorous debate about Missouri's fate. For example, the rapid decline of a two-party system in which Jeffersonian Republicans battled against Hamiltonian Federalists created a political vacuum. As would happen more dramatically thirty-five years later, in the absence of a competitive national party system, more radical ideas and rhetoric could seem more palatable.<sup>8</sup> Glover Moore, in his seminal *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821*, offers a more subdued conclusion about persisting ill will than do later historians. As to the precise question of slavery restriction, Moore concludes that in its opposition "the Solid South [became] more solid."<sup>9</sup> The rationale for that unity, however, was diverse.<sup>10</sup> To gain more perspective of the dramatic events in Congress, he considers additional contemporary issues and the reactions among various constituencies beyond Washington City (as the nation's capital was often called at the time). The South, with some important exceptions, was fairly united against the tariff, but divided on internal improvements. It is significant that soon after the Compromise "the people were happy to forget it for a season."<sup>11</sup>

Put another way, something changed in the years after the War of

---

York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 144-157, 161. See also Richard H. Brown, "The Missouri Crisis, Slavery, and the Politics of Jacksonianism" *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 65 (Winter 1966): 55-72.

<sup>8</sup> John R. Van Atta, *Wolf by the Ears: The Missouri Crisis, 1819-1821* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), 3-5. Fehrenbacher also briefly notes the significance of the decayed party system, Fehrenbacher, 14. For the 1850's, see Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), and Joel H. Silbey, "The Surge of Republican Power": Partisan Antipathy, American Social Conflict, and the Coming of the Civil War" in *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics Before the Civil War* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>9</sup> Moore, 250.

<sup>10</sup> Moore, 346.

<sup>11</sup> Moore, 342. On the tariff, see 320-328; on internal improvements, see 332-336.

1812. The Missouri controversy was emblematic of that change. But change to what course? Was the new path primarily defined by views on slavery? Or was the future more inchoate and blurred? Gordon Wood reminds us that in the decades after independence the United States experienced a gradual, multifaceted transition from republicanism to democracy. Richard Ellis, who suggests the end of a Jeffersonian naivete on slavery, also observes, "What is much more difficult to assess is the role the Missouri Compromise played in the political revolution of the 1820s."<sup>12</sup> Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, albeit far from ordinary, could not ignore the Missouri debates. One scholar, in fact, argues Adams's views on the constitutionality of slavery restriction "flipped" in March 1820. But Adams avoided entanglement in the controversy (as did his equally diplomatic wife). In the years afterward "what is striking is his continued optimism about the union with slavery." For the ambitious presidential contender, "Expansion and the nation was what mattered."<sup>13</sup> More broadly, in his recent study of the Panic of 1819 Andrew H. Browning emphasizes that the economic collapse and Chief Justice John Marshall's expansive defense of the hated Bank of the United States in *McCulloch v. Maryland* "overshadowed" the Missouri crisis.<sup>14</sup> Even if one does not want to go that far, Browning's study is a reminder of the presence and persistence of other constitutional and economic arguments that shaped the nation during this period. As Van Atta notes, the Missouri debates "ended with a compromise making sense at *that* time." Only by looking from 1861 backwards could one conclude that the Missouri episode "made a violent outcome *inevitable*." But, in truth, "it did not."<sup>15</sup> While Jefferson

---

<sup>12</sup> Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1992); Ellis, "The Market Revolution," 165.

<sup>13</sup> David Waldstreicher, "John Quincy Adams, the Missouri Crisis, and the Long Politics of Slavery" in Jeffrey L. Pasley and John Craig Hammond (eds.), *A Fire Bell in the Past: The Missouri Crisis at 200* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2021), Vol. 1, 357, 359. For Louisa Catherine Adams, see Miriam Liebman, "Diplomat, Republican, Lady: Louisa Catherine Adams and the Missouri Crisis" in Pasley and Hammond (eds.), Vol. 2, 111-117.

<sup>14</sup> Andrew H. Browning, *The Panic of 1819: The First Great Depression* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2019), 339. Browning also shows the limitations of the argument that Congress was concerned about maintaining the balance of free and slave states. Browning, 334-36.

<sup>15</sup> Van Atta, 4. Matthew E. Mason offers an astute corrective in "Review of Forbes, Robert Pierce, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath*." H-SHEAR, H-Net Reviews. June 2008. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14582>. For a powerful statement of the Civil War's "pernicious influence on the study of American political development that preceded it," see Joel H. Silbey, "The Civil War Synthesis," in *The*

may have heard funeral bells for the nation, this second approach to the meaning of the Missouri controversy implies there were far fewer clear or predictable lines of development leading to the Civil War.

When it comes to Mississippi's connection to this controversy, historians have said very little. Moore offers some guidance in suggesting the state's "small population and isolated location" and a "conservative population . . . concentrated in the southwestern counties" led to a minimal response, and certainly not a sectional one.<sup>16</sup> This concurs with the opinion of Andrew Marschalk, editor of the *Mississippi State Gazette*, who in 1820 "chided members of Congress . . . for forgetting that 'Time is Money' which could be better invested in more important matters."<sup>17</sup> This was similar to the sentiment from an Alabama newspaper that "the question to be settled is of infinitely less importance to the nation than the time consumed in their discussion of it."<sup>18</sup> Both newly minted states were far too occupied with their own development. The reaction of Mississippi's White residents to the Missouri debates will never be determined with any precision. The complexity of their response is seen in the Natchez *Mississippi Republican*. The editor, Richard Langdon, credited opponents of slavery in Missouri with "principles of humanity." They had a "deep interest for the honor and character of the nation and regard for the future safety of the Southern States – What other motives can they have?"<sup>19</sup> While this was perhaps a generous opinion, Langdon was not so favorably inclined towards the enslaved. "If slavery must be kept up at all, no half way measures will answer" in its maintenance.<sup>20</sup> Natchez merchant Eden Brashears opined, "The People of that Territory ought to be the best Judges . . . and the less Legislating on this subject the better for the present."<sup>21</sup> Despite these comments, the apparent disconnect between Mississip-

---

*Partisan Imperative*, 3-12 (quotation on 12).

<sup>16</sup> Moore, 248. See also Joel Sturgeon, "Nullification in Mississippi," *Journal of Mississippi History* 82 (Spring/Summer 2020): 56, 59, which is very good on the later tariff controversy but glides by the Missouri debates.

<sup>17</sup> (Natchez) *Mississippi State Gazette*, April 1, 1820, quoted in D. Clayton James, *Antebellum Natchez* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1968), 282.

<sup>18</sup> (Huntsville) *Alabama Republican*, March 16, 1821, quoted in J. Mills Thornton III, *Politics and Power in a Slave Society: Alabama, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1978), 166.

