

YOUR OBEDIENT SERVANT: GOVERNMENT CLERKS, OFFICESEEKING, AND THE
POLITICS OF PATRONAGE IN ANTEBELLUM WASHINGTON CITY

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the social, political, and gendered components of public office and government employment during the antebellum era. Historians have invoked Andrew Jackson's system of spoils to demonstrate the rise of political democratization and the emergence of a federal bureaucracy. But few studies have attempted to examine at any length the public servants and citizens who were implicated into political parties and connected to government institutions through patronage. My research on public servants shows that officeseeking was a highly complex and contested phenomenon that was intimately connected to nineteenth-century political and moral economy. Its connection to the rise of partisan politics and its lure of men from more independent and manly professions worked to create a popular perception of government employment as a social evil. What is more, public office was regularly sought through elite Washington political networks accessible only to applicants with a relative close proximity to political power. My dissertation argues that these developments created a common ambivalence toward public life and a cultural hurdle to the development of a professional ideal within the federal government.

How government clerks understood this dynamic and how they made sense of their place within the unique political and social environment of the nation's capital, is of central importance to this study. Officeseeking emerged as a gendered middle-class experience, and clerking in the federal government offered an alternative livelihood to the diverse antebellum labor market. Many government officeseekers experienced decreased opportunities for

independent employment and hoped to protect their family's financial future with a clerk's salary. In their efforts to claim a respectable professionalism, Washington clerks articulated an understanding of the relationship between the federal government and its employees that challenged popular patronage rationality, setting the tone for future debates regarding civil service reform in the years following the Civil War.

For Julie and Doug Bowen, my parents

And

In memory of my Grandmother

Gloe Anderson

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Introduction

On December 5, 1814, Joseph Winborn Hand, a graduate of Yale College, arrived in Washington City from his home in Connecticut to work as a clerk in the General Post Office, a job he took in order to offset the cost of his legal training. Success, which Hand believed could be achieved through a respected profession, is what he sought. And at the age of 22, Hand found himself situated among “relations more of high rank and standing in society” than he had ever imagined. Hand’s two uncles, Josiah Meigs and Return J. Meigs, Jr., both Democratic-Republicans, occupied prominent official positions in Washington and were socially influential. After serving a brief stint as Surveyor General of the United States, Josiah assumed the more lucrative position of Commissioner of the General Land Office from 1814 to 1823. From 1814-1823, Return served as Postmaster General of the United States. Familial connections placed Hand in the position to garner a clerkship in Washington and study law in the office of Elias B. Caldwell, co-founder of the American Colonization Society and distinguished Washington resident.¹ Hand’s days were “uniformly spent.” He woke up, went to breakfast, and then to his office in the General Post Office, where he would remain until two or three in the afternoon. From there, he would spend his evening with company or reading Blackstone.²

¹ Joseph Hand Diary, Dec. 10, 1814, Container 2, John Aldrich Stephenson Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; “Sketch of Elias Boudinot Caldwell,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 24, no. 7 (1922), 210; William Chauncey Fowler, *Memorials of the Chaunceys, including President Chauncy, His Ancestors and Descendants* (Boston, MA: Henry W. Dutton and Son, 1858), 194. In 1801, Josiah Meigs left his brief position as Chair of the Department of Natural Philosophy and Mathematics at Yale College to become the first president of the University of Georgia until 1810. His brother, Return Meigs Jr., occupied a variety of leading political roles in Ohio, including the governorship from 1810-1814. See Meigs Family History and Genealogy, <http://www.meigs.org/index.html> (last accessed July 22, 2010).

Time and again, Hand questioned his existence in Washington and often doubted his ability to pursue the legal profession successfully without having the right resources at his disposal. On a lonely Tuesday evening in October, 1814, Hand wrote to himself:

Study is the great business of my life, but I have no books. I want to get acquainted with some lawyer of eminence for the sake of his library and if I could obtain it, his friendship. The young man's dream—I am laboring for a profession but I have no assistance, no instruction, and encouragement—'Tis a dark and intricate path—It leads to light at last, and I hope to independence—This is all the encouragement I have....³

Under Caldwell's supervision, Hand eventually went on to complete his training in the legal profession. He would, however, never become the attorney he dreamed of becoming; instead, as a career government clerk, Hand would go on to apply his knowledge of law and legal theory to administrative procedures. It is not known why Joseph Hand decided to choose this path. But at least one diary entry in 1815 offers a prophetic glimpse into Hand's future. Always introspective, Hand wrote that he did not find government clerical labor "unpleasant." And if he could consider himself "in business of a permanent nature [he] should be tolerably happy." But it was a "*profession*" that he wanted, and one that he was determined to get.⁴ Hand would ultimately discover moments of success and happiness while working as a government clerk in Washington City. But after 1829, his career would take an ambivalent turn as he found himself seeking a professional career within the federal government and all at once caught in the political windstorm of rotation in office.

Many other well-connected white men like Joseph Hand came to Washington City to

² Joseph Hand Diary, Dec. 26, 1814.

³ Ibid, Oct. 10, 1814. Similar sentiments are expressed on May 17th, 1815 and June 26, 1815.

⁴ Ibid., Oct. 6, 1815. On Joseph Hand's legal training, see "Sketch of Elias Boudinot Caldwell," 210; Fowler, *Memorials of the Chaunceys*, 194.

work as a clerk in one of the federal government's embryonic departments during the city's first few decades of development. Although many were not as young as Joseph Hand, they did share one commonality, which was to effectively perform the routine tasks needed in order to facilitate the growth of the national government. This would be the same for clerks who emerged on the Washington scene in subsequent decades, although, as this dissertation suggests, their social and professional lives would be increasingly influenced by partisan politics and the political doctrine of rotation in office. Nonetheless, clerks throughout the nineteenth century were ubiquitous figures in Washington society. Not only could they be located within the federal departments copying government papers and tabulating numerical data, clerks—and their officeseeking adversaries—could be found roaming the streets, dwelling in boardinghouses, and frequenting Washington's public establishments. As the nation expanded throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, clerks were crucial to the development of an efficient and rationalized national administrative state, if not the face of political and bureaucratic transformation.

This dissertation examines the social, political, and gendered components of government employment, the clerks who held government jobs, and those who sought them throughout the antebellum era. I analyze application letters, correspondence between government officials, diaries, government records, newspapers, popular periodicals, fiction, and advice literature in order to examine who government clerks were, where they came from, their social origins, their motives for seeking office, and how they related to and responded to the course of American politics and state development between the advent of Andrew Jackson's system of spoils and the beginning of the Civil War. Historians have invoked Andrew Jackson's system of spoils to demonstrate the rise of political democratization and the emergence of a federal bureaucracy. While the "spoils system" stretched the limits of officeseeking and made it increasingly popular

in American life, my dissertation argues that it primarily served the nation's burgeoning middle class. As well, the political doctrine of rotation in office created a popular ambivalence toward government officeholding and a cultural hurdle to the development of a professional ideal within the federal government. Yet there remained important linkages in the form of competent, career-minded public officials between the early republican period and the three decades before the Civil War. These individuals—precursors to the career bureaucrat—commonly challenged popular patronage rationality, setting the tone for future debates regarding civil service reform in the years following the Civil War.

By focusing on the officeseekers and clerks who worked in the federal departments in the nation's capital, my dissertation offers important insights into the growth of Washington City's clerking class and the formation of the nation's bureaucratic middle-class professionalism more generally. Despite her best efforts, the eminent historian of Washington City, Constance M. Green, noted over fifty years ago that there were few historical sources available to capture the social experience of the city's middle class during the first half of the nineteenth century.⁵ Contemporary journalists, writers, and travelers through Washington were more apt to discuss and write about the social dramas of high society, the personalities of the nation's leaders, and the city's meeting places and public buildings. As a result, the thousands of clerks who worked

⁵ Constance McLaughlin Green, "Problems of Writing the History of the District of Columbia," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, 51-52 (1951-52): 131. General histories of Washington during the antebellum period include Carl Abbot, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C. from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999). Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000); Howard Gillette Jr., ed., *Southern City, National Ambition: The Growth of Early Washington, D.C., 1800-1860* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Washington Area Studies, George Washington University, 1955); Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: Village and Capital, 1800-1878* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1962); Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

in the city's burgeoning federal departments throughout the antebellum era have been effectively left off the historical record. What is known, however, is that, with the exception of a few rooted and well-connected clerks who identified themselves as members of the Washington community, government clerks increasingly occupied the subordinate status of temporary residents between 1830 and 1860. The awareness and fear of being turned out of office simply prevented many clerks from making any long-term plans—mostly financial—within the city, including the purchasing of a home. As a result, the bulk of Washington City's middling residents did not share the same acts of civic engagement as their counterparts in other antebellum cities. More and more, an invisible line developed between those who thought of Washington City as home and the transient inhabitants—patronage clerks—whose purpose in the city was to perform a clerical duty in exchange for a salary.⁶

I

Middle-class development in Washington was an uneven and complex process that did not always correlate with the rest of the nation, particularly in the North, although it did share many of its characteristics. In this dissertation, I use class as an analytical lens for understanding the motives for seeking office and the development of a bureaucratic professionalism within the federal government. My analysis reflects a broader interpretive turn to describe the middling classes in the nineteenth century. Roughly thirty years ago, new social historians such as Paul E. Johnson, Mary P. Ryan, and Stuart Blumin drew attention to clerical labor in their efforts to understand middle-class formation and its gendered meaning in northern cities during the broad social and economic transformations of the nineteenth century. In an effort to write American

⁶ Jacob, *Capital Elites*; Green, *Washington*, 123.

history from the perspective of ordinary people, these scholars attributed a specific bourgeois and highly gendered mentality to clerks. Clerks stood as prime examples of individuals who learned to adapt middle-class ways, particularly through their identification with specific patterns of consumption, gender roles, housing, nonmanual labor, and civically engaged reform and religious organizations.⁷

Most recently, historians Brian P. Luskey and Michael Zakim have complicated our understanding of antebellum white-collar work by situating clerks more specifically within the context of the urban antebellum market economy and by demonstrating the elasticity of the American middle class. Luskey and Zakim have both demonstrated that clerkships were entry points into middle-class careers and lifestyles. Moreover, clerks continuously had to negotiate their terms of existence with competing narratives of success, gender, a moral life, and opportunities for class mobility in their effort to move up social and economic ranks. Leading the charge is Brian Luskey's study on young white merchant clerks in the Northeast. According

⁷ See Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family I Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: The Family In Oneida Country, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Also see Burton Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976); Allen Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, Pa.: Bucknell University Press, 1975). On the development of middle-class culture more generally, see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982); Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2000). In the past decade, scholars have resurrected the interpretive debate over the middle class and utility of class as a historical tool more generally. See especially Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001) and the special issue "Symposium on Class in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 25, n.4 (Winter 2005): 523-564.

to Luskey, young men left their farms and made their way into the city to work as clerks in order to accumulate enough “economic and cultural capital” to live independently and respectably. For these men, a clerkship provided a material and professional base to upward mobility and proprietorship. Luskey argues that antebellum merchant clerks were continually “on the make, persistently seeking self-advancement, self-improvement, or self-gratification,” and always hoping “to get ahead in business.” Sharing a similar interpretative framework, Zakim goes as far as to claim the business clerk a “social revolutionary,” someone who not only administered the new markets from an office-desk, but also “played an instrumental role in the social redefinition of an economy” that was moving increasingly away from the “mutuality and hierarchy of the agrarian republic.”⁸

Historians, of course, have developed conflicting arguments over the main determinants in identifying a class, or even if a distinct and identifiable middle class existed in the years prior to the Civil War. A plausible explanation has come from Stuart Blumin, who argues that in the three decades prior to the Civil War “a middle-class awareness” emerged due to the structural circumstances and social experiences that differentiated manual from nonmanual laborers. As middle-class awareness grew more acute, middling members of society sought out new ways to

⁸ See Brian P. Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 2; idem, “Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability, and Work in the Antebellum City,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Summer 2006), 173-219; Michael Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Winter 2006), 570, 72. For an informative and supportive response to Zakim’s article, see Stephen Mihm, “Clerks, Classes, and Conflicts: A Response to Michael Zakim’s ‘The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,’” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Winter 2006): 605-615. Recent studies that also reconstruct the worldview of clerks in the nineteenth-century are Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tail: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), and Jerome P. Bjelopera, *City of Clerks: Office and Sales Workers in Philadelphia, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

justify and safeguard their occupational status and relative economic position in society.⁹ Yet, Blumin's survey of middle-class formation in the nineteenth-century undermines the diverging and historically uneven socioeconomic composition that has come to characterize the middle class in American historiography.¹⁰ Brian P. Luskey's study on clerks underscores this point and suggests an important analytical frame to think about clerks in relation to class. Not all middling Americans had equal "access to wealth and the trappings of refinement." Clerks thus engaged in a "quest for capital," and clerking provided the material base to achieve independence, respect, and authority.¹¹

No studies exist, however, of those who journeyed to Washington and sought and found jobs as clerks in the federal government during the antebellum period. Cindy Aron's, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service* analyzes the development of a clerical class in Washington after the Civil War and is important to our understanding of clerical work and especially the development of female clerical labor into the twentieth century.¹² Although many connections

⁹ Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 9-10.

¹⁰ See Melanie Archer and Judith R. Bluth, "Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America," *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993), 17-41; Burton J. Bledstein, "Introduction" in Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-25.

¹¹ Luskey, *On the Make*, 17, 240 (fn. 23).

¹² Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987). Historians have primarily viewed government work from the standpoint of administrative form and state formation, see Carl Russel Fisk, *The Civil Service and the Patronage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920); Paul P. Van Riper, *History of the United States Civil Service* (Evanston, IL.: Row, Peterson and Company, 1958). For studies addressing government work from a state-centered perspective, see Leonard D. White, especially *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: Macmillan, 1956); Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The*

between the two periods exist, antebellum officeseekers and government clerks faced different circumstances—political and social—than their descendants. It is thus worthy to explore the clerks who worked in the nation’s nascent bureaucracy roughly half a century earlier. My dissertation shows that antebellum government clerks shared many of the same characteristics and ambitions as their counterparts who tended to the expansion of the national economy. Like merchant clerks, officeseekers and government clerks were forced to negotiate the terms of their labor and ambitions with competing cultural narratives and social ideals of success, independence, and what was deemed manly labor. Whereas merchant clerks hoped to find economic and cultural capital within the economic marketplace, government officeseekers hoped to find it within the federal government. One avenue, of course, was through rank, promotion, and even innovation; but government clerks sought to distinguish themselves within the confines of Washington society. Above all, however, government officeseekers shared a common aspiration with their middling merchant counterparts: a desire to accumulate social and economic capital.

While government clerks may not always have been “on the make,”¹³ in fact the bulk of them were family men, they did seek self-advancement and the attachment of professional authority to their labor. Government officeseeking was a middle-class experience shared by multitudes of men hoping to turn whatever social capital they had accumulated over the years into financial capital. While a clerkship in the economic marketplace provided a stepping stone to a loftier career, government clerkships provided a compensatory backstop for a fledgling

American Postal System From Franklin to Morse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Susan Sterett, *Public Pensions: Gender and Civil Service in the States, 1850-1937* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

¹³ See Luskey, *On the Make*.

sector of America's middling population hoping to secure their independence. Government clerkships and the widespread ambition to seek them were thus part of a larger struggle for power and social standing on behalf of the nation's middling population who shared an unequal access to the ideological and material underpinnings of refinement.¹⁴

Washington City was one venue in which social and economic capital could be accumulated. Compared to other occupations available in the antebellum economy, the salaries of government clerks were quite lucrative. Unlike the wages of laborers and skilled artisans, whose annual average income was often less than \$600 in 1850, clerks in Washington commonly earned between \$1,000 and \$1,500 annually. Chief clerks and other ranking officials earned upwards of \$2,000 annually. Private business clerks, on the other hand, generally started out at a much lower annual salary, expecting it to improve over the years. Moreover, salaries widely varied depending on the age, experience, skill, and relationship of the clerk to the employer. Business clerks tended to be young, single men and did not have a family to support; many also anticipated a move to the managerial class. Yet it was not uncommon for business clerks and other nonmanual employees to earn upwards of \$1,500 annually in many northeastern cities. Government clerks in the nation's capital thus earned a salary that was on par with their middling counterparts in other antebellum cities. Nonetheless, government clerks were often family men and due to the high cost of living in the nation's capital, they often found it difficult to move beyond middle-class subsistence, even though they and their families primarily resided in boardinghouses. A clerk in the Department of Treasury, Jonathan Seaver, who had a family of three adults, five children, and two part-time servants to provide for, could barely maintain

¹⁴ For a study on the economic perils of the nineteenth century and the cultural costs of individual economic failure, see Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

middle-class standards of refinement. Even with the best efforts of frugality, Seaver's household expenses amounted to \$1,447.96 in 1835, nearly \$50.00 over his annual salary of \$1,400.¹⁵

This dissertation suggests that antebellum officeseekers looked toward government clerkships as a way to secure nascent middle-class aspirations. Yet due to the political consequences of rotation in office, this quest was fraught with uncertainty. The fact remained that government clerks still performed a labor that was not entirely considered manly, or at least one that would lead to independence.¹⁶ Government clerks simply did not produce anything material—that is, of course, unless the nation was willing to overlook partisan politics and accept bureaucratic growth as a tangible product of hard-working men. Washington's clerking class thus attempted to reshape the labor theory of value by contending that “[g]eneral knowledge, mental activity and good judgment,” qualities of nonmanual, thinking labor, were as necessary in the operation of the federal government as they were on “the farm, the counting-house or the work-shop.”¹⁷ Popular discourse that suggested otherwise was time and again challenged by clerks who hoped to remedy their political vulnerability, economic position, and, importantly, their manhood by petitioning to Congress with a nonpartisan, merit-based discursive form that they hoped would elevate the professional and respectable qualities of their labor. In seeking to

¹⁵ Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 117; Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 377, 382, 392; Luskey, *On the Make*, 6, 44-45; Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, 109-121.

¹⁶ On gendered characteristics of independence, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 18-25.

¹⁷ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 1852, 320.

examine the ways in which clerks negotiated the terms of their labor, particularly along the lines of gender, this dissertation suggests new ways to think about masculinity in the nineteenth century, particularly as it relates to class. One of the most enduring features of middle-class masculinity could be found in their working life. My research suggests that middle-class white men attempted to forge their identities onto public service. This, in part, helped inspire the development of a rationalized and increasingly professional clerical class within Washington City.¹⁸

Nonetheless, not all officeseekers made the journey to Washington in order to spend their lives clerking in the federal government. Some viewed a government clerkship as merely a “situation,” a temporary position that could be used as a pedestal to move on to something bigger. Clerks brushed shoulders with the President, esteemed congressmen, and prominent residents while walking down the streets of Washington. Social capital could thus be accumulated in a variety of social settings, including the city’s hotels, lobby rooms, and parlors. Yet despite dreams of political accomplishment and fame, most clerks fell into and remained part of the city’s middling, clerical class.

Take for example, Benjamin Brown French, who arrived on the Washington scene from New Hampshire early in 1833 to work as a clerk in the House of Representatives. French had hoped that his initial appointment would grant him “an extraordinary course” through the ranks of public officials. His high point came when he was appointed to Chief Clerk in the House of Representatives in 1845, only to be dismissed when the Whigs took control of office. French soon realized that the level of social and domestic comfortableness to which he aspired would

¹⁸ See Toby L. Ditz, “The New Men’s History and the Peculiar Absence of Gendered Power: Some Remedies from Early American Gender History,” *Gender and History* 16 (2004): 1-35; Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

not come without its anxiety and struggles. French continuously battled “feverish longings for Fame [sic]” and “dreams of distinction,” but economically defined himself in 1847 as a middling member of Washington City—someone who stood “in that blessed position, having “neither poverty or riches.”¹⁹ French shortly thereafter reasoned that he was economically secure enough to be turned out of office without facing immediate consequences. Other clerks, however, were not so secure. For them, the fear of being rotated out of office was compiled by a potential loss in social status. French noted in his journal the consequential effects of rotation, which were “likely to be a source of distress” for his “friends in the office, some of whom are really poor.” He wrote sympathetically, “The political guillotine has already been set in motion, and five or six of my good fellows, & excellent clerks, have been decapitated.”²⁰

II

Unlike that of their business counterparts who tended to the capitalist transformation of the nation, the social experience of government clerks was influenced by the overlap of politics and society in Washington City. Their experience is thus inseparable from the history of the city. By placing my analysis of officeseeking and government clerks within the context of the nation’s capital and by examining the intersections between the social experiences of clerks, the rise of the second party system, and the forging of a national administrative state, my dissertation offers new and complex ways to think about political democratization and state development in the nineteenth century. Washington City experienced a subtle change in its social structure in the

¹⁹ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee’s Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), Dec. 30, 1833, 35, Nov. 18, 1841, 129, Dec. 16, 1847, 197.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 197.

decades after 1830, the period that marked the rises of political democratization. Washington government clerks and the development of a federal bureaucracy were significantly impacted by this development, although in ways different than previous historians have conceived.

In his pioneering 1966 study, *The Washington Community*, historian James Sterling Young emphasized the importance of Washington's informal networks and private institutions in shaping political decision-making during the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Insular and socially segregated from the rest of society, Young's Washington gave rise to a rigid social structure that paralleled "a hierarchy of superordinate-subordinate relationships" within the political and administrative structure of the government. Lacking a national political party in which to organize the federal government, Sterling's portrait of Washington reflected a decentralized republican political economy. The first three decades of the Washington community were marked by divisions and segmentation, a dynamic wholly supported by a network of associations that took place first and foremost in the city's boardinghouses. The only real political power, according to Young, resided in the executive and aristocratic class of government and society.

It was within this tier of the Washington community that networking in Washington took form, shaping not only social relations but public policy as well. As declared by Young, "Personality and social aptitudes—qualities wholly uncultivated in legislative society—were emphasized to the point of becoming a basis for rating a man's political prospects in the executive community." Young insisted that rank and status within public offices "carried over into extraofficial life" in Washington. Clerks and other ancillary employees, according to Sterling, were not permitted into this social arena and thus left to live a "separate class existence within the community." In the words of Young, "They [clerks] mingled largely with each other

and with townspeople in their leisure activities, intermarried within the group, developed their own social circles and rank orders, and stayed clear of the governmental politics of their superiors.”²¹ It would not be until Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party’s arrival in 1829, praised Young, that “common membership in a victorious political party” would cement “disparate groups at Washington into an association capable of governing.”²²

James Sterling Young’s study was one of the first to take the Washington community as a unit of analysis seriously, effectively using it to better understand the political development of the nation. Yet, for all its merits, Young’s study misunderstood and overemphasized the insular and hierarchical dimensions of Washington’s residential and official society. Young especially overemphasized the rigidity of its society. In particular, Young’s characterization of the Washington clerks as the “lowest tier” of the “ancillary employees” grossly understates their social standing. Finally, Young failed to account for the importance of Washington as the social and political capital of the nation, a place in which people could go to and accumulate social capital. Finally, Washington was not as remote and insular as Young was led to believe. Citizens were connected to it through a variety of federally-sponsored institutions and networks, the postal system being the most prevalent.²³

For years, James Sterling Young’s analysis of the Washington community stood on its

²¹ James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 215, 218.

²² *Ibid.*, 250-252.