<sup>19</sup> (Natchez) *Mississippi Republican*, January 11, 1820, quoted in James, 282.

<sup>20</sup> {Natchez} *Mississippi Republican*, August 17, 1819, quoted in Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 209.

<sup>21</sup> Eden Brashears to John McKee, February 6, 1820, quoted in James, 282.

pi's perspective and the debate among historians over the significance of the Missouri controversy is worth deeper examination.

There is a different avenue, however, for understanding the context and consequences of the Missouri debates. Even if the state's popular opinion and its interests are indistinct, the behavior of Mississippi's congressional delegation in the nation's capital might expand our perspective of this dramatic controversy. Presumably the opinions and priorities of Senators Thomas H. Williams, David Holmes, and Walter Leake and Representative Christopher Rankin in the Sixteenth Congress (1819-1821) and the Seventeenth Congress (1821-1823) reflected those of their constituents. Their actions might reveal a "seething sectionalism", or they might suggest that a deeper appreciation of a broader context is warranted. This analysis of their service is divided into two parts. First, the Mississippi delegation's reaction to the Missouri controversy offers insight into how southern leaders – even from a new state – confronted the change of direction that Representative Tallmadge demanded. Not surprisingly, they favored Missouri's slave state application, but they embraced compromise to achieve it. Second, the activities of Mississippi's senators and lone representative, aside from the Missouri issue, illustrate the concerns of that turbulent time. An investigation of both dimensions of their service is important if we are to appreciate what the Missouri debates meant then and what they may have contributed to a crisis forty years later. As will be seen, Mississippi's congressional delegation was far from irrelevant or uninterested. In Washington City, Mississippians labored diligently in service to their state and nation. Their manifold contributions reflect a developing society, not one that was destined for a national disruption.

No resolution of the Missouri matter was possible in the dying days of the Fifteenth Congress when Tallmadge proposed his slavery restrictions. It was inevitable the issue would be revisited when the Sixteenth Congress convened in December 1819. The outlines of the ensuing controversy and compromise are well known. Missouri applied for statehood assuming that slavery would be legal. At the same time, Massachusetts had given permission for its Maine counties to seek statehood, but only if Congress consented by March 4, 1820. Still, it was "a golden opportunity" for a deal to be made.<sup>22</sup> The initial attempt to link the admission of Maine and Missouri as a package failed. Ulti-

---

<sup>22</sup> Moore, 86.

mately compromise was reached when Congress added that no other slave state would be created in the Louisiana Purchase north of 36 30' (Missouri would be the lone exception). The first session of the Sixteenth Congress ended with those components approved. The issue of slavery was rejoined in the second session, however, when Missouri asked Congress to approve a state constitution that ordered the forthcoming Missouri Legislature to pass a law "to prevent" free Blacks from entering into the state. The constitution also made it very difficult for owners to free slaves, thus provocatively emphasizing Missouri's slave state standing. Although this controversy was less serious than those of the previous session, it was incredibly difficult to solve.

When the Sixteenth Congress opened in December 1819, Christopher Rankin took his seat in the House of Representatives replacing George Poindexter, who had become Mississippi's second governor. A lawyer from Natchez, Rankin was placed on the Committee on Private Land Claims, an issue he probably dealt with a lot in his private practice. In the Senate, Thomas Hill Williams of Washington, Mississippi, (the former territorial capital near Natchez) joined the Committee on Naval Affairs and also became the chair of the Committee on Public Lands. Walter Leake of Bay St. Louis accepted appointment to the important Committee on the Judiciary. Beginning in January 1820, Leake also chaired the newly created standing Committee on Indian Affairs, an issue of considerable interest to Mississippi.<sup>23</sup> Although all three would be embroiled in the Missouri arguments, the committee assignments should serve as a reminder that members of Congress conducted a lot of other business.

Probably as a result of his position on the Public Lands Committee, Senator Williams chaired a select committee to investigate whether any "legislative measures may be necessary" for completing the admission of the state of Alabama (formerly the eastern half of the Mississippi Territory). While his report and legislation sailed through easily, his next assignment – chair of a select committee that reported a bill declaring Maine a state, pending approval of its constitution – would have a more complicated legislative history.<sup>24</sup> Maine's wishes could not be divorced from Missouri's fate.

Leake and Williams fully supported Missouri's request to be a

---

<sup>23</sup> *Annals of Congress* (hereinafter *Annals*), 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 26, 57.

<sup>24</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 11, 20, 35.

slave state. Only Leake, however, spoke on the floor of the Senate to explain his position. He did so probably because of his membership on the Judiciary Committee, which had been tasked with investigating the constitutional issues involving the admission of new states. In his speech on January 19, 1820, Leake, like other southern senators, took a narrow view of Article Four, Section 3, which gave Congress this power. If the territory had appropriately defined boundaries and sufficient population, it was “expedient to admit” it.<sup>25</sup> Leake was at a loss to find a provision that permitted Congress to restrict slavery, which the senator categorized as a “municipal and local concern of the States.” The authority to restrict slavery was not in the enumerated powers of Congress in Article One, Section 8. It was true that by joining the Union a state gave up “important portions of their sovereignty” as listed in Article One, Section 10, but not “the right to make their own local and municipal regulations.”<sup>26</sup> If there were any doubts, Leake emphasized, the Tenth Amendment left such powers to the individual states or to the people. Furthermore, slavery’s legitimacy was “clearly recognized” in the Constitution by the necessity of returning runaway slaves. Thus, why should Missouri be treated any differently than the thirteen original states?<sup>27</sup> Congress had also not created regulations about slavery in the nine territories that became states after 1788. Instead, it had followed the will of the people in those territories.<sup>28</sup> This precedent was important because in the Louisiana Purchase treaty with France, the United States had promised to grant the trans-Mississippi region all the same “rights, advantages, and immunities.”<sup>29</sup> Having explored what he felt were the main constitutional issues, Leake took his seat. He did not defend the institution of slavery; he simply accepted its existence. As will be seen in the speech of Mississippi congressman Christopher Rankin, Leake probably felt he did not have to do so.

Senator Thomas Williams did not offer his views on the controversy. There is, however, some evidence of his position. All three members of the Mississippi congressional delegation were usually in attendance and participated in almost all roll call votes. Here an interesting difference in attitudes emerged between the two senators,

---

<sup>25</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 195.

<sup>26</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 196-197.

<sup>27</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 197.

<sup>28</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 198-200.

<sup>29</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 197. The entire speech can be found in *Ibid.*, 195-200.