²³ For a critique of Young’s analysis, see Richard John, “Affairs of Office: The Executive Departments, The Election of 1828, and the Making of the Democratic Party,” in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, eds. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 54.

own, used by historians and political scientists to understand the rise of political democratization and federal bureaucracy. Yet missing from Young's analysis was an examination of Washington's residential society. Otherwise known as official society, this class of the community played an important and active role in shaping the political culture of the city and fostering the development of the federal government by providing the social spaces and extraofficial structures needed for informal politicking to take place. In early republican Washington City, social rank, personal advancement, and wealth were byproducts of officeholding. Yet, importantly, members of Washington society also identified their interests as fitting for the republic. By focusing on Washington's public and private spaces, Catherine Allgor has demonstrated the inseparability of politics and society in Washington's early republican era. As argued by Allgor, Dolley Madison, among others "created a national etiquette and social style suitable for a seat of government, one that could display powers, enhance the status of the rulers, and facilitate the process of building a capital, a government structure, and a nation."²⁴ Washington's elite and middle-class white women, Allgor argues, "us[ed] social events and the 'private sphere' to establish the national capital and to build the extra official structures so sorely needed in the infant federal government." Much of this was done, furthermore, through the process of social networking, which took place in private social gatherings as much as the floors of Congress and the Senate. "The chief commodity supplied by these weekly gatherings was access," acknowledged Allgor: "Access begins the process of communication and then nurtures the personal relationship that keeps the political machine

²⁴ Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 1, 52, 79. For a more detailed account of Dolley Madison's social and political role in early federal Washington City, see Allgor, *A Perfect Union: Dolly Madison and the Creation of the American Nation* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 2006).

running.” It was thus through a chain of multifaceted networks that Washington’s elite women were able to help build the federal government. Despite its assumed aversion to republican ideology, patronage was crucial to the working of the government from the onset. The practice of patronage, especially through personal and family relationships, was central to this process as they “provided the federal government with the structure it needed to grow and thrive.”²⁵

In its first few decades of development, the city’s growth and stability were made possible through the establishment of an elaborate system of symbolic codes of etiquette and social rituals that structured domestic and political life in Washington. With the absence of mass national political parties and a relatively weak and undefined executive power to influence patronage claims, these social forms helped create the foundation for a stable and relatively efficient federal government and launch Washington as the center of the nation’s political power. As Allgor has aptly illuminated, Washington’s “unofficial spaces” played an important role within this uniquely local process of nation-building. The city’s drawing rooms, boarding houses, and hotel lobbies each existed as important links within an elaborate chain of social and political networks that proliferated throughout Washington during its first two decades of existence. Personal connections were made within these spaces for the benefit of patronage. But as social and political alliances, these agreements only enhanced the power of Washington’s official society. Vice versa, since lineal, personal, and social relationships played a critical role in determining one’s qualification for office, officeholders like Joseph Hand garnered respectability through their attachment and association to republican Washington City.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid., *Parlor Politics*, 145.

²⁶ Ibid., 52, 70, 130-145.

It is within this class, my dissertation suggests, we see the birth of career- and professionally-minded clerks, individuals who would avoid being rotated out of office and continue to push for merit-based reform throughout the antebellum period. They were, to be sure, important linkages that helped facilitate the development of administrative practices and procedures. By examining how this class unfolded and how new clerks were introduced into the administrative fold, my dissertation problematizes how we think about the rise of political democratization and the growth of a national administrative state prior to the Civil War.

As national politics changed, so too did the dimensions of Washington's social life. Beginning in the 1820s, officeseekers were compelled to negotiate the conventions of a community that was increasingly taking shape around party politics. Taking his cue from an 1820 law that authorized four-year terms of office for executive appointments, Andrew Jackson outlined a theory of staffing and rotating federal government offices that popularly came to be known as "rotation in office." By degrading the duties of public office to the status of "plain and simple," and by suggesting an improved "efficiency of the Government" by putting an end to the "long continuance of men in office," Jackson made officeseeking a commonplace in American life.²⁷ Accepting as real the participatory ideals of Jacksonian democracy, the conventional image of antebellum officeseekers is that of active political partisans exercising a new, democratic manhood within a revolutionary political system of spoils. Not only would laboring white men have a vote in political affairs, they would also be invited into the political process through rotation in office. Government offices were immediately interchangeable, and no one, at least according to Jacksonian rhetoric, held a vested right to government office. Jackson's

²⁷ Andrew Jackson, "First Annual Message" (December 8, 1829), in ed. James D. Richardson, vol.2 of *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1905), 449.

defenders, beginning with Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., have generally viewed this doctrine as a positive measure of reform that helped remove aristocratic and lineal privileges to office. In the words of Schlesinger, the spoils system helped establish widespread “faith in the government” and thus the foundation for “popular participation in the workings of the democracy.”²⁸

Antebellum historians have thoroughly explored the development of mass political parties in relation to patronage politics, but have rarely examined to any extent the political and social consequences of officeseeking.²⁹ Andrew Jackson’s inauguration of the spoils system provided the material base to the creation of mass political parties and the unfolding of the second party system by creating networks of influence throughout the country for at least the next 30 years. Jackson’s arrival as president in 1829 accordingly set off quite the stir among local residential and official elites, who had grown accustomed to using patronage appointments to appease friends and family members hoping to secure a government job to for someone in need. Jacksonian rhetoric, particularly his challenge to aristocracy and corruption within the federal government, threatened the social hierarchy of the city. But his threat to remove and replace the entirety of government officeholders with Democratic Party loyalists was only

²⁸ The literature from this angle is vast and broad, but begins with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), 46, 47. For a recent synthesis, see Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005). On white democratic manhood, see Paula Baker, “The Domestication of American Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-192,” *American Historical Review* 89 no. 3 (June 1984): 628-629.

²⁹ Exceptions include Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 37-46; Jeffrey Pasley, “Minnows, Spies, and Aristocrats: The Social Crisis of Congress in the Age of Martin Van Buren,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007): 599-653; and idem, *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American People* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 145-146, 320-348.

modestly put into place.³⁰

Nonetheless, many competent men did find themselves turned out of office and forced to seek a livelihood elsewhere. While the impact this had on Washington City's social structure was only subtle at the time, a line between official and residential society would be drawn more acute in future decades. Growing increasingly insular, Washington's elite residents would ultimately separate themselves from the rest of society, leaving the city's clerking class to form a class onto themselves. The implementation and use of rotation in office would be consequential in this regard, as many government clerks became extremely risk averse and chose not to make any long-term plans.³¹

By 1840, political proscription and rotation in office had become a widely used—albeit rhetorically contested—practice by both the Whigs and the Democrats. While both parties were sharply different on positions of national policy, both sought to use political patronage in order to mobilize voters and instill in officeseekers a partisan and personal stake in the outcome of each election. But patronage politics and rotation in office in particular did not necessarily elevate the “common man” to public office. As this dissertation suggests, patronage jobs were regularly sought through elite Washington political networks accessible only to applicants with a relative close proximity to political power. Social standing, family, and character, and most importantly, connections were as much determinative factors that shaped political patronage appointments as

³⁰ Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 100-104. In *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service: Standards of Selection in the Administrations of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1964), 192, historical sociologist Sidney Aronson has provided convincing evidence that the social class of the individuals Jackson appointed were not entirely different from those replaced.

³¹ On this development, see Jacob, *Capital Elites*; Green, *Washington*, 120-124.

party loyalty. The seeking of government office is thus significant because it reveals much about the nature of political democratization and middle-class formation prior to the Civil War.

Rarely, for example, did applicants for government clerkships or social critics of the time address political power as a primary motivation for the seeking of office. Economic opportunities were closely linked to political networking and patronage.³²

III

In one of his ruminations on nineteenth-century political economy, Tocqueville observed the distinctive nature of American individualism and national authority. “In the United States as soon as a man has acquired some education and pecuniary resources, he either endeavors to get rich by commerce or industry, or he buys land in the bush and turns pioneer,” wrote Tocqueville. “All that he asks of the State is not to be disturbed in his toil, and to be secure of his earnings.” Unlike his European counterpart, Tocqueville noted, the American’s last temptation was to seek “public employment.” But Tocqueville also recognized that Americans were not entirely adverse to public employment nor were they above “rush[ing] to the head of the State and demand[ing] its assistance,” especially when, as stated by Tocqueville, “commerce and industry, checked in their growth, afford only a slow and arduous means of making a fortune.” When this happens, Tocqueville noticed, officeseeking “becomes the most generally followed of all trades.”³³

Tocqueville was no doubt taken back by the high numbers of officeseekers making their

³² For a supporting claim, see Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*, 38-46.

³³ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans, Henry Reeve, V. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 738.

way to and from the nation's capital during his stay in the United States. Referring to it as "a great social evil," Tocqueville worried that officeseeking would destroy the republican social order by stifling the "spirit of independence in the citizen" and society's "manlier virtues." He further intimated that the American state would be forced to confront the nation's tremendous economic and demographic growth and all of its social consequences, including the hunt for public employment. "It is very certain that of all people in the world the most difficult to restrain and to manage are a people of solicitants," proclaimed Tocqueville. "[I]t is always to be apprehended that they will ultimately overturn the constitution of the country, and change the aspect of the State, for the sole purpose of making a clearance of places." Tocqueville offered sage advice to contemporary leaders, which was, "to teach their subjects the art of providing for themselves."³⁴ Tocqueville understood that political economy would emerge as a contested project in the nineteenth-century, and the demand for government assistance—in this case, in the form of government jobs, especially clerkships—would occupy an influential role in defining the limits of national authority.

Historians have debated the significance of national administrative authority in the early republic. In 1966, James Sterling Young declared that the federal government "was an institution of too little significance" to engage that attention of the nation's citizenry, nor were the nation's citizens interested in a "sequestered and secluded government." Young, however, did little to investigate development and implementation of public policy within the federal government.³⁵ Nonetheless, historians interested in party politics and political changes have found Young's assessment influential. Generally, this scholarship suggests that the nineteenth-

³⁴ Ibid., 739-740.

³⁵ James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community*, 27, 34.

century American state was dominated by courts and parties and few other institutions in American life had a major influence on social change.³⁶ Change occurred primarily through politics and at the local level. The period between 1830 and 1880 has accordingly been presented through historiographical literature as the “party period.”³⁷

Building on this literature, Lynn L. Marshall proposed in 1967 that spoils gave birth to bureaucracy in order to overcome national economic inefficiency. In their effort to create an egalitarian system of rotating offices, the Jacksonians—and Amos Kendal in particular—reorganized federal offices to be more rationalized, guided by rules and regulations, and organized by functions. Echoing Marshall’s thesis, Mathew Crenson argued that the initial bureaucratization of the central government emerged as a way to resolve the social change and dislocation that was taking place throughout society in general. Rather than connect the bureaucratization of the federal civil government to a previous era, Crenson argues that bureaucratization was a Jacksonian innovation to social disorder, and not an organizational

³⁶ Political scientist Stephen Skowronek argues that the early American state was limited to “courts and parties.” State authority, according to Skowronek, was hardly existent until after the Civil War, when a civil service career system began to emerge. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19-84. An alternative and more plausible state-centered approach to American institutional development is offered by Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 63-102.

³⁷ Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Joel H. Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

scheme of party operatives.³⁸ What is more, the Marshal-Crenson thesis ignores the claims previously made by administrative historian Leonard D. White, who argued that the spoils system stymied bureaucratic expansion by subordinating the executive branch to the goals and schemes necessary to the building of mass political parties.³⁹ The Marshal-Crenson thesis also neglected the “symbolic residue” that stemmed from Andrew Jackson’s clerical understanding of mass bureaucracy.⁴⁰ The symbolic image of government labor as “plain and simple” intermixed with the popular representation of officeseekers as self-interested, creating a cultural hurdle that inhibited the development of a professional ideal within the federal government.

The party-period paradigm, accordingly, does not sufficiently explain nineteenth-century political economy.⁴¹ Historians have demonstrated the pervasive and active role that the early American state played in stimulating national economic growth by fostering the building of communication networks and a host of other internal improvements. Additionally, the national

³⁸ Lynn L. Marshall, “The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party,” *American Historical Review* 72, no. 2 (1967): 445-468; Mathew A. Crenson, *The Federal Machine: Beginning of Bureaucracy in Jacksonian America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975). Sympathetic interpretations include James A. Monroe, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*, (2nd ed., New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 87-94; Michael Nelson, “A Short, Ironic History of American National Bureaucracy,” *Journal of Politics*, 44 (August 1982): 760-62; Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 271-305.

³⁹ Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 325-346.

⁴⁰ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovations in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43.

⁴¹ See, for example, Thomas Summerhill, *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

Postal System, the Patent Office, and even the national census were among many federal bureaucratic achievements that placed the early American state in an increasingly visible eye.⁴² Historian Richard R. John has been particularly important in this regard. His study on the development of the United States Postal System during the first half of the nineteenth century suggested that executive departments were often agents of social change. Not only did the Postal System inspire economic development it also provided the communicative link needed for the development of political parties. John located within the federal executive Post Office Department innovation, expansion, and the development of organizational procedures, the beginnings of bureaucratic autonomy; this development, however, was partly thwarted by Jackson's spoils system, which gutted the Postal System of its capable human resources.⁴³

My dissertation suggests the broader significance of antebellum government officeseekers and clerks in shaping and understanding nineteenth century political economy. Historians and political scientists have commonly invoked the Pendleton Act of 1883 as a fundamental recasting of national institutional power, and as a marker of success for early Progressive reformers and their ability to influence institutional reform. Emphasis has furthermore been insufficiently placed on the years between the Civil War and 1883, a period

⁴² See John L. Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an overview of recent literature on the growth of the American state, see Mark R. Wilson, "Law and the American State, from the Revolution to the Civil War: Institutional Growth and Structural Change," in Michael Grossberg and Christopher Tomlins, eds., *Cambridge History of Law in America, Volume II: The Long Nineteenth Century, 1789-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 1-35.

⁴³ John, *Spreading the News*.

marked by increased public attention on Congress for institutional change.⁴⁴ This interpretation fails to take into account the myriad ways in which government officeseekers and clerks looked toward and relied upon the civil government for personal and familial assistance, and, moreover, discredits the notion that professionalization within the federal bureaucracy had ever been a sought after ideal. The business of soliciting government officials for clerkships grew in popularity throughout the antebellum period. Consequently, officeseeking had become a politically important and ideologically contentious social practice. The antebellum officeseeker was easily employed by Americans to discuss—and undermine—the political and social developments of the day, including political economy.⁴⁵

The exclusive placement of officeseeking and government jobs within the “party period” paradigm partly obscures our understanding of nineteenth century political economy. That is, the rise in number and popularity of officeseekers and public jobs did not emerge wholly out of, nor was it entirely shaped by, a “partisan imperative” or even a “democratic wish.” In as much

⁴⁴ This field is extensive and generally follows the lead of Stephen Skowronek, who argues that the early American state was hardly existent until after the Civil War, when a civil service career system began to emerge. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State*, 19-84. Also see Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961); Patricia Wallace Ingraham, *The Foundation of Merit: The Public Service in American Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995). The influence of federal politicians in making the shift from political patronage to merit is suggested in Ronald N. Johnson and Gary D. Libecap, *The Federal Civil Service System and the Problem of Bureaucracy: The Economics and Politics of Institutional Change* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 12-76. The role of public pressure on congressional decision-making in the post-Civil War period, is explored in Sean M. Theriault, “Patronage, the Pendleton Act, and the Power of the People,” *The Journal of Politics*, 65 (February 2003), 50-68.

⁴⁵ James Parton, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, v. 3 (New York: Harper Row, 1967 [1860]). Wards, *Presidency of Andrew Jackson*. The decisive rhetoric that took shape around officeseeking can be understood within a “nonpartisan framework” suggested by Mark Voss-Hubbard. See *Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 40-48.

as government office was sought out of party loyalty, and patronage appointments were promoted through partisan political channels, there was also an expressed desire for state assistance. Although rotation in office weakened the organizational capabilities and efficiency of the national administrative state, there still remained within the federal bureaucracy important linkages to the early republican period. Increasingly throughout the antebellum period a professional and career-oriented middle class felt themselves entitled to economic rewards of government office. Once in office, many hoped that a clerk's salary would secure their social aspirations; in such, they looked toward meritocracy and professionalization in ways that would inform post-bellum discussions of civil service reform.

Finally, by placing my analysis within the context of Washington City—the nation's capital—my dissertation hopes to expose and analyze the complex history of political parties, state authority, and regional identity prior to the Civil War. Situated between the North and South, Washington City was designed to be outside of the direct administrative control of any particular state or set of states. As a one-company town, its sole purpose was to foster the development of the federal government. This, of course, made it an atypical antebellum city, although it did share some of the same cultural features as other cities.

Washington City has always had an “ambiguous and contested regional identity.” The question of whether or not it is a southern or northern town has often been a frequent point of debate. According to historian Carl Abbott, the “social and political construction” of Washington City has always been “a public process,” and is always changing. But what sets Washington City apart from other antebellum cities is its interplay between “place and network.” Geographically, Washington is distinguishably more southern than northern, but it always has been a “networked” city and permeable to outside influences. Because of this, according to

Abbot, the city was successively northernized and nationalized by the end of the Civil War and even more so in subsequent decades.⁴⁶ But this process would not have been made possible if it was not for the officeseekers and clerks who—through the process of networking—made their way to the federal departments and infused them with northern middle-class values of industry and business practices.⁴⁷

Each chapter of this dissertation is organized thematically in order to expose and analyze the complex history of officeseeking and clerking in the federal government during the antebellum period. Chapter One analyzes the ideological and discursive conflict that shaped public perceptions of government employment and officeseeking. The chief icon of the “age of spoils,” the officeseeker existed at the center of conversations regarding the development of political democracy and market capitalism. The officeseeker and officeseeking in general had become rhetorical and metaphorical devices, used by Americans to discuss—and undermine—the political and social developments of the nation. Coincidentally, Andrew Jackson’s political maneuvering of “rotation in office” effectively degraded the duties of public office to the status of “plain and simple,” even unmanly. This contested image of government officeseeking and clerical labor helped create a cultural hurdle to the development of a professional ideal within the

⁴⁶ Abbot, *Political Terrain*, 7, 24. On the rise of the national administrative state and its facilitation of northern capitalism, see Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁴⁷ Historians have provided convincing evidence that the southern middle class shared many of the same values and practices as their northern cousins. See Frank J. Byrne, *Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006). Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

federal government.

Chapter Two moves away from public discourse and looks more closely at the professional lives of clerks. In particular, it examines the intersection of government labor and an emerging middle-class ethos that valued nonmanual professions. Although commonly unnoticed by historians and political theorists who have attempted to document the formation of the American state during the antebellum period, many career-minded clerks remained in office for consecutive administrations. These individuals carried with them important administrative knowledge, and thus played an important role in administering the daily functions and growth of the federal government. Unlike their politically appointed counterparts, who based their claim to public office along partisan lines, this chapter argues that career-minded government clerks in Washington continually challenged the dominant principles of popular patronage rationality by proactively arguing for the professionalization of their labor and by pushing for merit-based reform.

The next two chapters turn attention to those seeking a clerkship in Washington. Each chapter explores the types of individuals seeking office as well as the officeseeing processes that took place. Chapter Three argues that the personal activities of officeseekers were part of a multifaceted and multiplayer drama that was being played out in many locations throughout the antebellum era. The accumulation of testimonial letters, the travel to Washington, and the expected visit with the president or any high-ranking official were important components to the officeseeing process. In the cutthroat world of officeseeing, officeseekers were required to employ a variety of distinguishing attributes and rituals in order to mobilize existing social capital or, in some instances, build more social capital. Character, devotion to party principles, and, importantly, personal connections to Washington were vital to the officeseeker's probability

for success.

Chapter Four looks more closely at the factors that led men from all regions of the county to leave their lives at home for potentially brief tenures as clerks in the federal government. In particular, it explores the cultural implications of failure and the social act of begging that permeated the officeseeking process. While scholars have tended to emphasize the democratic impulse of officeseeking, this chapter argues that government work provided a compensatory safety net for a fledgling middle class and failed professionals in particular. It takes as its primary source of evidence the application letters sent to government officials by individuals hoping to resolve their financial burdens by working as a clerk in the federal government. Otherwise known to nineteenth-century audiences as “begging letters,” their relevance and popularity provide important insights into the social backgrounds of government officeseekers and clerks, as well as the conflicted development of America’s middling class in the nineteenth century.

By the beginning of the Civil War, the phrase “political guillotine” had become a popular metaphor to illustrate the political removals of government clerks from office. The final chapter draws attention more closely to the political climate of the 1850s by illuminating the personal, professional, and domestic consequences of rotation in office. It argues that rotation in office, whether it was fully carried out or not, encumbered the ability of clerks to fully cross the line between official and residential society, inhibiting the development of a coherent class identity shaped by a common, professional occupation. Clerks hoping to reform the policy on rotation in office argued that it violated the clerk’s right to live independently, outside of the control of another person or political party. This chapter concludes by suggesting that clerks argued for a new state-centered nationalism as a way to resolve national problems.

Chapter I

A Nation of Office Hunters: Officeseeking, Public Service, and Manly Labor in the Age of Spoils

“It is positively pitiable to see able-bodied young men come a thousand or more miles for the very dubious chance of a little clerkship; now, especially, when all avenues of business are invitingly wide open. Oh, these acorn-fed shoats, squealing for a dive at the public crib, while the ‘initiated clover-fed’ are yet grunting around for more! It is a shame that they have no higher ambition.

—*American Phrenological Journal*, November 4, 1864

Of Andrew Jackson’s many policies, it seemed that only one stood clear: the use of patronage to bolster his administration and, in effect, the Democratic Party. According to Jackson’s opponents, the removal of men from public offices, only to be replaced by Jackson loyalists, stood as a stark form of corruption in a nation dedicated to republican principles. Washington’s leading anti-Jackson newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*, compared Jackson’s partisan appointments to “the schemes of the mere demagogues for their personal appointment.”¹ Jackson, on the other hand, declared that government had become increasingly corrupt under previous administrations, serving private rather than public interests. In his First Annual Message to Congress in 1829, Jackson declared, “The duties of all public offices are, or at least admit of being made, so plain and simple that men of intelligence may readily qualify themselves for their performance.” No one in the republic held a natural right to office, nor was any special talent or privilege required to meet the demands of public service. “In a country where offices are created solely for the benefit of the people,” pronounced Jackson, “no one man has any more

¹ Quote taken from Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 103.

intrinsic right to official station than another.”² Jackson, however, did not suggest the opening of doors to paltry and incompetent officeseekers; but by making rotation in office a democratic principle, he did expand the scope of public office to a larger body of citizens. So began the induction of what came to be known popularly as the “spoils system.”³

Prior to becoming a clerk or other public servant, one was an officeseeker. And by 1830, *officeseeking*—also commonly referred to as *officehunting*—had emerged as a popular and decisive keyword within public discourse.⁴ In its antebellum context, the term primarily referred to the seeking of public office, chiefly within the nation’s capital. The term also designated a wide-range of government offices and posts, from that of an office messenger to that of an elected official. But as an ideological concept, the term carried with it abstract meanings rooted in the social, economic, and political developments of the early republic and antebellum era. The chief icon of the “age of spoils,” the officeseeker emerged from its revolutionary and republican roots a divisive figure. As argued by historian Gordon S. Wood, the problem of officeceholding—whether or not political offices would be held by

² Andrew Jackson, “First Annual Message” (December 8, 1829), in ed. James D. Richardson, vol.2 of *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1905), 449.

³ The relationship between political parties and public bureaucracies and their significance in party-building during the nineteenth-century, particularly during the Jacksonian Era, is explored in Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). A historiographical overview of Jackson’s system of spoils is offered in William F. Mugleston, “Andrew Jackson and the Spoils System: An Historiographical Survey,” *Mid-America* 59, no. 2 (April-July 1977): 117-125.

⁴ The importance of the role “keywords” played in shaping social life is explored in Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also, Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

“disinterested” or “interested” men and the transition to the latter—“marked an end to classical republicanism and the beginnings of liberal democracy.”⁵ Additionally, Alan Taylor has demonstrated how forms of electioneering in upstate New York during the 1790s were at odds with early republican principles. Local ambitious office holders, according to Taylor, devised a self-interested and corrupt style of officeseeking that they tried to reconcile with republican ideals of governance. Importantly, the “contradictions” and discord within this political culture, according to Taylor, “led to the advent of organized political parties.” Despite the arrival of “modern” mass political parties by 1830, party leaders—Democrat and Whig—continued to employ a “premodern” language of republicanism in order to defend their party’s actions and mobilize voter support. Party spokesman, nonetheless, found it difficult to reconcile republican ideology with the new democratic realities. Caught within this political entanglement stood the social and political practice of officeseeking, a highly complex and contested phenomenon that was intimately connected to nineteenth-century political economy.⁶

This chapter focuses on the discursive patterns—the values, criticisms, and

⁵ For a brief albeit informative narrative of this transition, see Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 287-305, quote on 296. On the emergence of economic liberalism in the North, see Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

⁶ See Alan Taylor, “‘The Art of Hook & Snivey’: Political Culture in Upstate New York during the 1790s,” *Journal of American History* 79, no. 4 (March 1993): 1371-1396; Major Wilson, “Republicanism and the Idea of Party in the Jacksonian Period,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1988): 423; and idem, “The Country versus the Court: A Republican Consensus and Party Debate in the Bank War,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 619-617. On the importance of early republican political economy and the tension New York farmers faced in reconciling republican ideals with organized political parties in the long nineteenth century, see Thomas Summerhill, *Harvest of Dissent: Agrarianism in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

assumptions—espoused by national media and government officials over officeseeking. As officeholding distanced itself from republican principles and transitioned into the American party system, the officeseeker and officeseeking in general had become rhetorical and metaphorical devices, used by Americans to discuss and critique the political and social developments of the nation. As the symbolic nexus of all that was wrong with America, discussions and critiques of officeseeking were employed by political leaders and social critics in order to make sense of the world around them. This chapter argues that the contested rhetoric of officeseeking played an important and influential role in redefining and developing conceptions of public service. Antebellum government clerks—former officeseekers and forever implicated into the political maneuvering of “rotation in office”—were forced to negotiate public perceptions of officeseeking in their attempt to distinguish themselves within the public and social milieu of the nation’s capital.