Leake and Williams. Both were willing to combine the Missouri and Maine statehood bills to enhance Missouri's chances for admission.<sup>30</sup> Williams, however, was not as motivated to pursue compromise as Leake was. Of the ten roll call votes in the first session dealing with the Missouri issue, two specifically concerned adding the 36 30' line restriction, and on those Williams broke with Leake.<sup>31</sup> In opposing the 36 30' provision, Williams joined forces with more determined southern senators – William Smith of South Carolina and Nathaniel Macon of North Carolina and with several in the House of Representatives – who refused to accept any conditions on the admission of a slave Missouri. Ultimately, they voted no on the entire compromise package. Williams, for unknown reasons, declined to go that far. He relented and reunited with Leake in accepting the final compromise.<sup>32</sup>

On February 15, 1820, Christopher Rankin spoke in the House for more than an hour against the repression of slavery in Missouri. Like Senator Leake, he based his initial argument on specific passages of the Constitution, but then Rankin took a more general view of the Constitution's principles. A basic flaw in the slavery restrictionists' argument, according to Rankin, was the assumption that Congress had the power to do this. Rankin's response was that "the sovereignty of the people" was paramount. "The silence of the Constitution is our law," argued Rankin, and to do otherwise was to leave Congress with a "capricious will" exercising "undefined, unlimited sovereignty."<sup>33</sup> A deplorable example of this capriciousness, according to the Natchez lawyer, was the Northerners' assertion that the provision to end the importation of slaves after 1808 (Article One, Section 9) also applied to the importation of slaves across the Mississippi. But this "discovery of . . . latent and dormant powers" was illogical.<sup>34</sup> If the pursuit of humanity was so acute, why was this alleged power not implemented in the admission of Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama? Instead, Rankin urged, "we should adopt the rules dictated by common sense."<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 424.

<sup>31</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 420, 457.

<sup>32</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 428.

<sup>33</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1333.

<sup>34</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1336.

<sup>35</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1334. Rankin had done his homework. He cited James Madison's Federalist #42, the Massachusetts ratifying convention in 1788, and Anti-Federalist Luther Martin to prove Article One, Section 9 of the Constitution only

Another argument by Northern congressmen was that every state must have “a republican form of government” and “no constitution can be republican in which slavery is not prohibited.”<sup>36</sup> Rankin brushed this aside by noting that Virginia, Georgia, and others of the original thirteen had slavery. Such a redefinition of republicanism was ahistorical and a violation of guaranteed property rights. Congress had the responsibility to admit new states, but that “does not confer on Congress the power to frame a constitution for, and strip the people of their sovereignty.”<sup>37</sup>

A popular argument by those who would forbid slavery in Missouri was the precedent of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 which produced the free states of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. The Articles of Confederation indeed sanctioned that legislation, but Rankin argued no evidence existed “that such an ordinance would have been authorized by the Constitution.”<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, Rankin noted that the U.S. Senate had implicitly rejected the principles of the Northwest Ordinance when in 1803 it ratified the Louisiana Purchase treaty, which had guaranteed property and equal rights. That treaty was the “supreme law of the land,” and a future Congress could not renege on the its terms and engage in “such subterfuge. . . . The honest heart revolts at such a proposition.”<sup>39</sup>

Forty-three years later Abraham Lincoln in the Gettysburg Address would invoke the Declaration of Independence to justify the Emancipation Proclamation. When Northerners in 1820 cited the Declaration as reason for a slave-free Missouri, Rankin denied that the “Declaration gives liberty to every slave in the Union.” The Declaration was indeed relevant in that it gave the people the right to make their own governments. That right should not be denied to Missouri. Self-government was a Revolutionary “inheritance.”<sup>40</sup>

Rankin could make this argument, and try to gain the high ground, because of a self-imposed handicap by the restrictionists. While some northern congressmen attacked the morality of slavery, they could not bring themselves to the logical conclusion that if slavery

---

applied to the international slave trade. Both Madison and Martin had been members of the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention.

<sup>36</sup> Constitution, Article Four, Section 4; *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1338.

<sup>37</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1339.

<sup>38</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1341.

<sup>39</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1340.

<sup>40</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1342.

was wrong and to be forbidden in Missouri, it also had to be wrong and set on the road to extinction in Mississippi or South Carolina.<sup>41</sup> Like most Americans all the way to the Civil War, Northerners shied away from abolition.

Southerners, however, faced an equally “difficult problem” in confronting the morality of slavery. “They had to acknowledge that slavery was an evil and at the same time demand that it be allowed to spread.”<sup>42</sup> Rankin admitted that slavery was “an unrepugnant feature in our republican Constitution.”<sup>43</sup> His fallacious justification, one widely articulated by southern congressmen, was that the expansion of slavery was a good thing. Conditions improved as slavery spread. “Extension is humanity, is mercy,” Rankin asserted. “No man has passed through the State of Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Alabama, who does not know that their condition is much better there than in the old States.”<sup>44</sup>

Secure in his own mind about the legitimacy of obeying the Missourians’ will, Rankin, in his conclusion, almost taunted the anti-slavery opposition for betraying the nation’s destiny. It was the restrictionists who “conduct us to an awful precipice,” namely disunion. Rankin, however, hoped “our Union will be as perpetual as the rocks and mountains of our continent.” Southerners did not threaten separation. “Spare, oh spare your country the evils which the agitation of this question has produced.”<sup>45</sup> After all, in Rankin’s mind, it was the restrictionists who did not understand the Declaration, who violated one Constitutional principle after another, and who denied the sovereignty of the people. Rankin’s votes show a faithful adherence to the middle course to produce compromise.<sup>46</sup> The arguments offered by Rankin, Leake, and Williams were not the views of representatives of a small, undeveloped state sitting on the sidelines.

When the Sixteenth Congress reconvened for its second session in November 1820, it immediately encountered Missouri’s defiant

---

<sup>41</sup> Knowingly or not, Rankin argued, restrictionists were leaning in that dangerous direction, and “yet we are told not to be alarmed,” *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1343-44.

<sup>42</sup> John Ashworth, *Slavery, Capitalism, and Politics in the Antebellum Republic* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), Vol. 1, 62.

<sup>43</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1335.

<sup>44</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1343. See also Matthew Mason, *Slavery and Politics in the Early Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 177-213, for an excellent discussion of this theme.

<sup>45</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1344.

<sup>46</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1586, 1587.

constitution. The question was whether that constitution could require the state legislature to enact a law forbidding free Blacks entrance into the state. Simple approval would seem to mean that Congress was permitting a violation of the United States Constitution that "Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the several States," since a few states had granted citizenship to African Americans.<sup>47</sup> The more radical Southerners—Macon and Smith in the Senate, and John Randolph of Virginia in the House—would admit Missouri only on Missouri's terms. More than a few northern congressmen saw an opportunity to use such a flagrant defiance of the Constitution to delay admission, if not bring up the slavery restriction issue again. Those interested in compromise found a solution elusive. Mississippi's three-person congressional delegation fit into that middle group. That delegation now included former governor David Holmes who replaced Walter Leake. Leake had resigned his seat to become a justice on the Mississippi Supreme Court.