I

Following the American Revolution, officeholders were expected to carry out a single, republican interest. In order to do so, officeholders were supposed to put their private and selfish interests aside for the betterment and unity of the republic. No one was accordingly expected to seek office; rather, it was an honorable duty, if not a burden, expected of aristocratic and property-holding men. In an ideal republican world, these men would be virtuous and wealthy enough to not have to accept a government salary, for such an action implied a self-interested motive. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson—two members of the Virginian republican aristocracy—maintained that government existed for the promotion of the common good; the autonomy of civic virtue would crumble if men were to assume office eager for profit. Over

time, however, the questions of whether officeholders would receive a salary became a debated and controversial topic. Eventually, officeseeking became another form of earning a living, thus separating itself from its classical republican antecedents.⁷

By 1800, the conception of officeholding had lost some of its classical republican muster. As it began to slowly permeate national politics and shape the contours of public administration, it became a source of criticism among the nation's leading men. In 1799, Vice-President Thomas Jefferson, offered a forewarning to the corrupting influences officeseeking potentially held on the public. A sentiment of classical republican thought, Jefferson reasoned, "whenever a man has cast a longing eye on them [public offices], rottenness begins in his conduct." Four years later, John Adams regrettably admitted that officeseeking had become "so numerous" it was "corrupting the principles of the great mass" of the population. "By presenting an easier resource for a livelihood," exclaimed Adams, "it was poisoning the very source of industry."⁸

But much of the distress over officeseeking was confined to the personal letters and memoirs of leading government officials, rather than the public press.⁹ To be sure, even Thomas

⁷ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 287-302. On classical republican thought, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969).

⁸ Quote taken from Leonard White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 365.

⁹ It was not until after 1820, with the beginnings of the transportation and communications revolution, that officeholding would become as historian Daniel Walker Howe suggests, "a battle over public opinion conducted through political organizations and the medium of print." See *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 237. On the nation diffusion of information, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). On the importance of newspapers and politics in

Jefferson, a champion of classical republicanism and political economy, found it difficult not to separate the political benefits from the removal and appointments of individuals to public office. While he abhorred officeseeking, relegating it to the ranks of self-interested political partisanry, Jefferson eventually rationalized that civic harmony and public good could be maintained by administering public offices partly along political lines. Evidently, Jefferson had become so entangled in the distribution and management of officeseeking requests that upon his retirement he felt compelled to distribute 100 copies of a “Circular to Office Seekers” in order to deter applicants “desiring appointments” from seeking his influence. Jefferson reasoned that it was necessary for him to “lay down as a law” his “future conduct never to interpose in any case, either with him [a friend] or the Heads of Departments...in any application whatever for office.” Such an act of importuning, Jefferson feared, would transform him from the “character of a friend to that of an unreasonable and troublesome solicitant.”¹⁰ Although Jefferson’s intentions were to perhaps retire in peace, he surely did not want to tarnish his honor or reputation by importuning for office.¹¹ Nevertheless, with the public good at the fore of republican decision-making, the appointment and dismissal of civil servants as a result of their political faith was hardly a national concern. The staffing of government offices with “men of talents,” as suggested by Jefferson, became the widely accepted (although not necessarily followed) rule of

the early republic, see Jeffrey Pasley, *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American People* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Circular to Office Seekers,” enclosure in Thomas Jefferson to Samuel H. Smith, Mar. 6, 1809, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson: Retirement Series*, Vol. 1, J. Jefferson Looney, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 30-31.

¹¹ On the importance of honor and reputation of early republican officeholders, see Joanne B Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

the day. Whatever partisan implications or criticisms existed in regard to officeholding or seeking of public office, they were commonly overshadowed by classical republican ideals.¹²

Nonetheless, after 1800 and increasingly more so by 1830, the classical republican belief that government was created to uphold a single interest gave way to the acceptance of “interests.” On a basic level, this reflected the transition from a republican conception of government to that of a liberal democracy. Since men were expected to pursue their own private interests independently and freely—primarily an economic pursuit that existed at the center of the public good—it was unreasonable to expect individuals to take on the responsibility of office without cash compensation. This closely paralleled the conceptual change that took place regarding elected officials and politics more generally. As the nation shifted to an acceptance of conflicting economic and political interests—primarily those wrought by the market revolution—politics changed too. As suggested by Gordon Wood, “elected official were to bring the partial, local interests of the society, and sometime even their own interests, right into the workings of government.” This shift, of course, was compounded by the mid-1820s. By this time, nearly every state had written into law universal white manhood suffrage, which led to greater participation in politics and consequently the swelling of mass political parties throughout the antebellum period.¹³

¹² Jeffrey Pasley, “‘A Journeyman, either in Law or Politics’: John Beckley and the Social Origins of Political Campaigning,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 16, no. 4 (Winter, 1996): 531-569; James Roger Sharp, *The New Nation in Crisis: American Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 276-277; Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951), 364-381; idem, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 301; Gaillard Hunt, “Office-seeking during Jefferson’s Administration,” *American Historical Review* 3 (Jan. 1898): 270-291.

¹³ Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*, 294.

The arrival of Andrew Jackson to Washington City in 1829 set forth a sociopolitical upheaval. By this time, Washington had established a social hierarchy with a prescribed social life that held connections all the way back to the Jefferson administration.¹⁴ Andrew Jackson's introduction thus added a layer of partisan politics to an already complex configuration of social networks. The notion that the "man of the people" had been elected to the executive office left Washington residents feeling a great deal of anxiety and uncertainty. Historians have frequently invoked the rambunctious mob that ensued at the national capital following the inauguration of Andrew Jackson as the seventh president of the United States in March 1829 to illustrate the rise of populist democracy. But the large, diverse, and unrestrained crowd of officeseekers and Democratic partisans who stormed the capitol's front lawn was less a triumph of popular democracy than it was a challenge to the sensibilities of Washington's official and residential elites.¹⁵

Jacksonian rhetoric and politics, particularly the principle of rotation in office, left distinguished members of Washington's deep-rooted residential and official society fearful of

¹⁴ Catharine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000).

¹⁵ Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 196-215; Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 36-37. A traditional account of the Washington scene during Jackson's inauguration includes, Robert V. Remini, *The Revolutionary Age of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Avon Books, 1976), 35-40. The social drama that occurred surrounding Jackson's inauguration is thoroughly explored in Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 96-104. My conceptual approach is especially influenced by Richard John, "Affairs of Office: The Executive Departments, The Election of 1828, and the Making of the Democratic Party," in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, eds. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 50-84; idem, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 212-213.

losing their social position and political authority, which had been partly maintained by their ability to control access to and distribute patronage jobs. “Fear-ants” became the word of the day to describe those reluctant to accept Jackson’s changes. “Everybody is in a state of agitation—gloomy or glad,” wrote socialite Margaret Bayard Smith. “All the subordinate offices of government, and even to the clerks, are full of tremblings and anxiety.”¹⁶ Politics and society progressively intermixed. Washington elite society remained, but social events in the nation’s capital increasingly served political ends.¹⁷

Catharine Allgor and other historians have demonstrated the effect Andrew Jackson’s administration had on Washington’s social and political affairs. The infamous Eaton Affair in 1828, for example, underscored Washington’s rough transition from a society which had primarily taken shape around social relations of kith and kin to one that had become more profoundly influenced by political rank and political allegiance, properties of the new participatory democracy. In carrying with him to Washington the ideological underpinnings of democracy, Jackson proved unwilling to accept Washington as a community inseparable from politics and society. But it also became apparent through the Eaton affair that politics would continue to depend on society. While the interconnection between politics and society was continually downplayed by Jacksonian rhetoric, its utility within the political culture of Washington would remain until after the Civil War. Jackson’s system of patronage, as in previous decades, would also depend upon government society, particularly the forging of

¹⁶ Margaret Bayard Smith, *The First Forty Years of Washington Society*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1906), 281, 297, 283; also cited in Allgor, 196.

¹⁷ Allgor, 238.

politically beneficial public relationships.¹⁸

Andrew Jackson's victory over John Quincy Adams in the election of 1828 was divisive and vicious on a variety of fronts, but more so because partisanship was embraced openly for the first time in a presidential election. The momentum of the election can be traced back to the election of 1824. Due to a controversial decision, the House of Representatives rejected Jackson in favor of Adams, although Jackson carried more votes in both the electorate and electoral college. Commonly referred to by Jackson supporters as the "crime of 1824" or "corrupt bargain" orchestrated by Kentucky Senator Henry Clay, this decision helped create an energetic coalition around Andrew Jackson as the leader of the Democratic party, which partly defined itself against Clay's American System.¹⁹ Tension between the candidates would escalate as both camps utilized a partisan political rhetoric that transformed the 1828 election into a passionate and gendered political controversy.

At the center of this moral and value-ridden debate, was Andrew Jackson's past marital and sexual transgressions. According to the pro-Adams or proto-Whig supporters, a president with such devious and scandalous inclinations would not only corrupt the morals of the nation he might also weaken ties between the household and government—that is, the use of law to enhance marriage as a legal institution. Above all, anti-Jackson rhetoric helped articulate a

¹⁸ Allgor, *Party Politics*, 233; Kirsten E. Wood, "'One Woman So Dangerous To Public Morals': Gender and Power in the Eaton Affair," *Journal of the Early Republic* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 237-75; John F. Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex in Andrew Jackson's White House* (New York: Free Press, 1997).

¹⁹ At the heart of Clay's American System existed an expansive framework for internal and social improvements, including the construction of various systems of transportation and the use of the federal government to foster American manufacturing and agricultural enterprises. See Maurice Baxter, *Henry Clay and the American System* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1995).

proto-Whig position, including a commitment to self-discipline and moral and institutional reform. In response, Jackson's supporters espoused a partisan rhetoric that championed manly honor and privacy in marital affairs. On a broader level, Jacksonians invoked elements of republican thought, including the right to self-government. Jackson's camp reduced the corruptness that took place in the 1824 election to a corrupt and overly expansive national government—the same administration that was trying to regulate his private affairs. The two sides thus split. The Adamsites invoked a national, reformist government and the Jacksonians supported self-government and individual privacy, the hallmarks of the modern liberal state. Importantly, as made clear in his inaugural speech, Jackson attempted to reduce his experience to that of the common man, who he did not believe was disqualified from holding office.²⁰

While both Jacksonians and Adamsites decried partisan politics in their campaigns, Jackson and his supporters laid the groundwork for a new two-party system. To be sure, the election of 1828 came at an important political juncture. Its hallmarks were increased voter participation, skillful and innovative campaigning, and growth and concentration of party loyalties. Yet as much as it constituted the coming of democracy to American, it also bitterly divided the nation. Moreover, much of what Jackson achieved could be called “demagoguery” as much as “democracy” by contemporaries.²¹ This was certainly the case of Andrew Jackson's

²⁰ Norma Basch, “Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828,” *Journal of American History* 80, no. 3 (Dec. 1993), 890-913. For a broader overview, see Lynn Hudson Parsons, *The Birth of modern Politics: Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams and the Election of 1828* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²¹ Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 283. On the creation of the second party system, see Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Watson, *Liberty and Power*.

patronage policy, which many related to the old monarchical techniques of the eighteenth century. In fact, Jackson's opponents partly coalesced around the image of "King Andrew." Jackson responded by invoking in his first annual message the doctrine of rotation in office, an approach to governance that had long been articulated by political theorists as a way to free government from aristocratic influence and political monopolies. But whatever Jackson's intentions, opposition to rotation was widespread, both within and outside of Washington. Most viewed Jackson's rotation rhetoric as a cover to award lucrative offices for his friends and party loyalists. But criticisms aside, rotation in office—the periodical replacement of civil service workers—established a "material basis for the mass party as a self-perpetuating organization."²² The spoils system would be utilized well into the latter half of the nineteenth century by whichever party won office. The issues involved in the distribution of public offices and the practices of rotation would, however, continue to be debated.

Jackson's administration marked the image of a new type of worker within the developing public bureaucracy; but this too was as much the product of competing public and partisan discourses as it was grounded in socioeconomic differences. In his landmark study on the Jacksonian administration, Leonard D. White, drew attention to the cultural differences between Jacksonian officeseekers and those of the Federalist and Republican years. In line with the looming awareness of a democratic revolution, the "differential and circumspect attitude" of the previous officeseeker was replaced with a multitude of "strident, pushing, and insistent" officeseekers. The new breed of officeseekers could further be identified by their democratic forms of dress, which indicated a diversity of social and economic backgrounds. Public life, according to contemporary observers, had undergone a revolutionary change. The refined and

²² John, "Affairs of Office," 63-65, quote from 65.

well-manicured presentation of the “old régime, with their high stocks and good breeding,” were according to popular descriptions, fast becoming a relic of the past.²³ Jackson’s critics, on the other hand, disparagingly referred to this era as the “millennium of the minnows.” “With all the talents of the Union” to choose from, Jackson’s critics scoffed at the idea of Jackson surrounding “himself with men of narrow minds, some of them hardly gentlemen and none of them much character and no principles, moral or political.”²⁴

While public perceptions of officeholders and officeseeking would change precipitously, public offices would remain predominantly filled by men whose social status and reputation deemed them fit for public service. Most commonly, these were men with a relatively close access to political power.²⁵ Sociological and historical studies also show that the economic status of officeholders was not dramatically different from earlier administrations, though it is plausible that a higher number were self-made men born into provincial rather than more urbane middle and upper classes. To be clear, rotation in office did little to democratize and make public office accessible to applicants outside of the upper and developing middle classes.²⁶

²³ White, *The Jacksonians*, 301.

²⁴ Quotes taken from Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 101. The social and political friction within the Washington community is also discussed in Jeffrey Pasley, “Minnows, Spies, and Aristocrats: The Social Crisis of Congress in the Age of Martin Van Buren,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007): 608-618.

²⁵ Historian Stephanie McCurry, for example, has demonstrated with persistent evidence that South Carolina’s political culture was defined by planter domination of the state legislature and especially that body’s ability to wield influence political offices. See *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, & the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 239-251.

²⁶ Sociologist Sidney Aronson, in *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service: Standards of Selection in the Administrations of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew*

Nevertheless, Jackson's inauguration and the public response to it sheds light on the controversial role that officeseeking played in the transition to political democracy. This sentiment is supported by Washington socialite Josephine Seaton's disparaging commentary directed toward the attendance of officeseekers at Jackson's inauguration. Jackson's policy of removal, according to Seaton, marked the beginning of "a dark era in the hitherto aristocratic circles of the capital, which had been characterized by elegance of manners and the charm of high-breeding." Seaton specifically highlighted the "extreme bitterness of the party spirit" and the "reign of the 'masses'" in altering Washington's political and social events.²⁷ The distinguished and meritorious civil servants, according to Washington's *National Intelligencer*, were now being replaced by incompetent "Johnny Raws." This critique, of course, was meant to undermine Jackson's rejection to recruit a meritocracy in public service.

Contemporary Nathan Sargent referred less to the diminished qualifications for office that the supposed new class of officeseekers carried with them and instead chose to emphasize their apparent socioeconomic distinctions. "The city was full to overflowing of these cormorant patriots," retold Sargent. "But there was a multitude of them gathered here belonging to a class...of whom had never before been seen at the capital as expectants of office." Former residents similarly noted the overcrowding and spatial disarray the officeseeking crowd placed on the city. Hotel parlors and boarding houses overflowed. All the while, official residents

Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), showed that there was little socioeconomic difference between Jackson's higher-ranking appointees that those of previous administrations. Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Freedom, 1822-1832*, vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 249-250. On the middle-class nature of public employment, see Cindy Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-39.

²⁷ Josephine Seaton, ed., *William Winston Seaton of the "National Intelligencer": A Biographical Sketch* (Boston: J.R. Osgood and Comp., 1871), 179, 209.

continued to observe in astonishment the mass of officeseekers who continually “flocked into the city until beds were at a premium and the privilege of sleeping in queer uncomfortable places like bar-rooms, upon billiard tables, was eagerly sought and paid for.”²⁸

In addition to class discontent, the shift from a single republican loyalty to one driven by party loyalty drove the bulk of the public discord. The pro-Jackson *Telegraph* was clear in its position on rotation. “The hour of reform was at hand,” it wrote. “[T]hose who have been busily engaged in *uttering* as well as *writing* these detestable slanders will have to draw on other sources for *their hire*, than on the Treasury of the United States.” Reports of clerks “employed in slandering Jackson” were, furthermore, reprinted by partisan organs throughout the country.²⁹ While some newspapers actively indicted clerks for political disloyalty, others came to the defense of sympathetic clerks. In 1829, William Browne was dismissed from his clerkship in the Department of State by newly appointed Secretary Martin Van Buren. The *National Intelligencer* immediately heard of the dismissal and came to Browne’s defense. “What was Mr. Browne’s crime?” its editor asked. If political loyalty was the issue, Browne “was not even a political partisan.” The editor continued, “Whatever his opinions, he was too much occupied by his public and his domestic duties to find leisure for mixing in the parties of the day.” The

²⁸ The prominent Washington newspaper the *National Intelligencer*, and its editors, Joseph Gales Jr. and William Winston Seaton, played an important role in revitalizing a republican antiparty rhetoric aimed toward Jackson and his policies. See Edward L. Mayo, “Republicanism, Antipartyism, and Jacksonian Party Politics: A View From the Nation’s Capital,” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring 1979): 3-20; “Johnny Raws” quote taken from *National Intelligencer*, June 13, 1835; Nathan Sargent, *Public Men and Events from the Commencement of Mr. Monroe’s Administration, in 1817, to the Close of Mr. Filmore’s Administration, in 1853* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 157-158; Helen Nicolay, *Our Capital on the Potomac* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 192.

²⁹ *United States Telegraph*, August 29, 1827, September 6, 1828.

hesitancy of clerks to demonstrate any outright political allegiance or sympathies had evidently become commonplace in Washington after 1828. In 1829, the *Daily National Journal* reported that supporters of Clay's American System had united for a large celebratory dinner in Washington. Its editor was careful to underscore that "[n]o government clerk or other officer was seen on or near the premises." The *Raleigh Register* caught wind of the same article and used it as an opportunity to ruminate over the newly developing system of spoils. It asked, "Is this a free country?" "Have fifty-four years made us so degenerate, that a man in the employment of the government *dare* not express his own opinions?"³⁰

By 1830, the subject of government clerkships had become an impassioned point of discussion regarding the development of mass political parties and political democracy in general. The rotation of clerks in and out of office presented key opportunities for editors of newspapers to moralize on these issues. In 1833, Washington's *National Intelligencer* called attention to the case of a clerk who was removed from one of the state offices in Pennsylvania for "having exhibited premonitory symptoms of an intention to support" the next presidential candidate, who stood "in opposition to the views of the head of his Department." The editor continued to express a disdain toward the evils of rotation and in particular its limitations on freedom of expression. "Party Spirit," the editor forewarned, was about to become "hostile to the repose" and "freedom of thought" of the nation.³¹

But the onslaught of officeseekers to the Washington scene would rise throughout the antebellum era. The inauguration of each president was marked by an overcrowded White

³⁰ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 06, 1829; *Daily National Journal*, July 24, 1830; *Raleigh Register*, and *North-Carolina Gazette*, July 22, 1830.

³¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, August 24, 1833.

House stuffed with officeseekers waiting to plead their qualifications and expected reward of public office. An introductory letter or testimonial from a distinguished member of the political party in power or some other prominent figure was the first step in separating one's name from the mass of officeseekers. A few days after William Henry Harrison's inauguration to the presidency, it was reported that the White House was under siege by a crowd of officeseekers who refused to leave unless Harrison "receiv[ed] their papers and pledg[ed] himself to attend them." Harrison eventually acceded to their demands, and returned to his privacy with an armful of application papers. But the "quadrennial revel" did not subside.³²

Particularly vexing was the invasion of privacy that officeseekers imposed on the president, cabinet members, and other government officials. From the onset, the intrusion of the president's privacy had become a crucial counterpoint to Jackson's policy on rotation, underscoring what many feared represented the excesses of democracy. Philadelphia's *United States Gazette* witnessed in 1829 the decline of courtly manners more akin to previous administrations. "Officeseekers are not merely importunate in preferring their claims, but press them in a manner which is the reverse of courteous," the paper's editor wrote. "They intrude upon his private hours, and perforate the whole of the rooms of his mansion, to get a peep at him." The pro-Jackson *Niles Weekly Register* cautiously challenged this view, claiming that it was an "untrue" attempt by the *Gazette* to "discredit the process of reform" that Jackson had set forth. Instead, the democratic officeseeking process had embarked on a course "in perfect accordance with the *spirit of free choice*, and the demands of the people for a thorough

³² Quote taken from White, *The Jacksonians*, 304.

change.”³³

For many Washington residents, the violation of the president’s public and private spaces by an uninhibited officeseeking public was a sign of a republic and government in peril. Every four years government employees and Washington residents looked at the onslaught of officeseekers with disdain. After observing the transition from a Democratic to a Whig administration in 1841, chief clerk in the Patent Office, Joseph Hand, who was first employed during President James Madison’s administration, agitatedly wrote to his wife: “This day terminates Mr. Van Buren’s Power. There is something very melancholy and touching in this state of things.” A career-minded public official, Hand was quick to mention in an embellished allegorical fashion that the city was “literally swarming with rapacious & savage office-seekers—enough to gorge and devour, ten times over, all the places here.” Mary J. Windle, a member of Washington’s elite society, also expressed her disdain toward officeseekers. “Some come to ask *anything*; some to ask *everything*; some to ask *nothing*—only to make known that *something* would be extremely acceptable,” wrote Windle in 1856. Two years later, Windle reiterated similar sentiments in her journal by drawing attention to the sundry crowd of officeseekers admitted into the president’s waiting room. Windle was particularly repulsed by the “people” who reminded her of “many vultures gathered together” around the President, who found it difficult to escape the officeseekers’ ravenous “beaks and claws.” According to an 1853 account in the *National Intelligencer*, the clamor for office in Washington had become so overbearing that President Pierce and his department heads were forced to seek alternate routes

³³ Quotes are taken from “Etiquette and Appointments to Office,” May 29, 1829, *Niles Weekly Register*, 152.

as they made their way to and from their offices to their boardinghouses.³⁴

As early as 1829, Andrew Jackson acknowledged the detrimental effect Washington officeseekers had on his party and administration. In a personal letter to John Coffee referencing “the papers and other channels of information” that detailed the happenings within Washington, Jackson admitted that he was overwhelmed with the “thousands of applicants for office.” “If I had a tit for every applicant to suck the Treasury pap, all would go away well satisfied,” Jackson admitted, acknowledging that “more than one out of five hundred who applied...must go away dissatisfied.” So it would seem that officeseeking haunted Jackson until his death. In 1845, the *Niles National Register* retold a private conversation a man held with Jackson a few days before his death. “I am dying,” Jackson was quoted to have told the man. “But they will keep swarming upon me in crowds, *seeking* for office—*intriguing* for office.”³⁵

Partisan newspaper editorials and letters from editors, travelers, and visitors within Washington also spoke with astonishment and dread over the mass of officeseekers who engulfed the city. A Whig editor of the Chillicothe, Ohio, *Scioto Gazette* compared the handing out of public offices in 1829 to the “food of carrion beasts,” and officeseekers to crows who have come from all parts of the country to “congregate in anticipation for the expected feast.” Hotels, boardinghouses, and the avenues leading to the capital were “literally besieged” by officeseekers. It would have seemed that Washington was under attack by officeseekers, a threat that could

³⁴ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, 3 March 1841, Container 4, John Aldrich Stephenson Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Mary J. Windle, *Life in Washington, and Life Here and There* (Philadelphia: J.P. Lippincott, 1859), 14, 306; *National Intelligencer*, April 28, 1853, also cited in White, 305.