Neither Holmes nor Williams contributed to the debate. If J. F. H. Claiborne's recollection is to be believed, Williams "and Governor Holmes . . . were all successful politicians, but intellectually very inferior to many who vainly competed for the honors they obtained."<sup>48</sup> Both were honest and men of character, but Holmes "was not an orator" and Williams was "a striking illustration of the success of mediocrity in politics."<sup>49</sup> While this may explain their silence, they did participate in all roll call votes on this difficult issue. In early December 1820, Senator John Eaton of Tennessee offered a solution that would eventually be reshaped and accepted in February. Eaton advocated Missouri's statehood, but "nothing . . . should be construed as to give the assent of Congress to any provision in the constitution of Missouri, if any such there be, which contravenes" the "privileges and immunities" clause.<sup>50</sup> Senators Holmes and Williams repeatedly voted for the inclusion of Eaton's compromise and refused to support a counteroffer to force Missouri to revise its constitution. The Senate was ultimately stalemated particularly since it received no cooperation from the House of Representatives.

---

<sup>47</sup> Constitution, Article Four, Section 2.

<sup>48</sup> J. F. H. Claiborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State* (Jackson, MS: Power & Barksdale, 1880), 258. He also included Walter Leake in that list.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 303, 258.

<sup>50</sup> The full text is in the *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 41. See also Van Atta, 119.

The House, in fact, had an even more difficult time with Missouri's constitution. Part of the problem was leadership. Henry Clay resigned the speakership because of a long delay before he could attend the second session. In his place, the House selected John Taylor of New York, a determined opponent of slavery's expansion. The House had no majority interested in Senator Eaton's vague proposal. Instead, it erupted when a member called Missouri a state and another suggested it was "the late territory of Missouri."<sup>51</sup> The chaos only increased when John Randolph vigorously protested the backhanded way Missouri's electoral votes were to be counted in James Monroe's reelection even though Monroe received all but one electoral college vote.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the turmoil, Representative Rankin supported compromise measures to finalize Missouri's statehood with slavery. It was only when Henry Clay arrived on January 16, 1821, that momentum built towards a resolution. In the ensuing roll call votes, Rankin always agreed with Clay. The path was nevertheless difficult. While Rankin did not express an opinion on the floor of the House, he did play a key role in settling the dispute.

On February 22, Clay proposed that the House elect a special committee of twenty-three to meet with a Senate committee to find a solution that both houses would support. Clay suggested only those who received a majority of the ballots would serve. In the ensuing election 157 members received votes, but only seventeen attained the required majority. One of them was Rankin of Mississippi.<sup>53</sup> His election is testimony to the respect he had attained and suggests that he exerted his influence more quietly and beyond the House chamber. Most of the others elected had spoken at great length during the session. The joint committee's deliberations were not recorded.<sup>54</sup> Anti-slavery senator Rufus King of New York, although appointed by the Senate, was so disgusted at the prospect of a compromise that he did not bother to show up for the meeting.<sup>55</sup> Clay's joint committee returned with a proposal to admit Missouri that was even more opaque than Eaton's. Nev-

---

<sup>51</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 853-856.

<sup>52</sup> For a colorful account of this episode see Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1991), 188-190.

<sup>53</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1219-1220, 1223.

<sup>54</sup> Many years later Clay gave his account. Moore, 155-156.

<sup>55</sup> Rufus King to Charles King, February 24, 1821, in Charles R. King (ed.), *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King* (New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), Vol. 6, 386; Moore, 154-156.

ertheless, it attracted majorities in the House and Senate, including the votes of all three Mississippians. Missouri, with slavery, became the twenty-fourth state.

The history of the Sixteenth Congress was more than the Missouri debates. For example, Senator Eaton wrote a remarkable letter to the somewhat notorious Senator King immediately after the Sixteenth Congress had permanently adjourned. Enclosed was an article from a Nashville newspaper. In it, the editor found King "obnoxious" on the Missouri question, but most of the piece praised the New Yorker's "manly spirit" for his vigorous defense of General Andrew Jackson, who had led a controversial incursion into Spanish Florida. Eaton also took the opportunity to describe the inauguration of President James Monroe. With obvious disgust, he ridiculed "the Coronation" and Monroe's inaudible speech. "Of all the mobocratic collections I have seen, it was a match for any." Eaton claimed it took an hour before he got into the crowded House chamber; then "I remained but a few minutes, and was happier to get out, than I was to get in." There was a postscript in a different hand: "I was wiser\* than Eaton, I staid at home. In one thing we agree, that is in wishing you a safe arrival at your domicile, and my best wishes await you there. [signed] Wms. of Mississippi." Eaton literally had the last word; he put the asterisk next to "wiser" and wrote, "*Dubitatur*. E. of Tenne."<sup>56</sup>

This playful letter between bitter antagonists over Missouri seems unexpected, if one assumes that Missouri was the only political issue of the day. Eaton and Williams had both pushed for a slave Missouri and for compromise. While King went so far as to castigate northern congressmen, who favored compromise, as "men who pretend to be intelligent."<sup>57</sup> Yet Eaton ignored King's inflammatory rhetoric and graciously forwarded to King a newspaper's praise for him, and both Williams and Eaton shared a feeling of disdain for the reelected Monroe. These exchanges suggest that much more of significance transpired within the halls of Congress than the heated and prolonged discussion of Missouri statehood.

What lingering fears and animosity persisted in the ensuing Seventeenth Congress (1821-1823)? A broader examination of the ac-

---

<sup>56</sup> *Dubitatur: Doubtful*. John Eaton and Thomas H. Williams to Rufus King, March 5, 1821, in King (ed.), Vol. 6, 388-390. Eaton and Williams lived in the same hotel in Washington, D.C.

<sup>57</sup> Rufus King to Christopher Gore, April 9, 1820, in King (ed.), Vol. 6, 329.

tivity of Mississippi's congressional delegation reveals much about that period. The famous Missouri debates were part of a larger political fabric, not all of it portending disaster in 1861, as some historians would have it. The actions of Mississippi's two senators and single representative remind us of that complexity, and it would be decades after their deaths before the United States faced a more serious threat to the nation.

The Mississippi delegation—Senators Leake, Williams, and Holmes, and Representative Rankin—labored diligently for their state and its citizens. They handled issues of local, regional, and national significance. The range of issues and the continuity of behavior during the two Congresses lend perspective to the overall significance of the expansion of slavery.