³⁵ Andrew Jackson to John Coffee, March 22, 1829, John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1929), 4:14; “Honors to Ex-President Jackson,” *Niles National Register*, July 5, 1845.

potentially “lead to a speedy dissolution of the Union.”³⁶

Whereas some writers depicted officeseeking as a social and political problem, others identified the problem within the officeseeker. Editorials were quick to scrutinize the individual officeseeker by drawing upon the notion that officeseeking was the result of a deficiency of character in the individual. In this vein, writers drew upon the popularly recognized figures of failure during the time. “They [officeseekers] are speculators in the peltry of politics,” noted one observer in Washington writing for *The New England Magazine* in 1835, “They have the lean and fidgety look, which belongs...to the look of gamblers.” Indeed, the federal government and Washington in particular had become a mere “Babel” as a result of being thronged by self-interested officeseekers. Rather than men looking to make something of themselves, the same observer saw “loungers and lookers-on.” Among the “superannuated dandy,” “the brainless fop,” “the unsophisticated, and the blazee,” lurked the “turn-coat office-seeker” eager to pledge allegiance to the party in power in order to receive a government post. In 1852, Washington’s *National Era* noticed so many officeseekers that it figured “the paupers of all the states had made a descent upon our godly city,” for it had “never behold so many lean, greedy, afflicted-looking mendicants.” Four years later, the *National Era* shared a similar observation when it noticed “every grade and stripe of social condition” filtering into the city, “from the plethoric officeholder of many years standing...to the swaggering leader of the bullies and short-boys of the great cities.”³⁷ Underlying this tension was an apparent labor problem. No longer were men seeking an independent living and driving economic change. Officeseeking was, these accounts

³⁶ *The Scioto Gazette*, March 11, 1829.

³⁷ “A Letter from the Capital,” *The New England Magazine*, March 1835, 232-233; *National Era*, March 17, 1853, 42, April 2, 1857, 54.

feared, putting an end to economic individualism.

Observations and sensationalized critiques of officeseeking within Washington played an important role in turning the national gaze toward the officeseeker. Home to the federal government and to multitudes of newspaper editors from all sections of the country, shameless officeseeking in the nation's capital had become a national spectacle and the officeseeker its most contested icon. Literary historian Sarah Luria has argued that Washington began and still remains a "speculative space," the locus of the "nation's rational order." According to Luria, "Washington writings"—or reports from the capital—played an important role in imagining "new political landscapes," a means in which citizens would come to interpret and "even experience a federal organization of government." Through its interplay of politics and space—public life and social life—Washington writings helped introduce citizens to adopt a national, rather than local, understanding of government and their relationship to it. Anne Royall, Washington City's malcontent and editor of the Jackson-leaning political exposé *Paul Pry*, continuously blamed officeseekers for driving the nation further from its republican origins. "We are a nation of office hunters," she proclaimed in 1833. "This explains all our national faults and national merits, our pursuits and our prejudices."³⁸

In his celebrated political and cultural analysis of American democracy during the early 1830s, Alexis De Tocqueville shared a basic ambivalence about the role officeseeking was beginning to place on the nation. "I shall not remark that the universal and inordinate desire for

³⁸ Sarah Luria, *Capital Speculations: Writings and Building Washington, D.C.* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2006), xxiv-xxv; *Paul Pry*, Dec. 7, 1833. Disparaging remarks directed toward officeseekers and department clerks, especially in the post office, were numerous in *Paul Pry* as well as its continuation, *The Huntress*. For a discussion of Anne Royall's partisan and political identity, see Elizabeth J. Clapp, "A Virago-Errant in Enchanted Armor?": Anne Royall's 1829 Trial as a Common Scold," *Journal of the Early Republic* 23, no. 2 (Summer 2003), 207-232.

place is a great social evil,” affirmed De Tocqueville. “But I would observe that a government that encourages this tendency risks its own tranquility and places its very existence in great jeopardy.” For Tocqueville, the future of democracy and the nation was at stake. Officeseeking was particularly damaging along one distinct cultural ideal. Men, once ambitious and independent, stood to lose their “manlier virtues” and “spirit of independence.” Failing to add to the nation’s economic resources, the once manly republican citizen would resort to loaferism and selfish complacency, spawning “a venal and servile humour throughout the frame of society.” But Tocqueville’s insights were more than whimsical pontifications over the virtues of republican manhood. Indeed, he foretold a bleak scenario “when public employments afford[ed] the only outlet for ambition”—a consequential future, Tocqueville observed, when the government would be “tasked to satisfy with limited means unlimited desires.”³⁹ Indeed, it was within this equation—the distancing itself from early republican political economy—that Tocqueville located the destructive possibilities of officeseeking.⁴⁰

II

Less an indictment of one national political party over another, the rhetoric of

³⁹ Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans, Henry Reeve, V. II (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 738, 739.

⁴⁰ Although critiques directed toward officeseeking could be interpreted as implied criticisms of Democrats, they were also directed toward Whigs in their attack on political partisanship and the two-party competition in general. See Mark Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Party: Cultures of Antipartisanship in Northern Politics before the Civil War* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 40-48; Mayo, “Republicanism, Antipartyism, and Jacksonian Politics,” 5-6; Ronald P. Formisano, “Political Character, Antipartyism and the Second Party System,” *American Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Winter 1969): 687; Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).

officeseeking can be placed in the fold of what historian Mark Voss-Hubbard has referred to as a “broader vernacular antipartyism” in nineteenth-century American political culture. According to Voss-Hubbard, vernacular antipartyism, although influenced by and susceptible to partisan political strategies, emerged as a rhetorical device for middling Americans to voice conflicting attitudes toward the developing system of party politics and long-accepted ideals of classic republicanism. Voss-Hubbard insists that antipartyism was a rhetorical device used most often and pragmatically by third-party insurgents and populist factions outside of the two-party system as a way to inspire civic engagement against Whigs and Democrats in the years leading up to the Civil War. Rather than a coherent theory, antipartyism was a response to corruptive practices within the party system.⁴¹

Yet it is important to note that the intertwined critiques of officeseeking and party politics had been a tradition in American governance and oppositional politics since the 1790s. More generally, those who controlled patronage were attacked for neglecting or not following through with the intended interests of the republic. In addition to its roots in classical republican theory, antiparty rhetoric also emerged in the North alongside the Protestant evangelicalism of the Second Great Awakening. Here evangelical religion interacted with political and economic development. Not only did northern evangelicals seek religiously-inspired moral reform, they also sought political reform on a variety of levels. This, in turn, helped create a broad base for the development of the Whig party. According to Daniel Walker Howe, evangelicals championed modernization by supporting “changes in the structure of society and individual

⁴¹ Voss-Hubbard, *Beyond Party*, 68; also see Mark E. Neely, Jr. *The Union Divided: Party Conflict in the Civil War North* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). On antipartyism in the nation’s capital, see Mayo, “Republicanism, Antipartyism, and Jacksonian Party Politics.”

personality that emphasized discipline and channeled energies by the deliberate choice of goals and the rational selection of means.”⁴² The decision to trade manly independence for office was not always viewed as a “rational selection.” Much of the rhetoric directed toward officeholding and officeseeking stemmed from a northern evangelical base that not only sought a more rationalized central government but a society that granted moral free agency. The officeseeker thus emerged alongside these two longstanding traditions.

While newspaper editors were often key players in the organization of political parties and often looked toward patronage appointments in return, many expressed a basic disregard for officeseeking. Columnists were quick to draw attention to the enormity and popularity of officeseeking throughout the nation and commonly presented it as a social evil, the bane of the nation. Tapping into a long history of republican thought, in 1834 the *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette* likened officeseeking to the “unprincipled lust of office that occasioned the famous Catalinian conspiracy at Rome.” Despite its partisan character, *The American Whig Review*, expressed a disregard for officeseeking when it declared in 1848 that it would be “good policy” if officeseeking, which creates the “greatest unhappiness and discontent” in the nation, “should be abated.” The cost officeseeking placed on manly independence as the defining characteristic of the nation was in jeopardy. The *Review* explained: “The office-dispepsia [sic] sometimes seizes upon men at the middle age in the full vigor of health,” wrote the paper’s columnist. So much so “they will even throw up a good business, sell a farm, pawn their mortgages and hypothecate their stocks, to scrape money to spend in the hotels of Washington.” All this just to solicit a “miserable boon of a clerk’s place, with a salary of six hundred a-year.” In an enduring example of nonpartisan vernacular, the paper’s editor went on to claim that the

⁴² Daniel Walker Howe, “The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North during the Second Party System,” *Journal of American History* 77, no. 4 (March 1991), 1216.

Whigs desired “the free unbiased favor of the nation, not the interested love of dependents.”⁴³

Former Deputy Surveyor of Customs in Boston, John Barton Derby, also called attention to the evil officeseeking presented to the future of the republic: “They [officeseekers] care nothing for the Constitution or the preservation of our ancient institutions.” Derby further exclaimed that “law and order were their abhorrence.” Devoid of any intention of serving the public good, officeseekers clamored for the corrupting emoluments of public office during times of social and public upheaval, easily influencing the ability of political leaders to effectively control patronage. In this imbalanced political order, officeseekers “possessing neither talent or desert in any other way” used patronage to acquire distinction in society. This was of course an implied promise of rotation in office, if not democracy more generally.⁴⁴

In its inherent erosion of the public good, officeseeking had become according to one reform-friendly editor by 1859 “the besetting folly and sin of this Union.” Writing for the *Friends’ Review*, the editor proceeded to note the evil officeseeking had inflicted on society’s most basic unit, the family, and then contemptuously pointed toward another “matter of more importance” to Americans: the qualifications of officeseekers. With little discernment for merit, and “perseverance and persistent efforts” being the primary means of obtaining office, the majority of government offices were filled by “unqualified” men. Lost in the partisan storm of officeseeking, so said its critics, was any consideration for “public interest” and “the honest

⁴³ *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette*, February 18, 1834; “Party Discontents,” *The American Whig Review*, October 1848, 335-336.

⁴⁴ John Brighton Derby, *Political Reminiscences, Including a Sketch of the Origin and History of the ‘Statesman Party’ of Boston* (Boston: Homer and Palmer, 1835), 50-51.

unbiased judgment” of the citizenry.⁴⁵ At least for this particular editor, party politics came at the expense of a strong central government.⁴⁶

While Democrats believed that officeseeking benefited the public good by influencing the democratization of politics and was therefore a positive good for society,⁴⁷ critics insisted that officeseeking led men to assume a false sense of party obligation. In his journey across America in the 1830s, Francis Grund was struck by the façade of party loyalty among the countless officeseekers in Washington who were forced to return home without obtaining an office. According to Grund, officeseekers came boasting of devotion to party, but left “cursing the ingratitude of those whom they have elevated by their suffrages.” The flippant officeseekers, however, angrily returned “by joining the oppositions, expecting to be treated with more consideration by the next administration.” This type of factionalism pushed critics into proclaiming public office a disgrace rather than honor—a public perception that intensified throughout the antebellum era. North Carolina’s *Fayetteville Observer* reduced “the boasted *principles* of Democracy...to nothing more nor less than ‘loaves and fishes’.” Referring to rotation in office, it compared the “passion for living on the government” to “hypocritical ebullitions of *patriotism*.” Simply put, political partisanship made it difficult for Americans to

⁴⁵ “Office-Hunting,” *Friends’ Review; a Religious, Literary and Miscellaneous Journal*, January 29, 1859.

⁴⁶ This was, to be sure, a northern sentiment that had its roots in the northern evangelical movement of the Second Great Awakening. See Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁴⁷ This sentiment follows a long trend in historical scholarship since the publication of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little Brown & Comp., 1945). I take my cue here from Pasley, “Minnows, Spies, and Aristocrats,” 618-625.

favorably connect officeseeking with democratic government.⁴⁸

For many critics of rotation, the federal government had assumed the role of a national pauper house for men unable to achieve material independence. While taking part in a conversation over officeseeking in a Washington barroom, Francis Grund was abruptly interrupted by the barkeeper. “And then what a continual influx of paupers!” the barkeeper remarked. “Would you believe that people come here from a distance of from six hundred to a thousand miles, to hunt an appointment of six hundred dollars a year?” The barkeeper went on to express his dismay, noting that officeseekers originally “expect nothing less than an appointment of two thousand dollars a year” but end leaving willing to accept any situation just to have enough money to get back home again. Jackson himself even worried over the public perception that applications were motivated by less “a love of principle” and more for “the love of office.” “The applications were so numerous for office that it really appeared that self-exertion was about to be abandoned and dependence for livelihood was placed upon the government,” Jackson feared after serving three years as president. “The public crib was looked to for the support of thousands.” Indeed, it was this “dependency for livelihood” that struck critics of officeseeking most inauspiciously, for it threatened the foundation of Jacksonian and antebellum politics all together. *Niles National Register* felt compelled to remind the public in 1841 that “offices were created, not as a retreat for political paupers, but for the purpose of

⁴⁸ Francis J. Grund, *Aristocracy in America, from the Sketch-book of a German Nobleman* (New York: Harper, 1959), 251; *Fayetteville Observer*, March 17, 1853 [Editorial first printed in the *Richmond Whig*].

having the public business faithfully and promptly done.”⁴⁹

III

With little insight into the larger social and economic transformations taking place, critics attributed the decline in manly independence to the vicious pursuit of office that had taken over the country. Family competence, household economy, and economic independence—key attributes to white male citizenship in the early republic—were now being redefined if not challenged by the burgeoning industrial order. The liberal virtue of self-made manhood that accompanied the market economy had arrived at a cost to republican manhood.⁵⁰ In 1841, a correspondent for New York’s *Weekly Herald* wondered why in a “young and growing nation,” with “openings in every walk of life, for the profitable employment of every mental and physical energy of her citizens,” would any man choose the “devious, uncertain, and unsafe path of political intrigue...to the manly and independent position which, with ordinary industry and prudence, can be acquired either in the agricultural, mercantile, mechanical, or professional walks of life.” Why would a man seek a “paltry clerkship” in one of the government departments in Washington while already having “the means of a comfortable support at home?”

⁴⁹ Grund, *Aristocracy in America*, 249-250; 1831 Letter, *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*, 504; *Niles National Register*, April 24, 1841, 116.

⁵⁰ For an understanding of social experience as it relates to changes the early republican economy, see Kathy Matson, “A House of Many Mansions: Some thoughts on the Field of Economic History,” in *The Economy of Early America: Historical Perspectives and New Directions*, ed. Kathy Matson (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 2-70; Daniel Vickers, “Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 47, no. 1 (1990): 3-29. On white collar labor, see Michael Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 4 (Winter 2006): 570-573.

The correspondent continued: “Let a proud man...take a turn through any of the departments” and he will “observe the cringing, fawning, and almost slavish bearing of the poor devils whose very bread depend upon the breath of the Secretary.” And if that was not enough to deter a potential officeseeker from going to Washington, one would only have to observe the “spaniel like” subordination “with which our official superior is greeted, and see the terror produced by every rumor, malignant or otherwise, of a removal.”⁵¹

The semblance of logic within the public discourse of the time placed officeseeking at odds with the values of republican manhood, which equated civic virtue to personal autonomy. Economic free agency, moral autonomy, and household patriarchal authority—hallmarks of nineteenth century political economy—were deemed unattainable by a new generation of officeseekers. This was to be, many feared, the evils of officeseeking, since it was perverting the morality of the republic. Since public office did indeed provide a sufficient salary, critics were apt to disparage the economic value of officeseeking along gendered lines. Borrowing from a nineteenth-century working-class rhetoric that equated slavery with wage labor, critics commonly equated officeholding to slavery. “It must be remembered that the officeholder is a mere slave, a pensioner,” reminded one critic. “He is the slave, first of the executive, second of the party leaders, and thirdly, of the party itself.” It is within this context of dependency and subordination, said another writer, that “we see wrecked and ruined men who have frittered away their manhood and squandered a moderate competency in fruitless endeavors to climb the slippery ladder of political preferment.”⁵²

⁵¹ *The Weekly Herald*, July 03, 1841.

⁵² Reprint in *Paul Pry*, Dec. 7, 1833.

Critics of the patronage system likewise pointed out that it devoured those most eager to participate in it, making officeseeking both corrupting and predatory. Even those who were awarded a public post might ultimately fall victim to the politics of rotation, they predicted. *The Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette* forewarned officeseekers that their selfish endeavor would bring “inconvenience upon their families, if not want.” “Whether a man’s wife and children will starve the next day after he is cast out of office, is a matter of no consequence to men who, officially, have no souls any more than cabinets and corporations have,” reminded a like-minded Washington correspondent writing for the Whig-oriented *New York Observer and Chronicle* in 1849. “This is the fruit of *partyism*.”⁵³

Critics of both parties—Whig and Democrat—further lambasted officeseekers for failing to seek out a way of life that afforded opportunities for future success, proceeding of course under the false assumption that officeseekers already live in or embraced a world free of dependency.⁵⁴ “Is it [officeseeking] worth the pursuit?” asked the Jacksonian editor of the *Philadelphia Intelligencer* in 1833. “Think of its uncertainty.”⁵⁵ Not only would individuals

⁵³ *The Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette*, April 23, 1829; “Office-Hunting at Washington,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, April 26, 1845, 66.

⁵⁴ Historians have shown that many Americans were facing economic peril and hoping to establish economic independence elsewhere, including the federal government. Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974), Bruce Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), or Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard university Press, 2005). I address this issue more fully in Chapter 3.

⁵⁵ *Philadelphia Intelligencer* editorial reprinted in *Paul Pry*, Dec. 7, 1833.

have a slim chance of attaining office, they could, according to the logic of proscription, be replaced at any time. Officeseekers previously engaged in a respectable business would then be “out of business” and left with their “business habits destroyed,” and forced to “commence life a second time...with every disadvantage.” To antebellum readers, the officeseeking script was drably formulaic: “If a man is unfortunate in business, instead of throwing himself to his own resources...he is advised to ask for an office, and you see him a supplicant at the door of some influential person, or a hanger-on at a ward hotel, an active partisan at the polls, or a declaimer at public meetings.” Failing to make it in the world on their “own resources,” officeseekers were reduced to live a life of dependency while incessantly trying to eek out an existence at the mercy of someone else. In this vein, the unlucky officeseeker “puts on livery and becomes the vassal of some ambitious leader, or the humble follower of some influential person.” Even worse, he lives in “constant terror of losing his office.” If by chance he was able to retain his office for a significant period of time, he would ultimately be “turned out, poor, aged, and helpless” by some future administration. Having exchanged “talent, ability and industry” for public office, he would be forced to return to his former station in life with even less resources for hope. So went the officeseeking script. Those seeking office “must play false to get it, and surrender independence to retain it.”⁵⁶

Descriptive language and warnings regarding manly independence were used by the popular press to protect the nation’s republican foundation, which was uniquely shaped around cherished ideals of honor and manhood.⁵⁷ Pictures and storylines of unchecked political

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ On the importance of honor in early American political culture, see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*.

partisanry and imperiled manly independence were carefully woven into the officeseeking master plot. In the public imagination, the story told was clear: officeseeking ruined the man. No matter how hard he tried to flee the tugging tides of patronage in Washington, one fictional officeseeker revealed that he was “chained to it by a fascination,” despite relinquishing any claims to “self-respect” and feeling his “manhood wasting away.” “The expected office,” said the powerless man, “held me as a victim and would not let me go.”⁵⁸ It was precisely this lust for office that critics held responsible for corrupting the nation’s republican foundation. The *New York Observer and Chronicle* noted that “it [officeseeking] drives out the spirit of kindness and charity, and makes even a Christian forget his profession and his duty.” The assiduously fierce competition to obtain office encouraged men to inevitably resort to treachery and deceit, proclaimed the *Happy Home and Parlor Magazine*. By “hook or crook,” was the widely accepted popular expression to vilify the officeseeking process. In such slanderous warfare, attested the *New Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register*, the “modest man gets worsted,” while those engaged in falsehoods and “cold blooded assassination of character” gained a pivotal advantage.⁵⁹

Such criticism helped confirm what many feared: that in the course of the nation’s political development there would come a time when no respectable man would seek public

⁵⁸ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Sept. 1857, 56.

⁵⁹ “Office Hunting at Washington,” *New York Observer and Chronicle*, April 26, 1845, 66; “Love of Office,” *The Happy Home and Parlor Magazine*, May 1, 1859, 377; *New-Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register*, February 28, 1829.

office.⁶⁰ After witnessing for nearly a decade the rush of officeseekers to Washington City, Anne Royall declared in 1841, “No man who seeks an office ought to have it.” If any man should choose to seek office, rather than “take care of his own business,” they should automatically be precluded from the list. “Generally they are ignorant, dissipated and lazy,” affirmed Royall, “and are put upon the government to be maintained.” Royall went on to relate the general incompetence of officeseekers to the inefficiency of “public works,” which had been left “spoiled.” Officeseekers were so inept, that it was sardonically suggested “writing schools” for “ignorant clerks” had been set up in some of the federal departments, further leading “to the neglect of their official duties.”⁶¹

Popular images of government clerks intersected with the sullied criticisms of officeseekers and officeseeking. Critiques were generally centered around the dependency on the federal government for economic support that clerks placed themselves. Upon visiting Washington in 1844, Caleb Atwater expressed his belief that young men hoping to gain employment as a clerk might “be more independent and have a better prospect of rising in the world as respectable men” in different employment. But for the young clerks who did manage to gain a clerkship, it was not uncommon for Atwater to see them “walking the streets, standing in refectories, drinking spirits, or lounging about the lobbies of the two houses, or sauntering about the rotunda with an umbrella over their heads, leading about some female friend.” Although Atwater may have somewhat exaggerated his remarks on Washington’s clerking class, he underscored the antimeritocratic animus that was slowly beginning to take shape within the nation’s capital. While the new generation of partisan officeholders spent their days loafing

⁶⁰ “Brutus,” *The Yankee and Boston Literary Gazette*, April 23, 1829.

⁶¹ *The Huntress*, January 23, 1841.

throughout the city, “the older clerks and older men with families to support were over worked in their several offices.”⁶²

In 1852, *Harper’s* observed that the “old clerks” who had worked effortlessly in order to win their “insecure earnings by hard labor” were forced to prepare themselves for a “new cast upon the tide of life” with each presidential election. The editor drew attention to the image of a fictitious “scant figure of an old gentleman of sixty, who had managed to retain place through three successive administrations,” only to be dismissed at the onset of the fourth administration. To make matters more troubling, the nameless clerk had raised his family with a small, fixed income, “saving nothing and yielding much of independence in his endeavor to retain the place that gave bread to his household.” With skills only “attuned to a clerk organization,” and with a “hand and brain cramped to his tread-mill office,” the man was “turned carelessly adrift, and aimless and almost hopeless wreck of a man.” A year later *Harper’s* recognized that it was “a sad thing to find very many poor fellows, grown old over the cramping desks, and in the latest hours of life, finding their occupation gone. What becomes of them all?” its writer asked. “I have puzzled my brain overmuch with the inquiry.”⁶³

Government dependency not only violated popular conceptions of nineteenth-century political economy, it also conflicted with the culture of individualism that had been an important component of industrial and political progress. By 1840, the ideal of the self-made man had burgeoned into an influential cultural and economic force. James McCabe’s popular descriptive account of Washington’s political and social life helped affirm that a government clerkship was

⁶² Caleb Atwater, a Citizen of Ohio, *Mysteries of Washington City: During Several Months of the Session of the 28th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: G.A. Sage, 1844), 23.

⁶³ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, Dec. 1852, 420, June 1853, 132.

antithetical to the development of this ideal. “One so rarely sees true manliness and independence in the Departments,” insisted McCabe. John Ellis’s *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital*, published in 1869, similarly noted that clerks maintained “no true manhood” while in office. Dependent on the government for support and at the mercy of unruly patronage practices, the clerking life “takes all the manhood out of a man, and transforms him into an object of contempt.” Washington socialite Jessie Benton Frémont retrospectively recognized that the policy of removals that coincided with each presidential election “create[d] a smothered atmosphere of fear and suppressed manliness which is not American.”⁶⁴

In its narrative form, the cycle of failure permeated the lives of officeseekers. The commonly endorsed prescription was to avoid officeseeking altogether. “When an office seeker arrives at Washington he walks erect, with his head high,” told one Washington correspondent for *The North American and Daily Advertiser*. But in the following days an “air of doubtfulness” and a “tinge of blue” takes over his “visage” until “his head gradually sinks” and his “under jaw falls.” The life of an officeseeker was, according to *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette*, a “miserable sort of dog’s life.” The continuous hunt for a vacant clerkship or any other “bone,” followed by “new hopes” but failed “energies to secure it,” was sure to leave the officeseeker disappointed if not depressed. With no other alternatives to fall back on, the officeseeker was forced to leave Washington.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ James McCabe, *Behind the Scenes in Washington* (New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1873), 459; John B. Ellis, *The Sights and Secrets of the National Capital: A Work Descriptive of Washington City in All Its Various Phases* (New York: United States Publishing Company, 1869), 375, 372; Jessie Benton Frémont, *Souvenirs of My Time* (Boston: D. Lothrop and Company, 1887), 87.

⁶⁵ *The North American and Daily Advertiser*, March 29, 1841; *Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette*, March 15, 1842.

The cautionary, if not fabricated, story told by the nameless author of “Scattered Leaves from the Journal of an Office-Seeker at Washington” further affirms this point. Confidently dressed in his “sable suit” this particular officeseeker began his week with a walk to one of the government’s departments, where he encountered no less than thirty “old, middle-aged, and young men, walking, sitting, or standing” hoping to receive an appointment to office. Thereafter, the officeseeker was informed by the messenger that his likelihood of seeing the prospective Departmental Secretary was “worse than certain.” Later that day, the officeseeker found himself at the hotel bar with “a fellow-pedestrian” and several of his acquaintances, where, out of hesitant obligation and trickery, he was pressured into paying for the entire bill. With less and less money to get by, the officeseeker was forced to relocate from the hotel to a less expensive boarding house the following day. So it seemed the officeseeker’s fears had slowly penetrated deep into his unconscious. Later that evening, he awoke to a “frightful dream.” In it, “[s]cores of spirits” were “dancing” around his bed in mockingly manner until one approached his bed and held close to his eyes an inscription that read: ‘*Fourteen hundred dollar clerk!*’ When he finally recovered from the “astonishment and terror” of the dream, he assured himself that it was “nothing but a spiritual intimation” and that he would obtain a well-paying clerkship. Unfortunately for this officeseeker, it was just a dream. He grudgingly scribbled at the bottom of his journal page: “No clerkship yet: money almost gone.”⁶⁶

Stories of social failure and even suicide were used to warn officeseekers of their assured disappointment. With few resources for officeseekers to fall back on while in Washington, editorials warned of a potentially worse fate: begging. Officeseeking was a “hopeless errand,” remarked a Washington correspondent for the *Charleston Mercury*. In his “drive to feed out of

⁶⁶ *The Knickerbocker; or New York Monthly Magazine*, November 1849, 455.

the public crib,” the officeseeker is “broken down by disappointment and poverty, or drink,” until “he becomes known and shunned by everybody as if he had the small-pox or leprosy upon him.” According to the *New Hampshire Statesman*, “Thousands of office-hunters remain [in Washington] till they are literally in a state of starvation, and are compelled to resort to beggary as a means of sustaining life.” In addition to suffering a social death, reports of suicide by disappointed officeseekers and disgruntled clerks who were removed from office also circulated through public discourse, a cruel reminder within the master script that officeseeking would ultimately crush any hopes of success.⁶⁷

The officeseeker’s ubiquitous presence in national conversations suggested a shared ambivalence over the course of nineteenth-century political economy. For that reason, critics feared the corrupting influences officeseeking held over future generations. Would young men seek public office instead of picking up a plough or engage in some other form of manly, independent labor? Indeed, this question could be extended to include any young man pursuing a livelihood outside conventional boundaries of what constituted manly labor, including that of a merchant’s clerk. The lectures to young men by such influential middle-class figures as northern evangelicals Henry Ward Beecher and Horace Bushnell, along with the prescriptive writings found in numerous periodicals and publications, helped strengthen a national sentiment that the nation’s youth needed to be convinced that there was no honorable alternative to working the land. Commercial ambition in antebellum American was thus a contested cultural terrain. At stake were deeply held conceptions of what was deemed proper labor, which many had hoped would remain at the heart of republican government. Within the discourse of partisan politics, officeseeking was deemed a social evil, a contemptuous label that also pointed to “a crisis in the

⁶⁷ “Picture of an Office-Hunter,” cited in *Fayetteville Observer*, Nov. 4, 1858; *New Hampshire Statesman*, July 23, 1853.

meaning of industriousness” spawned by the industrial revolution. Stripped of its partisan affiliation and overtones, the active pursuit of office also underscored the apprehension toward developing forms of labor within the new national economy.⁶⁸

Those who leisurely sought out other occupational pursuits in the nation’s burgeoning urban areas risked being labeled disapprovingly by contemporaries as loafers, loungers, or dandies—disparaging and often interchangeable labels that carried with them a deplorable stain of urbanity. These leisurely wayward ne’er-do-wells became the focus of the morally debased industriousness suddenly sweeping the nation, particularly in its burgeoning cities. And since officeseeking—like loafing—occupied an important cultural counterpoint to the work ethic associated with farming, it was not uncommon to find loafers among the officeseeking crowd. Indeed, officeseeking loafers were abound in Washington. “Our city is swarming with office hunters—tall ignorant youths who have run up like cornstalks from being raided in idleness,” observed Anne Royall from her place in Washington. Two years later in 1834, Royall noted that, “there are some hundreds of *Dandies* seeking a place in the Army, or Navy, or Clerkships, or Messengers, in the Departments—anything rather than work.” Committed to “loafing” about the city, officeseekers found themselves “resorting to every scheme” and “hoax” in their effort to obtain office and avoid conventional labor. Officeseeking loafers could be found hanging about the city’s hotel lobbies, parlor rooms, barrooms, boardinghouses, and the waiting rooms of government buildings, and sauntering through the streets, up and down the nation’s capital. Yet

⁶⁸ I am influenced here by Michaels Zakim’s inquiry into the divergent meanings of industriousness that shaped public perceptions of white-collar labor in the antebellum era. See, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,” 563-576, quote from 564. Historian Glenn Wallach has argued that in the decades prior to the Civil War, “specific crises and conditions in America produced a language that invested a ‘younger’ generation with responsibilities for maintaining community ideals.” See *Obedient Sons: The Discourse of Youth and Generations in American Culture, 1630-1860* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997).

the eagerness with which offices were sought bemused outside observers. In 1834, *Niles National Register* wondered why a man would choose an office that paid less in a year than a “respectable mechanic earned by his daily labor?” *Niles* reasoned, “The great inducement, perhaps, is laziness—a moral hatred of work.”⁶⁹

The lure of public employment escalated alongside the expansion of the nation throughout the antebellum era, and its increase brought to the forefront a nationwide social crisis over the new industrial work ethic. A potential solution to this problem was found in the nation’s young men, who were believed to be harmfully inflicted by the lure of public office. To be sure, youthful ambitions had become a point of contestation in the antebellum era, particularly in their disregard for republican ideals. “Should I err in saying, that little less than half of this great population [of young men] know absolutely nothing on this subject?” propounded A.B. Muzzy in reference to the founding principles of republican government. “Instead of receiving sound instruction, and being inducted into sphere of pure principles, they are too often taught the arts of intrigue, cunning and duplicity.”⁷⁰

The thought that young men might be willing to surrender independence for subordination or choose to receive a salary rather than work the land or engage in an independent and honorable profession became a crucial point of anxiety for a nation that identified labor as an important individual source of value. Many feared that officeseeking was not only hindering the political development of the nation, it was also causing the nation to move further from its agrarian ideal. As well, local communities were starting to be concerned about the departure of

⁶⁹ Paul Pry, Dec. 8, 1832, Dec. 20, 1834; “Office-Seekers,” *The Huntress*, Nov. 7, 1846; *Niles National Register*, November 8, 1834, 147.

⁷⁰ A.B. Muzzy, *The Young Man’s Friend*, 2nd ed. (Boston: James Munroe and Company, 1838), 109, 114.

youth to cities. This too was part of a general social anxiety about the breakdown of order and authority that coincided with rapid economic change. It was thus the responsibility of the new generation of young men to repel any inclinations for public office in order to carry out the republican ideals of the nation. But this could only be achieved by instilling in youth, particularly in the North, a morally acceptable industrial ambition.⁷¹

Whereas political ambition was rarely underscored as a reason to seek office, John Barton Derby admitted that he was initially drawn to political power. But his experience as a subordinate clerk in the Boston Custom House put an end to any youthful political ambitions. He warned: “Here was a young man, engaged in an honorable profession (which already yielded him a sufficient income, and promised future independence as well as distinction) led away by that jack-o’lantern, *the desire for office*, to the gradual desertion of all his better hopes and prospects.” But it was the relinquishing of manly virtues as identified through labor that distressed Derby the most. As Derby noted, public officers were bound, confined and subject “to all kinds of exertions,” all the while “sinking under the intolerable fatigue and confinement of labours as severe and as unintellectual as those of a horse in a bark-mill.” Indeed, it was this “insolence of authority”—the inability to shape their own destiny—that public officers were “compelled to endure in silence” while sitting behind their desks. Having “madly plung[ed] into

⁷¹ See *Obedient Sons*, 2, 136-145; Allen Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1975). On the intersection of youth, urban anxiety, and upward mobility, see Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), especially 45-69, 125--147; Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982). On the disengagement of young men with the economic opportunities available to them in eastern cities, see Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2000).

the arena of party,” Derby reluctantly received his “wages of slavery monthly,” but noted that for every dollar he received would have been “worth a hundred” if earned in “honorable competition by superior talent and industry.”⁷²

Warnings regarding the perils of public office ran against efforts on behalf of political parties to recruit young voters.⁷³ A testimonial printed in the *Friends Review* affirmed Derby’s cautionary tale. Former Chief Clerk in the first comptroller’s office of the Treasury Department, Mr. Connel, offered a grim forewarning to a prospective youthful officeseeker: “No matter how brilliant, how intelligent, how industrious, he becomes metamorphosed in the tread-mill horse, pursuing the same weary, never changing round, until death sets him free.” But Derby and Connel were not alone in their refusal to accept government employment—a clerk’s wage in particular—as a viable alternative livelihood.⁷⁴ As articulated by the national reform periodical *Scientific American*, “The mechanic labors with his hands, and soils them, and wears overalls, and colored shirts, and rolls up his sleeves, and carries the honorable insignia of toil about with him, while the clerk may sometimes keep clean hands, and dress neatly, and show a white shirt front, and carry only a pencil behind his ear.” The cherished republican ideal of virtuous labor juxtaposed with the more “genteel” and emasculating urban professions—symbolized through the loafer—helped draw attention to other evils of officeseeking. *Home Magazine*’s “Advise to an Office Seeker” offered exemplary (if not fictional) advice to middle-class audiences by telling

⁷² Derby, *Political Reminiscences*, 53, 67-68.

⁷³ On the ways in which antebellum political parties appealed to young voters, see Edward L. Widmer, *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁷⁴ “Office-Hunting,” *Friends’ Review*.

the story of a young man who applied for a clerkship to Secretary of the Treasury, Thomas Corwin, in 1853. The young man repeatedly applied for the position, but was denied by Corwin on numerous occasions. In the end, Corwin said to the young man: “go to the North-west; buy 160 acres of government land—or if you have not the money to purchase, squat on it.” By working the land with an “axe and mattock,” Corwin assured the young man he would be able to keep his “conscience clear” by living without orders from anyone, “and without dependence upon any body.” *Home Magazine* agreed with Corwin’s advice: “Independent productive industry, alone, gives to a man conscious independence, and, without this feeling, life to most men is a burden.” The National Reform periodical *Young America* proclaimed a similar sentiment by arguing that the growing number of officeseekers was due to the “increase of *landless* laborers.” The solution to the officeseeking epidemic could thus be solved by “restor[ing] the right to soil.” Once given a tract of land to farm, men would no longer resign themselves to the status of “hungry office-beggars.”⁷⁵

The notion that young officeseekers were willing to exchange independent and honorable labor for a subordinated position in the government conflicted with a national tradition that valued labor as a source of manliness. Critics responded with a popular sentiment that underscored the evils of officeseeking as well as the personal value of productive toil and industrial ambition. Timothy Walker’s 1832 address before the Union Literary Society of Ohio’s Miami University, warned youth not to “begin life with false notions of the importance of *office*.” Walker proudly proclaimed “that we live in a land where every station is accessible to every citizen;” but went on to acknowledge that the popular pursuit of office was “the besetting

⁷⁵ “Why is Mechanical Labor Objectionable,” *Scientific American*, March 13, 1869, 169-170. “Advise to an Office Seeker,” *Home Magazine*, June 1853, 711; “The Offices,” *Young America*, Oct. 4, 1845.

sin of our institutions, the one dark spot on the else bright disk of our political sun.” Due to the limited number of offices available, Walker argued that the officeseeking process only “generates bad passion and leads to unworthy practices.” “There are few spectacles more disgusting than an electioneering canvass,” said Walker. In the scramble for office, “artifices, tricks and stratagems become the order of the day.” And when office is sought in this manner, there is “no real honor” in holding it. Walker was clear in his address that he was “no decrifier of ambition.” On the contrary, he believed ambition was fundamental to a young man’s pursuit of happiness, but only if it was “guided by enlightened reason.” Public office cannot bestow honor on any many, Walker explained; rather, honor must come from the character of the individual. If more young men adopted Walker’s advice, he would see “ambitious farmers, ambitious mechanics, [and] ambitious scholars, who never think of seeking office, because they believe that the post of honor may be a private station.”⁷⁶

The contention made in 1843 by the *Niles National Register* that “office itself operates rather as a disgrace than as an honor to any man” accentuates an antipartisan rhetoric used by third-party and major political parties but also draws attention to the economic and social changes that Americans faced.⁷⁷ Despite widespread public lamentations directed toward young men and their professional and political interests, the fact is young men and adults were turning more and more away from the occupational pursuit of a mechanic, tradesman, or farmer in order to pursue alternative livelihoods as clerks and other nonmanual professions in the nation’s

⁷⁶ Timothy Walker, *An Address Delivered before the Union Literary Society of Miami University, on the Twenty-Fifth of September, at their Anniversary Celebration* (Cincinnati, Oh.: Corey and Fairbank, 1832), 13, 16.

⁷⁷ “Party Spirit,” *Niles National Register*, July 29, 1843, 351.

burgeoning commercial centers.⁷⁸ The popularity of officeseeking among young men, and the public outcry that ensued, must be understood in relation to the national industrial transformation of work in the North as well as political democratization and the rise of mass political parties in the antebellum era more generally. As a result of these transformations new forms of social experience began to take shape, and officeseeking stood at the center. A nationwide phenomenon, critiques of officeseeking intersected with a multitude of contemporary debates over the social and political transformations that were altering the course of the nation. To be sure, the officeseeker had become a way for Americans to voice their opinion over the political and economic changes that was undermining its republican foundation. In many regards, it provided a window into the political and social world that was taking shape around them.

Although officeseeking would be the material base that kept the democratic machine moving forward, antebellum Americans remained increasingly vigilant and critical of officeseeking and its underlying support of political partisanship and the new industrial work ethic that was taking hold of the nation. The public sentiment that depicted officeseeking as a social evil and the officeseeker a “servile tool of party,” or loafer driven by selfish ambition, was revealed through a recycled discourse within multiple historical frameworks. Consequently, it worked to construct a baneful and distrustful image of government administration and political parties, leaving a dark shadow over the course of public service throughout the antebellum era

⁷⁸ On the transformation of antebellum, masculine ideals in the development of white-collar labor and clerkships specifically, see Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary;” Brian P. Luskey, “Jumping Counters in White Collars: Manliness, Respectability, and Work in the Antebellum City,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 173-219; Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tail: Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

and well into the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ The ideal of government work as a meritorious profession outside of political influences had become increasingly difficult to reach in the years leading up to the Civil War. Nonetheless, an important and career-minded clerking class remained within the confines of Washington City throughout the antebellum period that sought out merit-based reform and challenged popular precepts of rotation in office.

⁷⁹ See Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovations in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 45.

Chapter II

Pen-pushers and Thinking Men: Washington's Clerking Class and the Professionalization of Government Labor

“Merit has very little regard now-a-days.”

—Joseph W. Hand, April 23, 1836¹

On September 14, 1814, twenty-two-year-old Joseph Winborn Hand sat down in his Connecticut home to write in his journal. “What a gloomy year has it been!” he wrote. One year prior, Hand had graduated from Yale College with a bachelor’s degree and was confident in the “prospect” of success. Indeed, Hand could proudly claim membership to a first generation of New Englanders who grew up in a society slowly taking shape around the free-market economy. But this was a “stormy dark unpleasant day,” and the “prosperity” he once felt had “gone like a dream.” Distraught and confused, Hand even began to question his faith. “When shall I see the amiable character of Jesus and feel his love sweetly constraining my soul to follow after him?” Hand pensively asked himself. Hand’s life was, in his words, “passing rapidly away.” Discouraged with his business and dealings with “selfish and unreasonable” farmers, Hand concluded it was time to “depart from home...perhaps for life.” In order to save himself and his soul from financial and spiritual ruin, it was time for Hand to embark on a new career, a new economic undertaking. He would, in short, become an active agent and attempt to take control of his own existence, a path that would be facilitated by his faith in God. It was a personal moment, one endured by numerous young men as they attempted to carve out their passage to

¹ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, April 17, 1836, Container 4, John Aldrich Stephenson Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (cited hereafter as JASC).

adult freedom within the early national economy.² On November 22, Hand boarded the Constitution and underwent a two-week passage to Washington, D.C., where he would eventually begin his studies to become a lawyer and support himself financially by working as a clerk in the General Post Office.³

Hand's professional ambition to practice law never materialized; instead, he earned his living and made a career (often to his own regret) as a clerk within the federal government in Washington. In 1837, Hand was appointed to Chief Clerk in the Patent Office, where he remained until he died of an unexpected illness in 1844. His obituary in the *National Intelligencer* recalled that Hand's "mind, improved by education, was remarkable for discrimination and power of analysis, whether in speculative or practical subjects."⁴ Although public critiques of officeholders and officeseekers rarely applauded, or even noted, the professionalization of the federal government, the prominence of career-minded clerks like Joseph Hand was one of its distinguishing features. Hand was among a variety of men from all parts of the country who navigated the unconventional line between meritorious government

² On early republican ideology and its emphasis on social and economic opportunity and mobility, see Joyce Appleby, *Inheriting the Revolution: The First Generation of Americans* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); J.M. Opal, *Beyond the Farm: National Ambitions in Rural New England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 229-369.

³ Joseph Hand Diary, August 28, Sept. 14 and 15, 1814, Container 2, JASC.

⁴ See William Chauncey Fowler, *Memorials of the Chaunceys, including President Chauncy, His Ancestors and Descendants* (Boston, Mass.: Henry W. Dutton and Son, 1858), 194.

clerical labor, patronage politics, and a middle-class identity in antebellum Washington.⁵

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: to delineate the moments of professional and merit-based development within the federal government from the popular and critical public discourse directed toward officeholding and to comprehend the effect the second party system and Jackson's policy of rotation in office had on this development. I argue that there remained in Washington throughout the antebellum period important linkages to the early Republican period that often go unnoticed by historians and political theorists who have attempted to document the formation of the American state.⁶ In addition to the patronage system, an orientation toward a

⁵ Historians have produced extensive literature on the vast changes industrialization and the development of a capitalist marketplace wrought on farmers, urban laborers, and merchants in the North. Those concerned with the formation of the middle class have shown how middling members of society, including merchants, craftsmen, professionals, and clerks, uniquely adapted to the structural and cultural changes wrought by industrialization and formed a distinct and autonomous middle-class identity and influence in society, especially within the country's burgeoning cities. See Burton J. Bledstein, "Introduction" in Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 1-25. Bledstein, connects the development of a middle class to professional occupations in *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976). Stuart Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); idem, "The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals," *American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (April 1985): 299-338; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family I Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill: University Of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁶ This field is extensive but generally responds to the claims made by Stephen Skowronek, who argues that the early American state was limited to "courts and parties." State authority, according to Skowronek, was hardly existent until after the Civil War, when a civil service career system began to emerge. See Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 19-84. An alternative and more plausible state-centered approach to

career in public service and a demand for merit-based reform was carried over from the previous generation of clerks and upper-level bureaucrats. Despite the perils of rotation in office, many career-minded clerks remained in office for consecutive administrations. These individuals carried with them important administrative knowledge and thus played an important role in administering the daily functions and growth of the federal government. Unlike their politically appointed counterparts, who based their claim to public office along partisan lines, career-minded government clerks in Washington continually challenged the principles of rotation in office by proactively arguing for the professionalization of their labor and by pushing for merit-based reform. Finally, a significant portion of Washington government clerks united against the hazards of rotation in office by attempting to identify their labor as a source of middle-class identity, and put forward a labor theory of value that took in consideration the meritorious and professional qualities of their labor.

The bureaucratization of the federal government, including the standardization and rationalization of hierarchical office authority and administrative procedures, demanded above

American institutional development is offered by Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 63-102. My argument suggests the broader significance of antebellum clerks in shaping the discourse and moral frameworks of civil service reform in the nation's capital. Historians and political scientists have commonly invoked the Pendleton Act of 1883 as a fundamental recasting of national institutional power, and as a marker of success for early Progressive reformers and their ability to influence institutional reform. Emphasis has furthermore been insufficiently placed on the years between the Civil War and 1883, a period marked by increased public attention on Congress for institutional change. This interpretation fails to take into account the myriad ways in which government clerks sought out merit-based reform, and discredits the notion that professionalization within the federal bureaucracy prior to the Civil War had not ever been a sought after ideal. See Ari Hoogenboom, *Outlawing the Spoils: A History of the Civil Service Reform Movement, 1865-1883* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961); Patricia Wallace Ingraham, *The Foundation of Merit: The Public Service in American Democracy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

all a professional clerking class.⁷ Administrative historian Leonard D. White and most recently Richard D. John have shown that Washington's clerking class and the federal government's first few decades of development under the Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans was notably marked by standards of integrity and a broadly defined meritocratic approach to public administration. Rarely was a government employee removed from office on account of political opinion. "Malconduct is a just ground of removal," insisted Thomas Jefferson in 1801. "Mere difference of political opinion is not."⁸ While Jefferson and subsequent presidents may well have strived to avoid partisan-based appointments, they commonly chose officeholders from a similar socio-economic background and who held an honorable reputation in their community and among Washington circles. Government clerks were usually drawn from the surrounding states of Maryland and Virginia and appointed through familial and social connections, although this was not always the case.⁹ Indeed, it was this type of aristocratic nepotism that President Jackson called attention to in defense of rotation in office.¹⁰

⁷ I am influenced here by Max Weber's study of rationalization as bureaucracy. See "Bureaucracy," in Max Weber, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 196-244; see also Colin Gordon, "The Soul of a Citizen: Max Weber and Michel Foucault on Rationality and Government," in Scott Lash and Sam Whimster, eds., *Max Weber, Rationality, and Modernity* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 293-316. On ambition and attainment of economic and symbolic capital and its relationship to class-based bureaucratic systems, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

⁸ Quoted in Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 355.

⁹ A considerable number of clerks were also foreign born. See White, 361, fn. 54.

¹⁰ Take for example Joseph Nourse. A Virginian and acquaintance of Thomas Jefferson, Nourse was appointed Register of the Treasury in 1789. Nourse retained his position through

Yet despite Jackson's claims, a connection to official society played an important role in reinforcing continuity and authority within the federal government and in investing the labor of government clerks with republican ideals of virtue, honor and social prestige—qualities that were fitting for republican leadership but also expected to represent the public's interest. Progress in bureaucratic development was further enhanced by the appointments of men with educational backgrounds in the developing medical, engineering, and primarily legal professions. Lawyers especially provided important technical knowledge and training in the analysis of legal documents as well as the interpretation and implementation of government laws. While removals from office were made, the idea of being removed from office on grounds of partisanship hardly resonated within the federal departments. As a result, working relationships between and among clerks and their superiors developed organically and administrative procedures developed less out of law than by custom.¹¹

Nonetheless, the development of a merit-based and efficient administrative system would be an uneven process throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. While Jackson's theory of "rotation in office" made officeseeking a commonplace in American life by reducing the

several administrations and was able to secure appointments for his son, Charles J. Nourse, chief clerk in the War Department, and other family members. Prior to his election, Andrew Jackson claimed that he would "'clear out the Nourseries.'" See Anne Hollingsworth Wharton, *Social Life in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1902), 106; White, 371.