Mississippi's congressional delegation presented petitions from residents and memorials from the Mississippi General Assembly (as the state's legislative body was known at the time). These actions were not the most historically significant of their labors, but they were important to their constituency. Senator Williams, for example, presented petitions from Sarah Chotard, Clarissa Scott, and Horatio Stark, each asking for land or a confirmation of their land claims. Samuel Monett wanted reimbursement for supplies to the army. At the behest of the state legislature, Williams, Holmes, and Rankin pushed for federal "support of the Natchez Hospital, established . . . for the reception and relief of indigent boatmen."<sup>58</sup> That they failed was not due to a lack of effort.<sup>59</sup> They also requested the establishment of ports of entry at the mouths of the Pearl River and the Pascagoula River. Senator Holmes in February 1822 and again in January 1823, at the bidding of the legislature, asked for a "donation of lands lying upon the waters of Pearl river . . . to aid in opening and improving the navigation . . . from the seat of government of the State to the Gulf of Mexico."<sup>60</sup> Altering the meeting times of the U.S. District Court took Senator Williams and Representative Rankin over two years to accomplish. Williams requested a better post road connecting Natchez to St. Stephens, Alabama. Rankin unsuccessfully advocated for a military road from Columbus "through the Choctaw nation of Indians, to Turner Brashaer's

---

<sup>58</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 927.

<sup>59</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 27; *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 130, 439.

<sup>60</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 227; 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 75-76.

stand” on the Natchez Trace.<sup>61</sup> On March 1, 1822, Rankin presented a memorial from the legislature asking permission to sell the public lands that had been set aside “for the support of schools.” Holmes did the same in the Senate a day earlier.<sup>62</sup> These multidimensional efforts aimed to enhance the development of the new state.

One of the first contentious issues in the House of Representatives of the Seventeenth Congress was the apportionment of the House based on the 1820 Census. Impassioned speeches and numerous votes exposed the localistic priorities of the congressmen. There was no concern for what was best for one’s section, or the nation, but what served the interests of each representative’s state. John Randolph and other Virginians were determined that the Old Dominion would not lose one seat. South Carolina argued for a rather precise population to representative ratio (39,900 : 1) so that it could add one more representative to its delegation. Delaware and Rhode Island desperately tried to hold on to their two-seat delegations. Christopher Rankin in eight roll calls voted to keep the ratio high, above 44,000 per representative. While he never spoke on the issue, he probably realized that Mississippi would not get more than one representative, so why not keep the House relatively small, and thus maintain a louder voice for Mississippi. On one ballot, Rankin did try to assist South Carolina, but after that he was very consistent in supporting a small House of Representatives.<sup>63</sup> Resolving apportionment was clearly a situation where every state was out for itself.

Senator Williams was a frequent participant in an issue of regional significance – the organization of the recently acquired Florida Territory. He lent his expertise on “the extent and labor,” “the talents and learning required,” and the appropriate salaries of territorial judges.<sup>64</sup> He moved to protect public lands from squatters. Both Williams and Holmes, however, tried to guarantee that settlers in Spanish Florida would keep their lands.<sup>65</sup> In the House, Christopher Rankin presented

---

<sup>61</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> Sess., 1000, 1058. Brashaer’s Stand was the Choctaw Indian Agency. It was in current-day Ridgeland on the Natchez Trace near mile post 104.5.

<sup>62</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 239, 1165.

<sup>63</sup> David Holmes followed the same strategy when the apportionment bill came before the Senate. Williams was absent the day it was debated.

<sup>64</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 226.

<sup>65</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 229.

a bill from the Committee on Public Lands to accomplish those tasks.<sup>66</sup> Williams pushed for the timely creation of ports of entry and appointment of revenue officers, as well as for the application of tariff duties outlined in the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819 that ceded Spanish Florida to the United States.<sup>67</sup> In the debates over the roles of the territorial governor and secretary of the territory, Williams resolved a deadlock by pointing to precedents established by a 1789 law.<sup>68</sup> Clearly Mississippi's recent territorial status gave weight to Williams' advice in the establishment of the Florida Territory. Curiously, Williams would have added part of western Florida to Alabama, but a majority of the Senate, including his colleague David Holmes, disagreed.<sup>69</sup> Williams and Holmes, however, did help scuttle a feeble attempt to restrict the movement of slaves into Florida.<sup>70</sup>

The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Congresses dealt with issues having more national implications. The contributions of Mississippi's senators to national policy were first expressed in the Senate and House Standing Committees. Senator Walter Leake in his brief tenure was put on the Committee of Accounts, but later became a member of the influential Judiciary Committee. After Leake's resignation, David Holmes chaired the Committee on Indian Affairs. He held that post through the Seventeenth Congress. Thomas Williams was chair of the Senate Committee on Public Lands for one session, but in both Congresses he found a home on the Naval Affairs Committee. Committee records from this period were not preserved, so it is unclear what contributions they made to the deliberations.

Christopher Rankin's committee service led him to have more of a presence in the House. His first committee experience in the Sixteenth Congress was as a member on the mundane Committee on Private Land Claims. Presumably his performance was quite competent because in the next Congress he became chair of the Committee on the Public Lands. Rankin would serve as chair of that committee until his untimely death on March 14, 1826, during the Nineteenth Congress. The Committee on the Public Lands guided the distribution and sale of federal government land largely in the new states beyond the

---

<sup>66</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 928.

<sup>67</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 227-228, 236.

<sup>68</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 277.

<sup>69</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 276.

<sup>70</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 277.

Appalachians. The committee was besieged by requests to give lands away for one supposedly worthy project after another. The Mississippi General Assembly's request for lands along the Pearl River was a typical example. Since the Revolutionary War, the federal government had promised public lands to veterans for their service. Education in the trans-Appalachian states benefited from public land sales. But the lands were also to generate money for the federal government's operation. When the Treaty of Doak's Stand, signed in 1820, led to the removal of the Choctaws from central Mississippi, the House charged the Committee on the Public Lands with creating a process "for the better organization of the land districts in the State of Mississippi, and the disposal of the public lands."<sup>71</sup> Rankin's committee was responsible for finding the right balance.