¹¹White, 351, 347-385, 412-422, 546-553; idem, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 394; Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995). On early republican patronage practices among influential members of Washington society and in particular the role of matrons in finding suitable government jobs for young men, see Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 48-146.

duties of public office to the status of “plain and simple,”¹² it also widely inhibited the development of a permanent civil service throughout the nineteenth century.¹³ Most detrimental to this development was rotation in office. As convincingly argued by Richard John, after 1829 the American state would lose its strength and administrative capabilities as its apparatuses morphed “into the wellspring of the mass party.” Party loyalty, moreover, limited the power of Washington’s social elites, including Dolley Madison, to influence federal patronage appointments. Not only were capable clerks replaced by unqualified ones, public service on the whole faced a loss of prestige and clerks faced a widespread debasement of their labor. While stability and continuity shaped public employment during the government’s first three decades of development, these qualities were no longer a guarantee under rotation in office. More and more, distrust and disdain towards officeholders and officeseeking shaped federal employment.¹⁴

¹² Andrew Jackson, “First Annual Message” (December 8, 1829), in ed. James D. Richardson, vol.2 of *Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789-1902* (Washington, D.C.: Bureau of National Literature and Art, 1905), 449.

¹³ For alternative view that suggests the linkage between Jackson, spoils, and bureaucratic development, see Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

¹⁴ Richard John, “Affairs of Office: The Executive Departments, The Election of 1828, and the Making of the Democratic Party,” in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, eds. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 65. This process is most clearly and convincingly documented by John’s analysis of the Post Office Department *Spreading the News*, especially chapter 6. Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 190-238. On the consequences of rotation after 1829, see White, *The Jacksonians*, 327-332. The decline in the American administrative system closely paralleled the decline in government sanctioned internal improvements. See John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvements: Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), chap. 5, (“Spoiling Internal Improvements”).

This interpretation of American state development—pushed forward most recently and convincingly by Richard John—challenges historiographical claims made over three decades ago that credit Jacksonian democracy and the spoils system in particular for introducing bureaucracy to the federal government. Characterizing the Washington community prior to 1829 as remote, separated, and out of touch with the general public, James Sterling Young argued that the rise and victory of the Democratic Party “bound disparate groups at Washington into an association capable of governing.” Inspired by the Jacksonian revolution, a “demanding citizenry” nudged officeholders in Washington to “develop the political skills and the political organization necessary to satisfy popular demands.” This, according to Young, “would relieve power-seeking from the onus of self-seeking at Washington, and would provide incontestable justification for leadership initiatives,” all of which was necessary for a “viable government.”¹⁵ James’s influential study provided the conceptual framework for historians Lynn L. Marshall and Mathew Crenson. Rather than replace meritorious public servants and diminish the capacity of the central government, Marshall and Crenson argue that the spoils system encouraged administrative reform. For Marshall, the Jacksonians looked to devise government safeguards against economic corruption wrought by the National Bank; they did so by erecting new administrative rules and regulations so that personal economic benefits could not be exploited. According to Marshall, “the Jacksonians proposed to organize the executive department as a rationalized complex of offices, ordered by function, and defined by rules and regulations, so as to be free in so far as possible irregular custom and individual personalities.”¹⁶ Along the same

¹⁵ James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 251-252.

¹⁶ Lynn L. Marshall, “The Strange Stillbirth of the Whig Party,” *American Historical*

lines, Mathew Crenson credited the Jacksonians for producing a rationalized and depersonalized administrative state. Like Marshall, Crenson argued that rotation gave rise to bureaucracy. According to Crenson, rationalized, routinized, and functional administrative procedures developed in response to social disorder. In order for “common men” with diverse social backgrounds to be rotated in and out of office on a regular and efficient basis, a system of rules, self-policing regulations, and fixed salaries needed to be adopted in order to safeguard against corruption. Jacksonians, in this light, were merely responding to an emotional and democratic demand for rotation in office. As stated by Crenson, “It was political and social change, not the dynamics of technological progress, which produced the bureaucratic characteristics of Jacksonian administration.”¹⁷ The Marshall-Crenson thesis has long been endorsed by historians and political scientists seeking to understand the relationship between political parties and the development of the American state.¹⁸ Yet a crucial drawback of the thesis is that it fails to account for the development of the American state prior to Jackson and belies the notion that

Review 72, no. 2 (1967): 455.

¹⁷ Mathew A. Crenson, *The Federal Machine: Beginning of Bureaucracy in Jacksonian America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 5-6. Crenson sides with historians who have emphasized the emotional and psychological influences of Jacksonianism. See, for example, Marvin Meyers, *The Jacksonian Persuasion: Politics and Belief* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957).

¹⁸ The relationship between patronage, state formation, and the development of mass political parties in the nineteenth-century is explored in Richard L. McCormick, *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 67-68, 154-166; James A. Monroe, *The Democratic Wish: Popular Participation and the Limits of American Government*, (2nd ed., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 87-94. For an alternative to Marshall-Crenson thesis, see William E. Nelson, *Roots of American Bureaucracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Nelson attributes the growth of bureaucracy to reformative measures that took place after the Civil War.

“institutions beget institutions.” That is, the building blocks of a government bureaucracy were already in place prior to Jackson and rotation in office.¹⁹

To be sure, Jackson’s theory of “rotation in office” made officeseeking a commonplace in American life; but rather than provide an impetus to bureaucratic growth, it partly stymied the development of a permanent civil service throughout the nineteenth century. Not only did rotation in office affect the lives of countless government workers, it also worked to create what political scientist, Daniel Carpenter, has referred to as symbolic cultural constraints on the development of bureaucratic autonomy in the nineteenth century. By reducing the duties of public office to the status of “plain and simple,”²⁰ Jackson’s patronage system essentially reduced the federal bureaucracy to that of a “clerical state,” with the image of the “discreditable clerk” as its “symbolic foundation.” “A bureaucratic state existed,” argued Carpenter, “but it was predominantly a clerical outfit” shaped by local party machines. Clerks, in this view, were nothing more than plums who “took orders” within a political machine. Government clerical labor was devalued and degraded, viewed by many as simple and feeble-minded, even unmanly.²¹

While Carpenter is correct in that Jackson’s justification for rotation in office created cultural constraints on bureaucratic reform, he mistakenly assumes that clerks were plums and

¹⁹ See Richard R. John, “Governmental Institutions as Agents of Change: Rethinking American Political Development in the Early Republic, 1787-1835,” *Studies in American Political Development* 11 (1997): 347-380; and idem, “Affairs of Office.”

²⁰ Andrew Jackson, “First Annual Message,” 449.

²¹ Daniel P. Carpenter, *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks, and Policy Innovations in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 44-45, 60.

discredits the notion that professionalization within the federal bureaucracy prior to the Civil War had ever been a sought after ideal. More specifically, Carpenter and his predecessors fail to take into consideration the myriad ways in which government clerks living and working in Washington sought out merit-based reform and pushed forward bureaucratic innovation. Although negatively impacted by rotation in office and popular public discourse directed toward officeholders and officeseekers, there remained in Washington throughout the antebellum period a career-minded clerking class. Importantly, each study fails to take into account the ambitions, practices, and professional goals of the clerks themselves.

The fact is that a national administrative state did not develop entirely as a response to a fervent democratic spirit, economic change, or social disorder; rather, meritocratic reforms were sought internally on behalf of clerks and for a variety of reasons, but particularly because to do so was an essential characteristic of an emerging middle-class *mentalité*.²² Work and labor performed was a critical indicator of class status. Government clerical labor during the antebellum period must accordingly be understood not only within the context of party politics but also within the larger northern middle-class experience and in particular the transition to bureaucratic-white collar labor.²³ While the labor of government clerks can be included among a variety of nonmanual professions that were taking shape throughout America's burgeoning

²² See especially Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, which connects the development of a middle class to professional occupations. Historian Stuart Blumin has traced the emergence of the middle class in the nineteenth-century and concluded that its development was owed in part to a structural transformation of the American economy, particularly a decline in skilled craft workers, and the convergence of socioeconomic factors such as living patterns, the professionalization of nonmanual labor, and a shared self-identity that was shaped partly by personal and social perceptions of nonmanual labor. See *The Emergence of the Middle Class*, especially pp. 230-257.

²³ Brian Luskey, *On the Make: Clerks and the Quest for Capital in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: NYU Press, 2010); Ryan, *The Cradle of the Middle Class*.

urban centers, the experience of government clerks reveals that the formation of the middle class in the nineteenth century was not exclusively connected to market development and often took different forms and pathways from locale to locale. The development of government labor and experience of government clerks, compared to their merchant counterparts, suggest what sociologists Melanie Archer and Judith R. Blau have called a “middle class characterized by heterogeneity and a historical shifting social composition.”²⁴ For career-minded clerks, government labor was economically and socially important. Merit-based reform would not only create career opportunities, it also served to prevent arbitrary and politically motivated removals from office. But these men also shared both a common interest in enriching the growth of the federal government and a belief in a socially responsible state authority even if their intentions were shill—that is, out of their own self-interest and acceptance of the modern state. In addition to establishing career-based promotions, meritocracy was a social ideal meant to shape the contours of government authority.

The push for merit-based reform within the antebellum period suggests the rise of a centralized government power infused with northern bourgeois social values of hard work, parsimonious habits, and efficiency. This contributed to, if not provided, the material and ideological foundation of what historian Richard Franklin Bensel has dubbed the “Yankee Leviathan” when referring to the rise of national power and diminished local authority during the

²⁴ Melanie Archer and Judith R. Bluth, “Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: The Case of the Middle Class,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 19 (1993): 21; Burton J. Bledstein connects the development of a middle class to professional occupations in, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1976); Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class*.

last half of the nineteenth century.²⁵ While many clerks lived and worked in Washington—a southern city—many carried with them northern bourgeois values. To be sure, the number of clerks in the District of Columbia from states other than Maryland and Virginia would escalate as the Democrat and Whig parties hoped to secure their political base by warding off potential intraparty factions in the Northwest and Northeast.²⁶ This, in turn, brought to Washington more public servants from the northern states.

Nevertheless, due to their proximity to the District of Columbia, men from Maryland and Virginia occupied a higher percentage of government clerical jobs than men from other states throughout the antebellum period.²⁷ This raises the question: what place did southern values of honor, generosity, and personal and local autonomy, as well as a shared southern opposition to a centralized state, have within the federal departments? From the outside, it would appear that southern honor and its emphasis on manly command and leisure would run opposite to the effeminate, urbane, and industrious clerk.²⁸ Historian Catherine Allgor has shown, however,

²⁵ Richard Franklin Bense, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

²⁶ On the use of patronage appointments to ward off the development of intraparty factions and third-parties, see Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), especially chapter 13, (“Patronage is a Dangerous Element of Power”); Amy Bridges, *A City in the Republic: Antebellum New York and the Origins of Machine Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 125-145; Ronald P. Formisano, *Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

²⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Apportionment of Clerks and Messengers in the Government Departments*, H. Rep., no. 406, 35th Cong., 1st sess., May 17, 1858, 20.

²⁸ On southern honor and values, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); idem, *The Shaping of*

that efforts were made during Washington City's first three decades of development to build a political community that reflected the interests of the city's ruling class—a class defined by a modern and functional government rather than access to, and control of, the means to political production. Even the middle clerks who worked in the federal government were pervious to this class. By virtue of their labor, they too could identify themselves as a member of this community, a community that envisioned itself around aristocratic social forms as well as meritorious approaches to state-building.²⁹

Remnants of this society and approaches toward government labor and public service would continue throughout the antebellum period. What is more, historian Jonathan Wells has identified in the antebellum South a small, but articulate and professional, middle class that shared many of the same values as their northern counterparts, including education and a commitment to industry and reform. According to Wells, the transportation and communication revolution that took place during the first half of the twentieth century provided a cultural and intellectual bridge—one that allowed a southern middle class to closely emulate characteristics and values of a developing northern middle class.³⁰ While northerners and southerners were certainly cognizant of their differences, Washington City provided a meeting ground for these differences to come together. Men came to Washington from the North and South hoping to secure in the form of a clerkship better prospects for themselves and their families. In doing so,

Southern Culture: Honor, Grace, and War, 1760s-1880s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Kenneth S. Greenberg, *Honor and Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); and William R. Taylor, *Cavalier & Yankee: The Old South and American National Character* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).

²⁹ Allgor, *Parlor Politics*, 70.

³⁰ Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

they helped mold the identity of Washington's emerging clerking class.

I

From 1789 through 1829, the world that Joseph Hand first entered as a clerk, public service was akin to a career system. Young men with some connection to Washington's official society began working as clerks and usually occupied the same office throughout the remaining of their professional career, unless they were promoted to chief clerk or some higher office. They generally carried the trust of their fellow workers, assumed intimate knowledge of the workplace, and put in place habits and procedures that would ultimately shape the functionary of government. After 1829, this single system fissured but it was not entirely destroyed. On one hand, career-minded clerks were needed to carry out the function of government; on the other, party patronage clerks were needed to supply the material base of national political parties. To be sure, the two struggled to coexist. While rotation of personnel did partly diminish the quality of service, there is evidence that at least a segment of Washington's clerking class hoped to remain neutral and employed on a permanent basis. While patronage appointments and rotation in office occupied popular public attention, career-minded clerks kept the government and all of its functions in operation.³¹ This tension would shape the lives of government clerks and public service for the next four decades.

Joseph Hand was a capable, career-minded clerk whose life and experience working and living in Washington between 1814 and 1844 crossed over two important political periods and two different social worlds shaped respectively by political culture in Washington. Once a connected member to Washington's official society, Hand eventually observed and faced the

³¹ For evidence of this, see White, *The Jacksonians*, 354-362.

political, social, and professional consequences of Andrew Jackson's ascendancy to the presidency as well as his controversial policy on rotation in office. Hand's professional and personal history draw attention to the ambivalent aspirations, everyday experiences, and economic and political realities that ordinary government clerks in Washington were forced to negotiate during the first half of the nineteenth century. Hand's life, like many antebellum government clerks, was one of perpetual anxiety. He continuously strived to reconcile republican and cultural ideals of independence and respectability with his own moral ambitions within the confines of Washington society. In 1829, just as Jackson's policy of rotation was beginning take hold of government offices, Joseph Hand confessed to his uncle that he often wished that he could become "a quiet independent farmer."³² For Hand, the idea of spending a life working in the midst of Washington's political distractions and exertions was in many regards disheartening. Like so many other government clerks of the time, Hand observed officeseekers come and go from Washington. He feared dismissal with each presidential election, and was continually frustrated by the damaging effects rotation in office held on administrative thought and procedures, as well as public morale.

A career-minded clerk, Hand was one of many clerks in Washington entrusted with specialized tasks in an ever-expanding state mechanism. A clerk in Washington's General Post Office until 1836, Hand was often called upon, in addition to his regular duties, to develop important administrative procedures and provide crucial legal advice to federal postal policy. In 1834, for example, Hand was given the task of delivering "a paper in a case before Congress involving important principles of Post Office Law," to which he "felt a weight of unveiled responsibility" but wrote with much enthusiasm. He said to his wife, "I went to work in my

³² Joseph Hand to Uncle, December 1829, Container 4, JASC.

room at home—worked hard and sat up all night and at last provided something which I believe will do me no discredit.” On another occasion that same year, Hand was called upon to write a “legal argument” that directly pertained to the United States Court of Virginia and the “interest” of the Postal Department. To his delight, Hand had “strong confidence” that his argument would effectively expand the legal boundaries of the federal postal system.³³

In 1835, Jackson appointed the influential architect of spoils, Amos Kendall, to the position of Postmaster General. A patronage rationalist and technician, Kendall immediately embarked on a campaign to reform the postal system. At the heart of Kendall’s reform measures was a new, democratically inspired ethos that further reinforced political patronage within the departments. As maintained by Richard John, “This new ethos—with its mingling of antiaristocratic, antibureacratic, and anti-institutional themes—sought to destroy the link that had formerly existed between public preferment and social prestige.” In a calculated effort to build the Democratic Party by intensifying the policy of rotation, Kendall turned out capable officeholders and regularly replaced them with influential newspaper editors throughout the country. In less than two years time, Kendall had removed nearly 180 postmasters in cities throughout the United States, and 12 clerks within the department. In determining whether or not a clerk was fit for government Kendall looked toward the moral conduct of government employees, rather than merit and capability—undeniably a source of frustration for many clerks.³⁴ Joseph Hand offered a glimpse into the “excitement” that took place at the time. On

³³ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, May 5, July 9, 1834, Container 4, JASC.

³⁴ John, *Spreading the News*, 127; Donald B. Cole, *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2004), 208, 115-131. Kendall’s thoughts and actions toward removals and clerkship can be gleamed from his personal letters. See William Stickney, ed., *Autobiography of Amos Kendall* (Reprint, New

July 5, 1836, the day after Congress passed a bill to commence reorganization of the postal department, clerks showed up for work in the General Post Office, but the doors were locked. To Hand's knowledge, thirteen clerks had been dismissed from office, while the others anxiously crowded the hallways outside the locked doors to their offices. "What will be with me is still tentative," Hand cautiously explained to his wife a day later.³⁵

After 1830, Hand regularly corresponded to his wife, Catharine, the details and political proceedings of rotation that were beginning to take shape in Washington. By 1835, his tone and sentiment regarding partisan dismissals had reached a fiery pitch. A clerk in the General Post Office, Joseph Hand witnessed firsthand the reforms that Amos Kendall initiated. As soon as Kendall took office, Hand feared he too might be dismissed from office. In July 1835, Hand solicited the help of family friend and Secretary of State, John Forsyth, to speak on his behalf to Kendall. Forsyth kindly responded to Hand that he "indeed *cannot* interfere with Mr. K's arrangements." Hand spent the next few months wondering what Mr. K's "disposition" and "plans" would be. "It is very difficult to say how any man will stand in the political world six months hence," he cautiously said to his wife. Yet Hand, whose tenure as a clerk was closely tied to national politics, found some hope in the presidential election of 1836, between Democrat Martin Van Buren and the three regional Whig candidates. Martin Van Buren won the popular vote by a narrow margin and a smaller majority of the electoral vote than Jackson did in 1832. The ideological appeal of the Whigs had gained ground in the months leading up to the election. This development was further given strength by the partisan fissure that ensued during the Bank War. As aptly stated by Hand roughly a year before the election, "The bonds which hold

York: Peter Smith, 1949), 278-463.

³⁵ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, July 6, 1836, Container 4, JASC.

together the great dominant [Democratic] party seem to be giving way, and no one can predict the result.”³⁶ Martin Van Buren, nevertheless, won the election, and the Jacksonians remained in power.

Rotation in office essentially left capable, career-minded clerks in a perpetual state of uncertainty. Even before Kendall attempted to reorganize the United States postal system, Hand revealed that the partisan uproar in Washington was “perfectly appalling.” In words that echoed throughout his time in office, he reluctantly conveyed to his wife in 1834: “I know nothing of what to do, nor what is to become of me. There is a state of madness in the minds of men—of madness in high places.” Two years later, the appointment of Kendall as Postmaster General, the looming election of 1836, and a national economic panic left Hand wondering what his options might be; indeed, if there were any at all. Would he or would he not be turned out of office? His inability to fully control the outcome to this question left Hand feeling void of an independent selfhood. His wife Catharine tested his manly self-identity when she stated to him that she would merely “try” to be “happy” after her husband informed her of his doubtfulness to provide an independent living for himself and family as a government clerk. “I know and feel that you are not situated in any respect as you ought to be nor as I wish,” Hand confided to his wife. “[But] I too wish you had my experience. You can not know the toils, the responsibilities, the dependence, the personal inflictions of injustice belonging to office.” Hand was truly thrown into an uncompromising situation, and frustratingly responded to his wife by reminding her that

³⁶ Ibid., July 11, 20, Nov. 21, 1835. On the presidential election of 1836, see Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 33-59.

she was asking him to “succeed where I cannot command success.”³⁷ Unfortunately for Hand, his future and independence were, according to his own introspection, out of his control—that is, of course, if he desired to remain a government clerk. On one occasion in 1836 Hand even admitted to his wife: “I thought that if I should fail here, with my talents, industry & property we might be happy even *out* of Washington.” But even if Hand left Washington to pursue another career, economic independence was not guaranteed. This accordingly stirred in Hand an ever-present “nervous irritability” and a constant “longing to live free,” to, in his words, become “a master of myself.”³⁸

Especially alarming to Joseph Hand was the impression that competence and merit were by no means taken into consideration for promotion, or dismissal. By 1836, Hand had witnessed first-hand the rise of partisan political appointments. He continually voiced his frustration over the decline in morale that was quickly beginning to unfold within the public departments, and doubted that his meritorious efforts and abilities as a clerk would ever be of any credit to his name. “From my lowly station my action and my opinions go forth into the high place of the land—and I am in constant contact with minds of the highest order in it—and yet what does it avail?” he somberly inquired to his wife. Weeks later, Hand continued to express his frustration. “Now it is a sober fact (absurd to be sure) that length of service & consequent experiences, is really no *admitted* claim—Mr. K. especially *not* the *man to feel these* things.” Hand, moreover, criticized Kendall, for “break[ing] down the principle of *honor* in the service,” and reminded his wife that “*personal* presentation of one’s own merit” offered few opportunities for reward unless

³⁷ Ibid., March 27, 1834, March 1, March 16, 1836.

³⁸ Ibid., July 20, 1835, March 1, 1836, March 16, 1836, April 9, 1836.

it was “supported by other influences.” By April, Hand regrettably admitted to his wife that public service was “not what it was a year ago.” His “principles of honor & confidence,” along with “the *spirit* of the *service*,” had been effectively “*broken down*.”³⁹

Opportunities for upward mobility and promotion within the federal departments grew increasingly rare after 1828. Some clerks, however, found opportunities for personal advancement by moving laterally from office to office or from department to department. This was certainly the case for Joseph Hand. By way of his close relationship to Secretary Forsyth, Hand carefully avoided being rotated out of office in 1836 by leaving his position in the General Post Office and accepting the position of Chief Clerk in the Patent Office. Although Hand admitted it was difficult to leave a “service” to which he deemed himself “competent to the highest situation,” Hand gratefully accepted his new position. He refused, however, to serve under the newly appointed chief clerk in the General Post Office, to whom Hand believed knew “nothing of the service” he was about to take over. But Hand’s change in office infused in him a “new life in public service.” Upon assuming his new and higher-ranking clerkship, he gleefully confided to his wife that he was “restoring” the office into a “higher condition” by “giving to it more mind than was ever given to it before.” Hand quickly became “very popular in the office.” Within less than a year’s time, he was sure that he had “already done more to introduce a regular and efficient system” than anyone who had preceded him. “I am now in my proper element,” admitted Hand. “I have a great deal of care—a great many questions to decide every day...Having this hold of the good will of the office, I can accomplish more than another by all

³⁹ Ibid., Jan. 19, Feb. 1, 1836.

manner of vexations & provoking little regulations.”⁴⁰ Meritorious feelings such as these, however, tended to wane with each presidential election.

In the face of rotation, Hand doubted his ability to achieve personal success. “The times are against me. Everything here is against me,” wrote Hand prior to accepting his position in the Patent Office. “I am struggling against the current.” Hand even admitted to his wife that he did not “expect to succeed.” This type of sentiment, to be sure, left many government clerks feeling that their masculine identities were under siege. The stifling of merit-based promotions and the often arbitrary appointment practices generated by patronage rationality, combined with the reorganization of the General Post Office, led Hand to believe that it would be a “direct *personal dishonor*” to be “passed over” for promotion. The esprit de corps of public life, suggested Hand, had consequently been broken down. In words that reflected his personal emotions on multiple occasions, Hand acknowledged that he had very little “heart” in the public service. He wrote, “[W]ords cannot express the deep loathing & disgust I feel for the present character of public service.”⁴¹

Hand’s public and private experiences of living and working as a clerk in Washington reveal much about the political system that emerged in Washington after 1829 and the consequences it had on public life as well as the personal lives of government clerks. Government clerks like Hand were thus greatly self-interested in each presidential election. In describing the transfer of presidential power from the Democrats to the Whigs in 1841, Joseph Hand noticed that there was “something very melancholy and touching in this state of things.”