A seemingly trivial but bitter dispute arose when residents of Peoria, Illinois, requested public lands due to their settlement long before that territory had been organized, allegedly in 1776. The town's initial and valuable purpose was as a trading outpost with Native Americans. Most committee members concluded that acceding to this claim was tantamount to giving public lands away to squatters. Rankin acknowledged that the Confederation Congress in 1781 had granted the residents some lands, but they had never legally registered their claims, and later settlers were demanding the same right. One member of the committee, Daniel Cook, the lone and particularly feisty representative from Illinois, argued the claims had merit and "this was a peculiar case, requiring peculiar legislation."<sup>72</sup> The response by many congressmen, including Rankin, was that this "peculiar case" set a dangerous precedent. "They would tread on dangerous ground," Rankin warned, "and . . . there were claims of this description in several other of the States and Territories."<sup>73</sup> "It was time to stop giving away the public lands."<sup>74</sup> Not only was the precedent worrisome, but some of the land in question, Rankin observed, might have been already surveyed for military bounties.<sup>75</sup> Eventually, the bill was passed after being amended in the House and Senate, notwithstanding Rankin's concerns. The act did restrict how much land a claimant re-

---

<sup>71</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 524.

<sup>72</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 477.

<sup>73</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 477.

<sup>74</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 472.

<sup>75</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 486.

ceived while recognizing that others might have prior and superseding claims.

Rankin represented the voice of financial prudence when U.S. Representative Edward Tattnell of Georgia proposed the immediate enactment of a measure to pay the Cherokee and Creek Indians for all lands within Georgia's borders. Rankin gently suggested the Ways and Means Committee investigate this appropriation. Congress did not comprehend "the extent of these reservations," and Rankin warned "the sum adequate to the extinguishment of the Indian title would be much greater than gentlemen anticipated." Tattnell felt he had been unfairly criticized, if not insulted, but Rankin's cautiousness carried the day.<sup>76</sup>

On two occasions Rankin helped define the borders of Western expansion and facilitate its settlement. According to the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Spain recognized the Sabine River as the western border of Louisiana. Long before that treaty, controversy surrounded the ownership of what was called the Neutral Ground, or demilitarized zone, in western Louisiana. Rankin's committee wrote a bill to examine the titles of all settlers in that long-disputed area, thus setting the stage for the sale of the remaining public lands.<sup>77</sup> Rankin's attention also ranged farther north. In January 1823, he proposed creating a select committee (to include many of the Public Lands Committee members) to define the western border of the Arkansas Territory, beyond which would be Indian lands. Their bill would shield public lands in Arkansas from squatters and prevent White settlements in the Indian Territory. His vice-chair on that special committee was future president James Buchanan.<sup>78</sup>

The smooth operation of land offices was also of concern. In a time of economic turmoil, Rankin, as will be seen, was supportive of cutting government expenses. Rankin vigorously argued, however, that the employees of the land offices – registers and receivers of public money – deserved salary increases due to the great surge in western land sales after the conclusion of the War of 1812. This important business demanded accurate records of the money delivered to the banks where the government had accounts. "The effect of lowering the sal-

---

<sup>76</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 442, 443.

<sup>77</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 447-448.

<sup>78</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 543-544.

aries” for these officials, Rankin argued, would “not . . . diminish the number of applicants for them, but to get incompetent men to fill them. This was false economy.”<sup>79</sup> More compensation would attract the truly qualified who would conduct the government’s business both efficiently and safely.

Rankin’s conduct of the Committee on the Public Lands provides no evidence of the persistence of sectionalism. Far from it. The Mississippi congressman showed concern for the equitable settlement of the West, good government, and the nation’s prosperity and welfare.

In the absence of published speeches and detailed committee records, it is still possible to get a sense of what Mississippi’s congressional delegation thought of national issues. The roll call votes in the House and Senate, despite their limitations, reveal a number of important patterns. The financial panic in 1819 severely disrupted the national economy for several years.<sup>80</sup> Congress responded in three ways – retrenchment of government spending, reform, and seeking the foundation for future growth.

One controversial target for curtailing government spending was the reduction of pensions for Revolutionary War veterans. On seven roll calls in the Sixteenth Congress, Rankin supported making these cuts. In the following Congress, he relented to restore some pensions to demonstrably indigent veterans. But on a subsequent question of adding more to the pension rolls, he again was in opposition. Senators Leake, Williams, and Holmes joined with Rankin. When a Kentucky senator proposed rewarding a veteran of the War of 1812 with land for “very . . . hazardous service” against the Indians, Williams and others objected that such a bill did not come “within any principles on which Congress had given pensions or donations and of the inability of the Government to reward all cases of meritorious service, where no disability ensued.”<sup>81</sup>

Congress also targeted the army. Williams adamantly favored trimming army appropriations. Leake and Holmes did not. In the House, Rankin was almost as determined as Williams and voted twice to reduce the size of the army. As will be seen, there is indirect evidence that Williams concurred. Rankin even supported a measure that

---

<sup>79</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 364-365. See also *Ibid.*, 356-357.

<sup>80</sup> An important study of the economic dislocation is Browning, *The Panic of 1819*. For an insightful overview of its impact, see 7-10.

<sup>81</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 641.

would have affected the viability of West Point, and Williams voted against the promotion of Sylvanus Thayer, the superintendent of the United States Military Academy. In the Sixteenth Congress, a bill came up to remove the military and government from the business of trading with the Indians and, instead, place it in the hands of private entrepreneurs. Leake presented evidence of “the pernicious effects of private traders.” Rankin moved to lay the bill on the table to kill it. On this issue Holmes, Leake, and Rankin consistently disagreed with Williams.<sup>82</sup>

There were several reductions Mississippi’s political leaders refused to make. All supported maintaining appropriations for the navy. Williams, who was the most vigilant in constraining spending, approved their appropriations without dissent, perhaps because of his service on the Naval Affairs Committee. Rankin even voted for a small increase to help the navy combat piracy.<sup>83</sup> Senators Holmes and Williams opposed measures to cut congressional compensation. Rankin fervently joined them, voting twelve times to preserve salaries and travel expenses. To be fair, Rankin also wished to preserve or even increase compensation for land office employees, and he also voted to maintain custom officials’ pay and the number of customs houses. His rationale was that government revenue would be enhanced.<sup>84</sup>

Both the Senate and the House of Representatives proposed reform measures meant to mitigate future economic downturns and eliminate corruption. Senators Holmes and Williams agreed on changing some practices of the Bank of the United States, whose leadership was widely condemned for causing and deepening the economic panic. In the first session of the Sixteenth Congress, an issue arose with which the Mississippi delegation was probably well familiar – the purchase of public land on credit. Senators Leake and Williams and Representative Rankin favored switching to cash only.<sup>85</sup> The sole concession Rankin supported was that there should be some temporary indulgence be-

---

<sup>82</sup> For Leake, see *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 547. For Rankin, see *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1250-51. For the Williams and Holmes disagreement, see *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 381.

<sup>83</sup> On Williams and Holmes, see *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 415. On Rankin, see *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2239-2240; 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1063, 1287.