⁴⁰ Ibid. July 22, 1836, June 5, 9, 12, 1837. On lateral mobility with the federal departments, see John, *Spreading the News*, 128.

⁴¹ Ibid., April 23, June 21, April 17, 1836.

“Yesterday a mighty power existed here,” he continued. “Today it has vanished into thin air and not a vestige remains—a new power” has emerged. Joseph Hand’s status as a government clerk, of course, was still plagued with uncertainty. By 1840, the Whigs too had developed into a mass political party utilizing the same patronage practices instilled by the Democrats over a decade earlier. Hand’s description of the Washington scene on the final day of Martin Van Buren’s presidency is telling of this development. He wrote, “Washington is literally swarming with rapacious & savage office seekers—enough to gorge and devour, ten times over, all the places here.”⁴² From election to election, career-minded clerks like Joseph Hand, watched through their office windows as officeseekers filtered into the national capital. The threat of removal and being replaced by a political savvy and well-connected officeseeker always loomed, straining both the professional and domestic lives of clerks.

Clerking in the federal government was one of a variety of career-oriented professions that emerged in antebellum America and demanded specific standards, rules, and methods in order for it to be fully legitimized and accepted by a disengaged and disapproving public. Historian Burton J. Bledstein has persuasively argued that “an aspiring middle class in America was beginning to build a professional foundation for an institutional order, a foundation in universal scientific, and predictable principles” in the years before the Civil War. Career-minded clerks like Joseph Hand strived to develop values of professionalism that saw in government labor a rational and meritorious approach to state development. By 1830, Washington’s clerking class responded to the threat of rotation by pushing for the institutionalization of merit-based promotions over the customary practices that shaped public life a decade prior. As stated in one inspired government report, “[t]he hope of promotion is the most powerful encouragement to

⁴² Ibid., March 3, 1841.

official fidelity and skill” within the departments; it would produce in clerks “of every grade” the most “happy effect.”⁴³

Partly in response to rotation in office but also a developing middle-class experience, Washington clerks took an investment—emotional and rational—in reforming public service. A clerkship in the federal government not only provided a livelihood, it also gave meaning to clerks’ identities as nonmanual laborers. Faith in establishing an instructional order in which to build a profession was certainly a celebrated component of Joseph Hand’s efforts and experience as a Chief Clerk in the Patent Office. Hand privately boasted to his wife that he had a labor “force” of nearly thirty men working underneath, and was doing what his “very nature delights in, wielding & diverting it efficiently.” “I have... the whole system to plan, and organize—and now, unchecked....I am carrying it into effect.” Hand’s efforts to modernize and make the federal government more efficient not only ran counter to the anti-institutional impetus of Jackson’s policies, they were also defining features of what was deemed morally acceptable and professional government labor.⁴⁴ Clerks like Hand thus shared a common interest with one another in seeing the federal bureaucracy develop through the implementation of merit-based reform.

Clerks’ sense of worth and identities as nonmanual laborers were significantly shaped by their salaries and rank within their respective departments. The potential for upward mobility not only presented an incentive to work harder, the ability to move up in rank and salary also afforded clerks an opportunity to elevate their social status and acquire a more confident sense of

⁴³ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Retrenchment-Reorganization of Executive Departments*, H. Rep., no. 741, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 1842, 20.

⁴⁴ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, June 12, 1837, JASC; Burton J. Bledstein, 159-202, quote on 195.

independence. Yet throughout the antebellum period there remained little correlation between duties performed, rank, and salary earned. Salaries varied as did services performed. An 1836 letter to the editor of the *Daily National Intelligencer* hoped “that all *fictitious distinctions* in rank and compensation be done away” and that salaries more carefully reflect the duties performed. Clerks understood the concept of equal pay for equal work and could readily quantify and identify the differences between office duties. An 1842 investigation into reforming the classification and compensation of clerks revealed that there was “a great difference in the capacity and application requisite for the faithful discharge of the duties of the clerks.” Popularly known as the Gilmer Report, the investigation reflected the sentiments already espoused by the career-minded clerks. “Many of the clerks are mere copyists,” it recorded, “while others are engaged” in duties “involving great responsibility, experience, and research.” Nevertheless, when the investigating committee asked the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, T.H. Crawford, to define the duties of the three different ranks of clerks in his office, he responded by stating that the question was “impossible to answer precisely” as there was no “special classification of duties according to salaries.”⁴⁵

Four primary classifications of clerks existed throughout the antebellum period, although the duties of government clerks varied, as did their salaries. A “fourth-class” clerkship was the highest in terms of salary, while a “first-class” clerkship was generally the lowest. A first-class clerkship was primarily given to transcribing and recording clerks; a second-class clerkship to accounting and corresponding clerks; a third-class to chief clerks and subordinate officers (i.e.,

⁴⁵ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 16, 1836; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Retrenchment-Reorganization of Executive Departments*, H. Rep., no. 741, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 1842, 34.

auditors and comptrollers); and a fourth-class to the chief clerks and subordinate offices nearest the Secretary. Clerical salaries generally ranged from \$900 to \$1800 throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, but did not always reflect the difficulty of labor performed; nor did it always reflect workplace experience and tenure in office. At different times, particularly in 1836 and 1853, changes were made to institutionalize the classification and compensation of clerks. But it was never entirely rationalized and formally carried out, nor did any of the major changes in classification establish a thorough system of promotion. In general, chief clerks and heads of agencies were sympathetic to the willingness of clerks to gain promotion and an increase in salary; however, there remained throughout the antebellum period an intense riff between clerks' demands and the willingness of Congress to comply. With spoils being the rule of the day, most congressmen saw promotion and fixed compensation rates as a burden to their chances of getting reelected.⁴⁶

Government clerks seeking permanent employment, a promotion, or increase in salary carefully demonstrated a need for meritocratic identification within the federal departments, as well as a dependency on the government for financial support. After having been briefly removed, A.J. Dallas was restored to office in 1850. His salary, however, "suffered a reduction of \$1252 to \$939" per year. He immediately sent a letter to the Treasury Secretary asking that his original salary be reinstated since his duties were no different. Dallas had a family dependent on him for support, and received no other source of income other than his "pay from the government." Clement Bennett was also convinced that he did not receive adequate pay for the work that he performed in the Third Auditor's Office in the Treasury Department. A temporary

⁴⁶ White, *The Jacksonians*, 376-393; Cindy Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle-Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 65-68.

clerk, Bennett was assigned the duty of keeping “Letter Books” at the rate of \$3.00 per day. Soon thereafter, he was assigned the task of recording and categorizing the accumulated expenses of raising a volunteer army to fight in the Mexican-American War, to which “the duties and labor are much more arduous.” As an accounting clerk, Bennett felt he deserved at least \$4.00 per day. Bennett also claimed to be the “most experienced clerk, in his office,” having been employed for “one and a half years.”⁴⁷

With few alternatives to fall back on, most officeseekers readily accepted a \$1,000 dollar clerkship, although many believed they would advance beyond a first-class clerkship. Some, however, expressed a reluctance to accept what they deemed was too low of a salary to maintain a reputable standing in Washington. Joseph B. Clarke felt not only “qualified” but also “entitled” to a “higher grade of clerkship, and initially declined a first-class clerkship upon the grounds that it “might prejudice” him “as a candidate for one of higher grade.” Knowing full well the scarcity of clerkships available, Clarke eventually decided to accept an “inferior clerkship,” but only under the condition that he would not “lose *caste*” within the bureaucratic ranks.⁴⁸

Government salaries blurred the boundaries between independence, servitude, and subordination. But this was partially symptomatic of working in a developing bureaucracy.

⁴⁷ A. J. Dallas to Meredith, July 22, 1850, p. 126, Letters Received Relating to Appointments of Clerks, 1844-51, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 211, Vol. 2, National Archives at College Park, MD, (hereafter referred to as Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP); Clement W. Bennett to D.S. Dickinson, Feb. 3, 1848, Clement W. Bennett to Robert J. Walker, July 29, 1848.

⁴⁸ Clarke to Corwin, 15 Oct. 1850, Applications and Recommendations for Positions in the Washington, DC, Offices, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 210, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP).

Clerks of the lower grade often found it difficult to take orders from a ranking officer who earned a higher salary but performed duties that they felt required less “intellect,” “education,” and “attention to business.” An 1847 monthly report from the Chief Clerk in the Registrar’s Office in the Treasury Department was highlighted by a suggestion to exchange the salaries of clerks James Laurie and Samuel Atlee. According to the report, Atlee received only \$1,000 dollars, but performed the duties of a \$1,400 clerk. Laurie, on the other hand, was “quite advanced in years” and “physically incapable...of performing much official duty.” Yet labor performed, and the ability to perform such labor, were only part of the justification for a salary increase. Here again, administrative decisions often hinged on whether or not the applicant was dependent upon the government for support. As advocated in the Treasury report, Atlee had a “family consisting of a wife and children,” while Laurie had a wife but no “children so young as to be unable to earn their own living.”⁴⁹

Still, clerks were always replaceable and thus had to be cautious of being rotated out of office. In 1850, Edward Bell, worried that his current, temporary clerkship was too “precarious,” and thus “liable to be dropped at any time,” hoped to get a permanent clerkship. A self-identified Whig from Ohio, Bell worried that the Locofocos might win the next presidential election and pursue a “general dismissal of Whig Clerks.” He had witnessed other clerks around him get promoted, some of whom shared similar duties as Bell and had “no one to support but themselves.” Bell, on the other hand, needed the money to support himself as well as his mother’s family. What is more, Bell was a “corresponding clerk,” a title that generally “commands from \$1200 to \$1400” per year in “all the Departments.” He pleaded, “It does not

⁴⁹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, May 16, 1836; Samuel Cutts to Abbott Lawrence, 14 March 1849, file of Samuel Cutts, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP; R.H. Gillet to Robert Walker, 1, April 1847, p. 186, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP.

seem fair that I should only get \$1000 for performing duties, for which others receive \$1200 & \$1400.” Asking for assistance in this regard evidently ran against his sense of manliness, particularly as it related to his ability to independently provide for himself. “I have always had a delicacy in asking anyone to aid me,” declared Bell. “[T]here is not enough brass in my composition to make me a good office hunter.” But with “vacancies occurring almost daily,” Bell thought the opportunity to earn a promotion was ripe.⁵⁰

Clerks also invoked loyalties to whatever political party was in charge in order to receive a promotion. In 1849, Richard Mackall worked as a first-class clerk in the Treasury Department but couldn’t bear to witness “inexperienced democratic clerks...brought into the office and placed over” him. Knowing that the Chief Clerk was about to resign from office due to his “age and infirmities,” Mackall thought it would not be unreasonable to have a “younger and more efficient” clerk assume his position. As the “oldest Whig Clerk,” Mackall thought he was especially suited for the position. With little consideration for merit-based promotions, clerks commonly relied upon the same social capital that got them into office, in particular the assistance of politically influential men. T.L. Moody, of Alabama, began working as a clerk in the Second Auditor’s Office in 1843. Like numerous other officeseekers, Moody entered office due to a “misfortune in business” and was compelled to take any office available. With little hesitation, he took a \$1,000 first-class clerkship, believing that with the Whigs in power he would have ample opportunities for “early promotion or increase in salary.” But political tides changed, and in 1845 the Democrat James K. Polk assumed the presidency. Moody was able to retain his clerkship “without however interfering at all with Politics,” and having been attacked for four years by “vindictive and taunting Locofocos.” Void of any “political influence” to fall

⁵⁰ Edward Bell to Gen. C. R. Goddard, 5 Oct. 1850, Container 3, Thomas Corwin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

back on, Moody put to rest any “hope for an office of a higher grade,” despite whatever merits and qualifications he carried with him. Nevertheless, with the election of the Whig Millard Fillmore to the presidency in 1849, Moody was given “hope & new life.” In 1850, Moody’s salary was increased to \$1,400. As illustrated by Moody, hopes for promotion within the departments were often contingent on the political party in charge.⁵¹

II

While career-minded clerks engaged in a struggle against rotation and partisan appointments, they also hoped to increase the value of their labor in order to improve their social and professional position. Like the clerks who worked in the offices of the nation’s mushrooming financial and mercantile institutions, the tasks of government clerks primarily involved writing.⁵² Neat handwriting in and of itself could be viewed as an identifiable characteristic of a clerk. Indeed, proper penmanship was an essential trait for all clerks, if not their most important bureaucratic technology. In recommending Clement Bennett for a clerkship in the Treasury Department, William Oliver was sure to note that Bennett “writes well” and could “copy more in a day than three ordinary clerks.” Oliver had Bennett copy the letter he wrote for him so that the Treasury Secretary could himself testify to Bennett’s competency as a penman. Of course, Bennett was not necessarily unique in his qualities. A vast number of application letters were quick to underscore a proficiency in penmanship on behalf of the

⁵¹ Richard Mackall to Reverdy Johnson, 25 July 1849, p. 278, George Moody to Meredith, 10 June 1849, p. 319, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks in the Treasury Department*, H. Rep., Ex. Doc., no. 37, 31st Cong., 2nd sess., March 3, 1851, 9.

⁵² Michael Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary; or, a Labor History of the Nonproducing Classes,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Winter 2006): 579-586.

officeseeker and were commonly crafted to display clarity in penmanship as well as eloquence. In addition to moral character, penmanship offered a scientific method of determining one's fitness for office. A man by the name of Hopkins was recommended to office, in part, due to his "beautiful handwriting."⁵³

In the context of a developing middle-class culture, skillful and effortless penmanship was a manly trait that signified a man's industriousness as well as his sensibility. Instead of an axe or plow, the pen, or quill, symbolically identified the new, nonmanual laborer. A letter supporting Charles Schreiner's application to office noted that Schreiner, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, was a "ready penman, a good scholar and a man of energy, perseverance and industry." Penmanship was an essential qualification that was commonly underscored in testimonials affirming the applicant's character. Abiel Allen, who claimed over a decade of experience as a bookkeeper and later chief clerk in a dry goods stores, was deemed fit for government office. According to his "neighbor and personal friend," Allen was a "correct accountant and a *rapid* round-hand penman."⁵⁴

In the application letters of officeseekers, the conjoined talents of penmanship, industry, and personal character intertwined with the qualifications and habits of industry akin to nonmanual white-collar labor in the developing business world. From 1851 to 1852, Eugene Alexander applied repeatedly to be promoted from his temporary clerkship in the Treasury

⁵³ William Oliver to Robert Walker, 10 Oct. 1845, file of Clement. W. Bennett, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP; Truman Smith to Thomas Corwin, 20 Oct. 1850, Container 4, Thomas Corwin Papers.

⁵⁴ *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 15, 1853; File of Charles W. Schreiner, p. 388, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP; Granger to Guthrie, 29 April 1853, file of Allen Abial, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

Department. Alexander solicited multiple testimonials supporting his promotion, and then proceeded to copy each letter in order to demonstrate his skills as a penman—a tactful ploy on Alexander’s part. Not only were the letters more legible—perhaps distinguishable from the hundreds of other application letters—they also affirmed Alexander’s ability to transcribe in a clear and efficient manner. An auditor in the General Post Office recognized Alexander, an English immigrant and Washington resident, by his “neatness, accuracy, rapidity, faithfulness, & untiring industry,” all of which were traits that helped Alexander perform his duties with the “competency & fitness...of a first-class clerk.” Alexander, who was appointed a \$1,000 clerkship in 1852, certainly carried the resume of an endowed bookkeeper. A former treasurer for a London Insurance Company, Alexander was praised for his “quick and accurate...use of figures.” But if keeping accounts was not enough, Alexander also boasted that he was “competent to manage correspondence.” So it seemed Alexander could perform almost any qualification required by a clerk. But due to his “experience in accounts” and “modes of financial business in England,” Alexander reasoned he could provide a more “useful service to the Government in the bureaux [sic] belonging to the fiscal or commercial transaction of the Treasury.” He thus applied to Treasury Secretary Thomas Corwin directly.⁵⁵

Clerking in the federal government required a proper skill set; to be a skilled penman was a necessity. It was a skill, to be sure, that had been nurtured among attorneys and editors—men of letters—and developed in the mercantile business world. In the nation’s urban centers, men could readily access books and manuals on the science of handwriting, or enroll in courses to

⁵⁵ William F. Phillips to Howell Cobb, 18 August 1857, W.M. Corry to Corwin, 22 Sept. 1851, E. Alexander to Corwin, 25 Sept. 1851, file of Eugene Alexander, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks—Treasury Department*, Ex. Doc., no. 67, 32nd Cong., 2nd sess., Mar. 3, 1853, 31.

help improve their skills as penmen. Clerks, in turn, practiced their penmanship in part to qualify themselves as a member of an emerging middle class. For merchant and government clerks alike, penmanship embodied both a symbolic and functional importance. Proper penmanship granted young men a particular moral authority, if not an indispensable tool to succeed in business. Penmanship was an acquired technical skill and achieved talent. Legibility, discipline, and conformity were as much distinguished personal traits as they were signifiers of precise and mechanical writing. As argued by historian Thomas Augst, the writing done by clerks in business offices by the middle of the nineteenth century “was caught between an older moral value, as a prized habit of character, and a new economic value as a technical skill.”⁵⁶

The clerk-like business hand developed alongside the rise in applications for government offices throughout the nineteenth-century. Recognizing the importance of clear penmanship, it was not uncommon for officeseekers to apologize for what they perceived as sloppy handwriting in their application letters. Many officeseekers even emphasized their experience as a business clerk when applying for office. Beale C. Compton had been working as a copying clerk in New York for less than ten months when he applied for a clerkship in Washington in 1855. According to his employer, Compton wrote with a “good business hand” and “copies with care & attention.” His employer also recognized Compton to be a “good accountant & to profess a

⁵⁶ Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,” 581-583; Thomas Augst, *Young Men and Moral Life in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 8-9, 31-32, quote on 223. On the history of handwriting in America, see Tamara Plakins Thornton, *Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

knowledge of Book Keeping with its different branches.”⁵⁷ Charles Appleton, a Maryland native but graduate from Harvard College, had worked for many years as a chief clerk in the accounting department of Hannibal & St. Joseph Railroad Company in Missouri. But by 1861, his job was made vacant due to the onset of the Civil War. Here, Appleton was given the responsibility of assigning and registering bonds, often “to a large amount,” in addition to overseeing the “care of accounts and valuable papers.” To add to the breadth of Appleton’s professionalism as a clerk, he was recognized by one letter-writer as someone capable of carrying out his duties with “iron conformity...insisting upon every check and balance within his department.” A proper penman, Appleton was also a disciplined conformist. Clarity and adherence to rules, to be sure, were essential qualities needed to work in an increasingly mechanical and routine bureaucratic environment.⁵⁸

Copying and the mechanical tasks of a pen were an inevitable part of the developing governmental system of paperwork and recordkeeping. Similar to the business clerk, government clerks could measure their productivity by how many letters, public documents, and ledgers they copied in a day. Yet efficiency in writing also led to an estranged feeling of repetitiveness among clerks, if not an emotional detachment from their labor. While the ability to objectively quantify the task at hand could lead to small but discernable senses of accomplishment, the fact remained that at the end of the day some clerks commonly left their office fatigued from routine labor. The constant and never-ending accumulation of government

⁵⁷ J. Pryne to Peter Washington, 23 Feb. 1855, file of Beale C. Compton, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

⁵⁸ Thomas Saub to S.P. Chase, 9 Sept. 1861, Charles Appleton to S.P. Chase, 11 Sept. 1861, I.M. Forbes to S.P. Chase, 10 Sep. 1861, file of Charles Appleton, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

work also wore on clerks' sense of productivity and moral aspirations.

Quotas—the configuration of bureaucratic labor—were confronted by clerks in dubious ways. In 1853, Benjamin Brown French, a New Hampshire native who had been living and working in Washington since the early 1830s, was given the task of signing Land Patents in the president's office. “I *can* sign 150 an hour, but probably do not sign over 100,” French confided to himself. “There are now 10,000 ahead to be signed, & the Commissioner informs me they intend to issue about 5000 daily.” For French, the signing of Land Patents was a tedious task. No matter how many he signed in a day, there would still be more left to sign. This task also demanded no real concentration, an attribute to government work that French derided on multiple occasions. French sardonically referred to the signing of Land Patents as “*so intellectual*.” “That’s it—day in and day out,” stated French, who predicted that the mindless labor would turn his brain into a “sheet of parchment” and his heart into “a sort of vague idea of *something* that once beat with ‘feverish longings for fame’.” As suggested by French, government clerks sometimes found it difficult to properly and consciously absorb themselves in repetitive, mechanical labor.⁵⁹

Although frustrated with what he thought was numbing bureaucratic work, the fact is French was an important cog within the governmental machine. He was, in effect, administering new technologies of information management. Over time, clerks, like French, would be valued less on their character and degree of social capital and more on their mechanical efficiency.

Although French carried with him a significant amount of social capital in antebellum Washington and actively participated in the city's social events, he did at times describe his life

⁵⁹ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), 238. On the developing melancholy of white-collar work, see Augst, *A Clerk's Tale*, 219-232.

as routine, if not monotonous. At one point he tiresomely expressed the sentiment that he had been living the “same dog-trot life” for the last eight years. Shortly thereafter in June 1843 French was assigned the task of copying 338 pages of congressional recordings, which he believed would keep him “employed pretty constantly for two or three months.” Apparently government work conflicted with French’s future plans, for he expressed regret over the fact that his boss, Mathew St. Clair Clarke, the Clerk of the House of Representatives, did not assign it sooner. “But better late than never,” French reasoned with a tinge of frustration. “It is the most useless labor ever performed by man.” Government clerks often found it difficult to come to terms with their labor and personal feelings of satisfaction. In 1867, after his third day as clerk in the Treasury Department, Samuel Biddle, of Wisconsin, felt a strong sense of ambivalence toward his situation. Although his duties as clerk were “not very arduous,” he hoped that he would begin to feel “more at home” as they became clearer to him. Despite his optimism, he readily identified his labor as “somewhat monotonous,” which he attributed to “7 hours of continuous labor.”⁶⁰

Participation in Washington’s social scene, however, gave clerks a sense of relief from the monotony of bureaucratic life. It also gave clerks an opportunity to reconcile any failed social or personal aspirations. On one occasion Joseph Hand privately expressed to his wife that his current state of life was “solitary and monotonous” and lacked “variety.” In his view, he had no “society” of which to attach himself. On another occasion, Hand admitted that it was important for his psychological well-being to “not refuse the pleasures of social intercourse,” as they were “necessary...alleviations” to the “sense of loneliness” that would often overtake him. Not only had rotation diminished the prestige of government office at the subordinate level, it

⁶⁰ French, 135, 150; Samuel Biddle Letter, Jan. 9, 1867, The Historical Society of Washington, D.C., Kiplinger Research Library, Washington, D.C.

also exacerbated the routine nature of government labor. “I want rest—rest from the unmerited toil of the desk,” wrote Hand. “I want freedom.” Having worked as a government clerk in Washington for nearly two decades, Hand was sure that by 1836 rotation had diminished the “character of public service.” But for Hand, the routine nature of government labor was lessened so as long as he could perform it without someone with less experience and knowledge dictating his duties. In 1837, Hand described his life as “very busy,” if not rhythmic. He expressed to his wife: “I get to my office at 8 o’clock—stay till 2 o’clock—eat my dinner, and go back to my room, & finish off the business of the office for the day.” Hand confessed that his daily routine was however quite tolerable because he had “no little irritating power” watching over him.⁶¹

The majority of clerks used their skills in handwriting to create duplicates of important, if routine, government documents, then file them in a quantifiable and seemingly scientific system of record keeping. As a clerk in the House of Representatives, Benjamin French was given what he viewed as an “entirely useless” task of duplicating the reports of the Committee of Claims made during the previous session. To his dismay, a great portion of the summer in 1836 was spent copying printed reports that had already been printed. French found it difficult to rationalize what he viewed as meaningless labor. His best justification was that “custom” had made it his duty. Frustrated, French used the moment to moralize about the expanding growth of the federal government and the routine and seemingly insignificant policies that shaped government labor. He wrote: “In the infancy of the Government, when there were few reports, & not the half of that few were printed,” it made sense. “[B]ut now, when the *printed reports* of a single Committee form a royal octave volume, 2 inches thick, & all the reports of any

⁶¹ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, June 20, Aug. 4, 1832, Dec. 15, 1835, June 21, 1836, June 22, 1837, Container 4, JASC.

importance are printed, it does seem to me an utter waste of time to copy these printed reports in a large record book.”⁶² Whatever anxieties clerks felt toward their labor and ambivalence over inept policies that needed to be changed, their proficiency in copying government materials effectively facilitated the development of the modern state.