<sup>84</sup> Holmes and Williams were also on record for maintaining the customs presence at Natchez. *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 173.

<sup>85</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 450-452, 458.

cause this change was rather unexpected.<sup>86</sup> Leake was willing to divide the land into smaller sections to facilitate cash purchases, and in the future, the Senate might consider reducing the price for lands that went unsold.<sup>87</sup> But for the present, the policy of selling land had to change. In the Senate, controversy erupted over whether government officials who owed the government money should be paid. Williams again took a very hard stance voting six times to forbid paying “public defaulters.” Leake opposed him in the Sixteenth Congress, and Holmes did the same in the Seventeenth.<sup>88</sup> In the House, Rankin backed a bill to allow the Treasury to collect money due more easily.

A persistent reform measure in both the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Congresses was bankruptcy protection. Congress has the power to create “uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States,” but what that would entail was greatly disputed.<sup>89</sup> The Mississippians in Congress could not agree either. Williams was consistently supportive of a federal bankruptcy law that applied only to merchants. Leake and, later, Holmes were opposed to such a measure. Both, however, voted to extend bankruptcy protection to farmers, but they probably knew that was a deal breaker and would sink the measure. Rankin voted six times against a bankruptcy bill in the Sixteenth Congress. In the Seventeenth Congress, he waffled. Rankin opposed adding more than merchants to the bill, changed his mind (only a handful of representatives did that), and then missed the final vote.<sup>90</sup> It would be decades before Congress enacted a bankruptcy measure covering individuals.

The Congress also looked beyond the immediacy of the Panic of 1819 to lay a foundation for future growth and stability. One such measure was a revised tariff. The Tariff of 1816 had garnered widespread support from all sections and both political parties. A more protectionist proposal offered in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Congresses was not so well received especially by Mississippi’s senators and its representative. Despite the argument that the nation would benefit from more

---

<sup>86</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1699.

<sup>87</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 27, 486.

<sup>88</sup> For example, see *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 576; *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 401, 402, 405-407.

<sup>89</sup> Article One, Section 8. See also Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York, 2009), 593.

<sup>90</sup> This series of perplexing votes are in *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1276, 1278, 1298.

revenue and less dependence on foreign manufactured goods, many argued a revision in tariff rates would benefit some at the expense of the many. Even potential beneficiaries quarreled over the appropriate revisions. Speaker of the House Henry Clay, a fervent advocate for the tariff, admitted there was no perfect bill when the subject was revived in the Eighteenth Congress.<sup>91</sup> No Mississippian spoke up earlier, but in the Eighteenth Congress, Representative Rankin gave an extended denunciation moments after Clay, his erstwhile Missouri Compromise ally, concluded his argument. In a two-day speech that began on March 31, 1824, Rankin preferred “a policy, which does not propose to tax one portion of the community for the benefit of another . . . which protects all classes in their lawful pursuits.”<sup>92</sup> Rankin admitted a sectional bias: “What does the South demand of Congress? Only that her capital and industry may not be taxed for the benefit of some other section of the Union.”<sup>93</sup> For the most part, however, he claimed the tariff hurt the nation as a whole. It did not inspire confidence that the bill had no accompanying report from the Ways and Means Committee that calculated “the probable effects” that all were to experience.<sup>94</sup> Rankin pledged to “protect . . . every species of industry; but no one exclusively.”<sup>95</sup> He then sought in the rest of his speech to prove the proposed tariff would be a “corrupting influence . . . on the commerce, the agriculture, the manufactures, the revenue, the morals, and the liberty of the country.”<sup>96</sup> If Henry Clay of Kentucky and Daniel Webster of Massachusetts could proclaim the tariff was part of the “American System” to guarantee national prosperity, so could Rankin declaim that the measure undermined America’s future, not merely the South’s.<sup>97</sup> As a mechanism for economic growth, the tariff left much to be desired, according to Mississippians.

A newer device for economic progress and stability was incorporation. Here again the Mississippians were wary. Leake and Williams voted for stricter restrictions on all District of Columbia bank charters. Rankin in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Congresses voted against

---

<sup>91</sup> Clay: “You want what you will never get. Nothing human is perfect.” *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2000.

<sup>92</sup> *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2002.

<sup>93</sup> *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2002.

<sup>94</sup> *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2003.

<sup>95</sup> *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2005.

<sup>96</sup> *Annals*, 18<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 2007, 2018.

<sup>97</sup> See Sturgeon, “Nullification in Mississippi”; Browning, 353-356.

chartering those banks outright. He also opposed the incorporation of the Columbian College (eventually a part of George Washington University) in the District of Columbia. Leake spoke against granting "certain privileges to the Ocean Steamship Company of New York."<sup>98</sup>

Mississippi's congressional delegation was also involved in decisions about federally sponsored internal improvements, particularly roads and canals. Unfortunately, if they spoke about it in the Congress, their comments were not recorded. Nevertheless, there are some clear patterns. Senator Leake voted against supporting roads and canals in Ohio and Indiana. Like Leake, Senator Williams twice opposed a bill for a canal in Ohio, but he backed a measure for roads in Ohio and Indiana. In the Seventeenth Congress, Williams and Holmes voted three times for the repair of the Cumberland Road. This part was the easternmost portion of the National Road that crossed the Appalachians between Cumberland, Maryland, and Wheeling, Virginia (now West Virginia). Williams's earlier support for the Ohio and Indiana roads was probably related to the eventual extension of the National Road towards the Mississippi River. In the House, Rankin's position was unequivocal. He voted eleven times for the repairs and one of those votes was to override President Monroe's veto. Although a measure to conduct surveys and estimates for roads and canals never came up for a vote in the Senate, Rankin backed it the two times that it did in the House. In sum, it would appear that Senator Leake joined President Monroe in finding federal government support for internal improvement to be unconstitutional or perhaps financially unwise in the midst of an economic downturn. Williams concurred only when the projects in question pertained to one state. When roads connected states, however, as did the National Road, Williams, Holmes, and Rankin deemed them beneficial for the nation's future growth. A standard theme is the South stood in opposition to the expansion of federal government power. That argument applies to the tariff, but in the 1819 to 1823 period, Mississippians did not see the internal improvement issue through a sectional lens.

This era also saw the constant stirrings of democracy. A recurring topic of debate was a constitutional amendment that would change

---

<sup>98</sup> *Annals*, 16<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 627. See also R. Kent Newmyer, *The Supreme Court under Marshall and Taney* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Wheeling, IL: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 70-79; Howe, 557-559.

the Electoral College from a winner-take-all to voting by districts in a state. Whether to include existing congressional districts or even allow people to choose electors formed the shoals on which these proposals crashed. But the prospect of making the presidential election more democratic was irresistible. In the first session of the Sixteenth Congress, Mississippi's Williams resolutely favored reform while his Senate colleague Leake voted three times to maintain the status quo. In the House, Rankin twice supported constitutional change, but the requisite two-thirds support was unattainable. When a similar measure reemerged in the Senate during the Seventeenth Congress, both Holmes and Williams were supportive, but in vain.<sup>99</sup>

It is somewhat ironic that the Missouri Compromise should loom large in the so-called Era of Good Feelings. That appellation came from President James Monroe's unopposed reelection in 1820 and subsequent tour of the Northeast. The apparent unity was emblematic of the emergence of calm after the turmoil of the War of 1812 and assisted by the demise of the Federalist Party. Yet the support for Monroe was limited and unenthusiastic. John Eaton's letter to Rufus King, with Thomas Williams' postscript, on the day of the inauguration was one of many indications of that lack of support. "We have no administration," Rufus King wrote an old Federalist colleague. "Mr. M. tho' not buried, is dead."<sup>100</sup> Monroe sincerely wanted to rise above political parties, but as John Quincy Adams noted, "As the old line of demarkation [sic] between parties has been broken down, personal has taken the place of principled opposition. The personal friends of the President in the House are neither so numerous nor so active, nor so able as his opponents."<sup>101</sup> The presidential campaign of 1824 had begun. Some of its earliest manifestations came in Congress because so many cabinet officers – Adams, William H. Crawford, and John C. Calhoun – and former (and future) Speaker of the House Henry Clay, eyed the White House. Their congressional allies sought both to enhance their can-

---

<sup>99</sup> See also Andrew Burstein, *America's Jubilee: A Generation Remembers the Revolution After 50 Years of Independence* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2002), 159-180.

<sup>100</sup> Rufus King to Christopher Gore, February 3, 1822, in King (ed.), Vol. 6, 456.

<sup>101</sup> John Quincy Adams Diary, entry for Jan. 8, 1820, quoted in Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 126. Monroe's philosophical and political dilemmas are outlined in Ralph Ketcham, *Presidents Above Party* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 124-130.

didates' credentials and torpedo the competition. The maneuverings were uncoordinated and murky.

The entrance of General Andrew Jackson into the presidential race by 1823 would dictate the public stand of all Mississippi politicians. Before that point, however, it is difficult to define precisely the inclinations of Senators Williams and Holmes and Representative Rankin. (Leake's resignation preceded the 1820 election.) There are, however, some indications worth noting. As with several of the aforementioned issues, Mississippi's congressional delegation was not united and apparently not fervently behind one candidate or another. For example, the successful attempt to cut the army's size and appropriations was generally interpreted as an attack on Secretary of War Calhoun. Williams and Rankin were the most ardent on that issue, Holmes (and Leake) less so. How the reduced army was to be organized also evoked opposition from Crawford supporters, particularly Senator John Williams of Tennessee. In the spring of 1822, the Senate in executive session considered a number of Monroe's army nominations as recommended by Calhoun. In particular, the nominations of James Gadsden for adjutant general and Nathan Towson for colonel of artillery divided the Senate. The roll call votes rejecting the appointments were close and not sectional.<sup>102</sup> An infuriated President Monroe resubmitted Gadsden's and Towson's appointments only to have them rejected with Senator Williams of Tennessee again leading the charge.<sup>103</sup> Senator Holmes backed President Monroe. Williams of Mississippi pursued a curious course as he was the only senator to vote for Towson, but not Gadsden. Forty-two of the forty-seven senators who voted in the five roll calls were consistent – they always voted for Towson and Gadsden or against the pair. Williams' particular voting pattern was unique, but he gave no reasons.

In the House, Rankin worked well with Clay to achieve compromise on Missouri, but always stood opposed to the tariff, a fundamental element of the Kentuckian's "American System." David Cook of Illinois, an open supporter of Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, made it his mission to attack Secretary of the Treasury William H. Crawford whenever possible, often inferring fraudulent behavior. Rankin tried

---

<sup>102</sup> The roll call votes can be found in the *Senate Executive Journal*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 476, 478, 509-510.

<sup>103</sup> James Monroe to James Madison, May 12, 1822, *Founders Online*, National Archives. See also Cunningham, 110-111, 127-128.

to rein Cook in. For example, Cook claimed the Treasury had deposited “nearly a million dollars . . . in certain local banks . . . and kept [Congress] so much in the dark.”<sup>104</sup> Cook demanded access to the Treasury’s records, which Rankin characterized as a “complex and voluminous . . . mass of information.” No one would be able to comprehend it easily, but Rankin predicted that Cook would manipulate the data to make “speeches on this floor . . . [to] go forth to the public” suggesting Crawford “had violated his official duty, and disregarded the public interest.” Cook’s only purpose was “do injustice to the Secretary of the Treasury.” There were legitimate questions to be asked, but Rankin “had the utmost confidence” in Crawford. With a more reasonable document request “no doubt all these insinuations would be entirely dispated.”<sup>105</sup> Ultimately, the chaotic 1824 presidential election would be determined in the House of Representatives, where Rankin would cast Mississippi’s vote for Andrew Jackson. In these early days of the contest, Mississippi’s congressional delegation typified the uncertainty of the nation.

The Missouri Compromise was disturbing. The nation had not witnessed slavery discussed in such heated terms since the Constitutional Convention in 1787. Nevertheless, we should avoid seeing portents of civil war that were not there. Placing the Missouri controversy in the context of its times and using Mississippians as our guides offer a valuable lesson. The first men sent by Mississippians to represent them in Congress were competent and diligent, and their actions portray a more realistic view of that period. The troubled Sixteenth Congress dealt with important business on numerous other topics. In the following Congress, not only did the Mississippi delegation grapple with the immediate needs of their state and nation, but also with the economic and democratic measures that might reshape the nation’s future. Slavery was not among those issues. There was no manifestation of ill feelings among those who participated in the Missouri debates. Williams, Leake, Holmes, and Rankin addressed their constituent and state concerns, but not exclusively. They were not Southerners with an agenda, nor were they even united on the issues before them. Before Andrew Jackson’s candidacy, they were not even sure who should succeed President Monroe.

---

<sup>104</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 674-675.

<sup>105</sup> *Annals*, 17<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 673, 677.

It might be best to see politics in the late 1810s and early 1820s not as party versus party, or North versus South, but as a nation of self-centered factions. Mississippi's congressional delegation over the four-year span of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Congresses (and beyond) characterized that fractured society. In their own individualistic ways, Thomas H. Williams, Walter Leake, David Holmes, and Christopher Rankin were faithful public servants looking out for the best interests of the entire nation.