While policies of bureaucratic administration were continually being developed, copying had become a highly rationalized task by the 1840s. The routine task of recording and copying everything from land patents to correspondence to congressional proceedings awaited multitudes of salaried clerks as they made their way to the office each day. The Patent Office even hired men at a piece rate to copy in official form other documents, commonly at ten cents per every hundred words.⁶³ Normally, these tasks were given to men with favorable connections to government officials; but they were also given to individuals well-known throughout Washington society, including women.

Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax was given piecemeal tasks in the form of writing for the War Department in the 1850s, but was never offered a salaried position on account of her sex. Lomax, a descendant of a prominent Virginian family and wife of a deceased army officer, was left with six children dependent on her for support. Lomax maintained close connections throughout Washington’s official society, and as a benefit was presented various volumes of material from the Department of State to copy from her home. In 1856, however, she received a note from one of the chief clerks stating that her services were no longer required. Dismayed, Lomax immediately forwarded the letter to President Pierce, accompanied by a note asking him to “remedy the evil.” She then went to the White House to follow up her request, but received

⁶² French, 65.

⁶³ Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 66-67.

no clear answer as to why her services were no longer needed. Over the course of conversation with connected friends she learned that she had lost employment due to a reduction of expenditures, or retrenchment. Less than two months later, Lomax confidentially received a note from the chief clerk in the War Department, requesting her services to transcribe a paper by noon the next day. Lomax welcomed the opportunity and finished the transcription by “one o’clock the same night.” The very next morning she submitted the work and was awarded “enough work to keep [her] busily engaged through next week.” Lomax continued to copy for the War Department on a piecemeal basis throughout the 1850s.⁶⁴

Lomax’s work as a copier for the Department of State lasted from 1854 through 1860. Her labor was to be sure a rarity for her sex; but her tasks differed little from her male counterparts working from within one of the federal departments. Despite rotation’s hindrance to the development of government bureaucracies, the federal government continued to grow in size and scope. The government needed the services of clerks to maintain and categorize expanding systems of information. Lomax’s name, for example, was among 17 other copiers who were hired in December 1856 as “extra clerks” and paid to copy folios of the Secretary’s reports at 12 cents per page. In December 1860, Lomax received a hefty paycheck for copying 804 folios of correspondence that would ultimately accompany the annual report of the Secretary of War.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax, *Leaves from an Old Washington Diary, 1854-1863* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1943), 18, 38, 50, 57, 58, 60, 81, 117.

⁶⁵ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Contingent Expenses of the Department of the Interior*, Ex. Doc. no. 6, 35th Cong., 1st sess., 1857, 15; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Contingent Expenses of the War Department*, Ex. Doc no. 25, 36th Cong., 1st sess., 1860, 33.

The hiring of women to privately copy government documents outside of public office helped establish precedents for the enlistment of women to work in one of Washington's federal departments during the Civil War. Up until that time, however, government departments were predominantly patriarchal and fraternal organizations. Since Lomax's copying was performed outside of the male-dominated office space, her labor posed little threat to the manhood of the men working within the departments. Government clerical labor, including copying, was still deemed men's work at this time.⁶⁶ On the other hand, one could conclude that her employment, along with that of the "extra clerks," was an early form of outsourcing. As the federal government expanded, her employers were likely quite aware of the pecuniary advantages of outsourcing specialized activities.⁶⁷

III

The routinization of government work also had its expression in the debased physicality of departmental clerks. Government clerks, like other nonmanual laborers, were deskbound and confined to a closed space; whatever physical labor they performed was limited to the pen, rather

⁶⁶ Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 65-68. Clara Barton and two other women were employed as clerk copyists in the early 1850s. This early practice of integration was, however, resisted by men who feared feminization of their labor. Secretary of Interior, Robert McClelland, wrote in 1855 that he had no objection to the employment of women as copyists in their "private residences," but went on to note "an obvious impropriety in the mixing of the sexes within the walls of a public office" that he was "determined to rest the practice." See R. McClelland to Hon. Alex De Witt, September 27, 1855, Letters Sent, Vol. 1, Patent and Miscellaneous Division, Records of the Office of the Secretary of the Interior, RG 48, National Archives at College Park, MD. Document also cited in Mabel E. Deutrich and Virginia C. Purdy, eds., *Clio Was a Woman: Studies in the History of American Women* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980), 2.

⁶⁷ On the managerial process and industrial organization in the nineteenth century, see Alfred Dupont Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

than the plow. Between 1830 and 1850, the nation witnessed a rise in reform physiology. Appealing to the emergent Protestant middle class, reformers argued that Americans needed to understand the nature of their bodies in relation to the physical environment in order to avoid specific health risks.⁶⁸ The physicality of office labor thus emerged as a source of anxiety for Washington's clerking class. In 1864, the *American Phrenological Journal* observed that the "old clerks" in Washington looked noticeably worn and "bear[ed] evidence of impaired health." The journal attributed the "hot-air mode of warming their rooms" to their decline in physicality. In addition to the unpleasant workplace environment, marked by dark, musty rooms and restricted spaces, the debilitating nature of clerking in the federal government was heightened by the clerk's "consciousness of wearing fine clothes," which made them "very cautious and mild in their movements."⁶⁹

Deprecating images of government clerks abounded. According to one popular account, skillful penmanship was but a reflexive extension of a brain that had been beaten down by routine labor. The usage of pen naturally distinguished a "very clerkly clerk" from a standard clerk. A symbol of habitual labor, "the quill naturally fit[s] to his ear, the office hours to his habits, and that nameless officially decorous, mildly contented, and easily obsequious air in his

⁶⁸ On nineteenth-century health attitudes, see Robert H. Azbug, *Passionate Liberator: Theodore Dwight Weld and the Dilemma of Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980); Stephen Nissenbaum, *Sex, Diet, and Debility in Jacksonian America: Sylvester Graham and Health Reform* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980).

⁶⁹ "Clerkships in Washington," *American Phrenological Journal* (Nov. 1864), 139.

manner, which is discoverable in government clerks the world over.”⁷⁰ In 1845, the *Daily National Intelligencer* timely asked, “What is the idea conveyed to most minds by the word *clerk*?” It answered with the most widespread assumption. “Unquestionably it is that of a person engaged in copying letters, keeping books, and making out accounts.” These, the editor insisted, were noticeably the duties of merchants’ clerks, whose paperwork duties were also accompanied by frequent visits to the shipping yards, banks, custom-houses, and other duties outside of the confines of an office, all of which “serve to invigorate the mind and exert a salutary influence on the body.” The government *copying* clerk was “tied to his desk” six hours a day in an “unvaried routine.” At the end of the day, he was “literally prostrate from his exertions.” Without frequent breaks in the monotony of his labor in order “to ride, to walk, to dig, to saw,” or to perform some other manual labor, “he becomes incapable of continuing his daily task of penmanship.” Even worse, his labor “sinks him into an early grave,” or so people wished to believe.⁷¹

Of course the logic that located government work as pathologically pernicious was partly cultural in origin. To be sure, the idiom to “grow old and gray” in one’s profession has its origins in the growth of bureaucratic labor and the cultural response to it. Mary Clemmer’s 1876 tour of the Treasury Department was notably marked by her depiction of its clerks, to whom she garishly referred to as “drones” working in the government “hive.” Here we see men who have grown gray, weak-limbed and wizened in those rooms behind those desks,” described Clemmer.

⁷⁰ Uncle Sam’s Civil Service,” *All the Year Round; a Weekly Journal*, n. 79, v. 4 (October 1, 1870), 429.

⁷¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 23, 1845.

“They have grown to be as automatic as their pens, and as narrow as their rooms.”⁷² In fact, the notion that bureaucratic government work would “hamper and narrow the intellect” and “reduce men to mere routine work” had become a popular trope by mid-nineteenth century. “No matter how brilliant, how intelligent, how industrious” the officeseeker might be, a clerkship was but a “living grave.” His “ambitions” would cease to exist as result of becoming “metamorphosed into the treadmill-mill horse?” that was the “weary routine of official life.” *The Daily Cleveland Herald* chronicled the death of a clerk who had been employed in the Treasury Department for over sixty-five years. The editor frowned on the deceased clerk’s life choice. The clerk not only “had no future, no past, no present in life,” he had evolved into a humanoid “machine” by the end of his tenure. The paper’s editor further noted that the monotony of a government clerk was the worse “physical hell imaginable,” a condition made worse by the fear of being turned out of office with each presidential administration.⁷³

Clerical work took on a symbiotic relationship with the more celebrated labor performed by the independent craftsman or shopkeeper. To be confined indoors in closed spaces not only denoted a restricted and declined state of physicality, it also represented a way of life antithetical to the widely shared belief that manly citizenship was achieved by competently working the land. “A new physicality was subsequently required if these young clerks were to both consummate their personal ambitions and function as full-fledged, virtuous citizens,” contends historian Michael Zakim in regard to the clerks employed to administer the new market

⁷² Mary Ames Clemmer, *Ten Years in Washington: Life and Scenes in the National Capital, As a Woman Sees Them* (Hartford, CT: A.D. Worthington, 1876).

⁷³ *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 25, 1869, September, 30, 1858; *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, Jan. 11, 1870.

economy. To be sure, the separation of physical and mental activity induced by government office labor was a profound source of anxiety. For clerks stationed behind a desk, six consecutive hours of sitting in a crouched position was enough to make a clerk fall “victim to dyspepsia and liver complaint,” suggested one letter to the editor of Washington’s *Daily National Intelligencer*. According to the author who went by the pseudonym “Experience,” an “entirely inactive” body and over-occupied mind exposed the bodily system to “lassitude,” a condition that physically active men seldom encountered. Balance was needed, and the solution was to allot time for more physical, manly labor throughout the day, such as picking up a “saw and axe, or gun and dog, or both alternatively” throughout the day.⁷⁴

Compared to the trades more akin to national expansion, especially those that included living off the land or working the soil, government clerkships appeared less manly. Their labor, to be sure, stood outside the lure of free labor ideology. By 1850, free labor ideology had begun to lure white northern men to the West with the promise of cheap and abundant land, all the while affirming individual independence.⁷⁵ Government clerks, however, did not necessarily bask in this ideology. While social and cultural critics decried government labor and public service, the fact remains that clerical skills were needed in order for a national administrative state to expand. This development, however, seemingly ran counter to values of individualism, further lending to the labor of clerks as a subject of national critique.

At least some clerks working in the federal departments found the physically and psychologically debilitating aspects of government labor difficult to endure. The “faculties of

⁷⁴ Zakim, *The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary*, 574; *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 14, 1853.

⁷⁵ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War with a New Introductory Essay* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

the mind” needed to perform government labor were continually put to test by the “[l]ong confinement of the body or of a limb, in one position,” which “weakens its function; and in time, cannot fail to render it totally inoperative,” suggested a popular clerks’ memorial to Congress. One clerk’s observations and experience led him to believe that “daily employment at a desk, in a sitting or a standing posture, for six consecutive hours, is all, and in many cases more than men can endure.” Physical exercise was thus to become a marker of the clerk’s new professionalism. Denial of such exercise would be “fatal to the nervous, and ultimately to the physical system, terminating, if not in death, at least in diseases.” Exhaustion and complacency among clerks would no longer be a concern if portions of the day were set aside for clerks to perform the “kind of exercise necessary to counteract the evil effects” of being confined to a desk. Unlike the “cultivation of land,” which readily allowed men to “mingle pecuniary profit with pleasure and the pursuit of health,” government labor produced in clerks a “morbid state of mind, causing a craving after excitement, which, if not indulged, tend[ed] to imbecility or insanity.” Without a proper physical outlet and regular intake of meals, clerks desperately latched on to any immediate source of fulfillment, some of which were “liable to be at the cost of morals, as well as money.”⁷⁶

Clerks, however, attempted to capitalize on the widely accepted belief that office work was pathologically destructive. Samuel Cutts, a Washington native but raised in Maine, worked as a loan officer clerk in the Treasury Department. Apparently, the “preparation, entry, &

⁷⁶ *Clerkships in Washington, By a Clerk* (Washington: Published by the Author, 1851), 22-23. On clerks and their propensity to engage in licentious activities in order to reclaim their masculine identity, see Patricia Cline Cohen, “Unregulated Youth: Masculinity and Murder in the 1830s City,” *Radical History Review* 52 (1992), 33-52; Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex: Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 125-143, 159-193.

dispatch” of Treasury notes all in a day’s time had become a vexing task, forcing Cutts to work “many hours beyond the usual closing of office.” In 1852, Cutts was led to believe that his health was deteriorating due to “his confinement.” Cutts claimed that he would be much more content if he had “more active employment” as an investigator in the Land Office or a similar position.⁷⁷ Of course, government clerks were not necessarily subject to a life of physical maladies and psychological despair. An increase in pay and stability in office, clerks contended, would allow them to make life-long “investments,” including the ability to purchase land and property. No longer would the clerk, who roamed between a cramped boarding house and enclosed office space, be forced into a routine and sedentary life. Riding on horseback was but one respectful and “healthful exercise” that clerks were “illegally able to bear” without a proper increase in salary. One government clerk who previously worked as a clerk in a mercantile firm, let it be known that he used to escape to the “open air, or to workshops and storehouses” when he was “wearied at the desk.” This brief escape from the office allowed him to lend a “hand to a variety of employments, each calculated to give rest to the parts of [his] [bodily] system which most required it.” Combined with “regular and daily apportioned” meals, small exertions of physical energy also gave the “digestive organs a chance to perform their proper functions,” thereby putting an end to the “overburdened” bowel movements produced by the stationary and constricted posture of working behind a desk.⁷⁸

Of course, not all government clerical labor was limited to copying. To be sure, there were higher-order tasks. Accounting and correspondence clerks, for example, demanded a

⁷⁷ Samuel H. Cutts to Millard Fillmore, 16 Sept. 1852, file of Samuel H. Cutts, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

⁷⁸ *Clerkships in Washington*, 23.

greater degree of expertise and knowledge of administrative procedures than a copying clerk. An 1836 clerks' memorial to Congress recorded that the "business of adjusting voluminous and intricate accounts, and comparing their items with numerous laws and regulations; the preparation of original statements and documents; the keeping of extensive books and ledger of appropriations and other accounts;" and in "assisting the head of them with the correspondence" were all duties that demanded a "salary adapted to [their] relative importance." Demands for competent government labor thus helped delineate the types of clerks that emerged within Washington's government offices. On one hand, clerks themselves admitted that there were many within their army who viewed their job merely as an "award to the victors in every party struggle." On the other hand, there were also capable, career-oriented clerks, otherwise known as "ministerial" clerks, according to one government report. Clerks of the latter class saw themselves as necessary to the functionary of the government, if not agents of the state. In addition to establishing a modicum of professionalism with the federal departments, career-minded clerks helped establish the foundation for bureaucratic autonomy.⁷⁹

Career-minded clerks continually encountered debased images of government clerical labor; but most vexing was the popular notion that government labor required little technical skill, intellect, or exceptional knowledge. Efforts to confront these sentiments were strengthened by a merit-based reform rhetoric that had emerged from within Washington since the beginning of rotation in office. According to its proponents, even copying was a qualified and meritorious modus operandi of government administration. "The public business which comes nearest to

⁷⁹ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Petition of Clerks in the Departments of Government for Increase of Compensation*, Ex. Doc., no. 196, 24th Cong., 1st sess., April 1, 1836, 2-3; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Retrenchment—Reorganization of Executive Departments*, House Report, no. 741, 27th Cong. 2nd sess., May 23, 1842, 3-4; also cited and discussed in White, *The Jacksonians*, 394-395.

mechanical, is copying, or recording,” explained one clerk to Congress. But “even for this, strong thinking powers are sometimes required, as well as a knowledge of technical terms and their meaning, in every pursuit of life, and every department of science.” In fact, a copying clerk was frequently called upon to decipher and transcribe a document “from the reservoir of his brain.” The memorial continued to offer proper illustrations of moments when “under the necessity of supply” clerks had been forced to utilize their intellectual powers. More than writing with a “beautiful hand,” copying clerks were forced to understand the context of translations in order to correctly translate the “various hieroglyphics that come to the Departments.” In these scenarios, clerks were asked to properly “make sense” of a document, a practice best served by knowledgeable and qualified clerks.⁸⁰

To be sure, not all public discourse disparaged government labor. An editorial in the Whig-friendly *Daily National Intelligencer* suggested in 1845 that a mere one out every five clerks in the departments perform the duties of a copyist, while the rest of the lot performed duties of a “much higher order.” Government clerks prepared and submitted letters addressed to leading government officials and maintained statements and accounts of the millions of dollars necessary for the “carrying on the Government.” What is more, clerks commonly needed to recall from “memory” the “laws and practice” that dictated administrative procedures. According to the editor, “It is this class of clerks, too, who bring together all the information contained in the reports accompanying the President’s annual messages to Congress, as well as in the special reports so unsparingly called for during every session.”⁸¹

For merit-based reform and the professionalization of clerical labor to be realized, it was

⁸⁰ *Clerkships in Washington*, 5, 6.

⁸¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 23, 1845.

important that “the [administrative] power exercised by even the lower grade of clerks” not go unrecognized by members of congress. These clerks also demanded qualifications of the “strictest integrity and highest capacity” as well as a particular type of training and experience, which “must be formed by nature, and matured by cultivation and an extensive acquaintance with mankind, and with business, generally,” insisted one memorialist. The duties of a government clerk were supposedly so complex and specific, that neither a general education nor “practical experience” as a merchant’s clerk could readily qualify someone for office. The rationalization of labor, including the preparation of reports, copying of documents, and methods of accounting and accumulation of statistical data, combined with discretionary decision-making, were but a few of the challenges of government labor that demanded a special “skill, care, and intelligence.”⁸²

Importantly, Washington clerks with a mind toward reform saw in their labor an opportunity to help build an efficient and expansive federal state. Central to this contention was the view—if not the reality—that administrative decision-making and unclear administrative policy was often left to the clerks’ own discretion. When “the files of the government are not sufficient to ensure correct decisions, or clear views,” and the chief clerk or head of a department do have a clear conception of the “matters at stake,” clerks were often left to act upon their own good judgment, a quality that could only be earned through experience and general knowledge of government administration. On occasion, heads of departments asked clerks to give their opinion or recommendations regarding a particular administrative procedure or application of a law. This connection between state expansion and the labor of clerks was underscored in an 1857 clerks’ memorial to Congress. “[A]s the country extends its material interests, enlarges its

⁸² *Clerkships in Washington*, 8-10.

borders, and develops its resources, the responsible and important functions of the Departments and Bureaus, devolve more and more on the clerks,” wrote its author. For that reason, it was important to employ and sustain clerks with “more care and intelligence, and a higher grade of literary and legal qualification.”⁸³ In order for the state to function effectively, clerks recognized the need for a professionalized clerking class over the appointment and removal of party loyalists.

Government clerks who yearned for promotion or hoped to avoid being rotated out of office often described their labor and qualifications as essential to the development and growth of the federal government. William Brewster asked for a transfer from his office in the Treasury Department because he received a “grossly offensive censure” for not responding to “some letters” soon enough—letters that he deemed were “of no official importance” and did not need to be opened as urgently as his boss demanded. Perhaps a minor office squabble or result of poor communication between ranking officials, Brewster used the moment to moralize over administrative procedures and promote himself for a chief clerkship. Brewster had so much work assigned to him during office hours, that he had been forced to work “on an average full twelve hours per day (a fact known to the Comptroller) either at the Office, or at [his] residence.” Brewster thus asked the Secretary for “redress,” and acknowledged that the amount of labor he had performed in the office was of a “greater amount” than could possibly appear in the official monthly reports. In short, Brewster believed that his efforts had gone unrecognized because office duties were “not properly distributed.” Brewster hoped to be transferred to the Internal Revenue Office, where his experience and “good knowledge” of “Internal Revenue business and

⁸³ Ibid., 8, 9, 10; *Memorial of the Clerks in the Executive Departments at Washington City* (Washington, D.C.: Polkinhorn’s Press, 1857), 5.

matters...would make it a model office, and save millions to the Government yearly.” Similarly, William M. Gouge, a Democrat from Pennsylvania and celebrated writer on finance and currency, was dismissed from his clerkship in the Treasury Department on two occasions, once in 1841 and another time in 1851 by Whig administrations. In 1853, with a new Democratic regime in office, Gouge once again found himself knocking at the doors of the Treasury Department as an officeseeker. A career-minded clerk, Gouge underscored his knowledge of the principles of economics and banking. The author of a noted book on the topic titled, *A Short History of Paper-money and Banking in the United States* (1833), Gouge could speak with confidence. Gouge claimed to have given “form to the controversy on the Sub-Treasury Question in 1837.” Gouge, who claimed to “have a more thorough acquaintance with the duties of what may be called the Statistical and Politico-Economical desk” of the Department,” was awarded a clerkship.⁸⁴

While other clerks no doubt lacked the qualifications and resume that Gouge carried with him, they did regard their place within the federal government as worthy of merit. In 1849, after witnessing over the course of four years the “baneful effects” of appointing men with little knowledge of public business to office, Mitchell Miller put forward his name for the position of chief clerk in the Office of the Commissioner of Customs. He confidently stated in his application that he had acquired over the last eight years a thorough understanding of the “entire operation and application of the revenue laws & regulation of the Treasury Department” by “minutely examining, adjusting, and stating the [custom] accounts of New York and other

⁸⁴ William Brewster to Hugh McCullough, June 27, 1865, file of William Brewster, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP; William M. Gouge to James Guthrie, March 10, 1853, file of William M. Gouge, Personnel Folders of Notable Treasury Employees, 1822-1940, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 213, National Archives at College Park, MD.

collection districts.” Miller supported his claim by carefully listing in statistical form the millions of dollars that were transacted through his office, and underscoring “the preparation of focus” that went into revising and adjusting the accounts. If it were not for possessing such an “intimate knowledge” of important treasury accounts, he overtly admitted, he would have surely fallen to the wayside of partisanship in previous administrations. Miller accordingly stressed a pressing need to make the day-to-day administration of the Office of Commissioner of Customs more “efficient” by “simplifying & rendering more certain” the “channels” through which the tax revenue “flows” into the Treasury. Miller also suggested an improved system of oversight, and a method to improve the “imperfections” that he believed tainted the accuracy and precision of recordkeeping within the department. In his view, the forms used to report government revenues were in “several particulars defective.”⁸⁵

Allegiance to an efficient and productive government was certainly shared by many clerks and expressed for different purposes. While many clerks described their labor as necessary and irreplaceable, others went so far as to propose innovative policy changes to department heads and other more immediate high-ranking officials. Clerks hoping to avoid rotation, as well as those desiring a higher salary, found it useful to employ both strategies. The brief history of Richard Burgess, however, reveals the utter defenselessness that some career-minded clerks felt in the face of rotation. Burgess, a Maryland native and professed “old line Whig,” began working as a clerk in the Third Auditor’s office of the Treasury as early as 1824. He was removed during the final year of Martin Van Buren’s presidency and immediately returned to office after the Whigs took over in 1841. It is not clearly stated why Burgess was removed from office, although he presumed it to be upon “political grounds.” In 1846, at the

⁸⁵ M. H. Miller to C. B. Perrose, March 22, 1849, p. 309, Miller to Meredith, March 10, 1849, p. 310, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP.

time of Democratic president James K. Polk's tenure, Burgess was once again removed from office. To Burgess's dismay, "no reason" was provided for his removal, although he again figured it was for political reasons. In 1849, after the Whigs regained control of the presidency, Burgess hoped to get his job back and thus felt compelled to clear the matter with William M. Meredith, the Secretary of Treasury. Since there was no reason given for his removal, Burgess was concerned of what might be "on the record" in the secretary's office. Of concern and at stake was the charge that Burgess was considered "either unworthy or incompetent to hold office as a clerk." A life-long clerk, Burgess's sense of identity and character was attached to his labor. Confident in his performance as a clerk, Burgess requested Meredith to ask the Third Auditor whether or not his removal had improved or diminished the business conducted within his office. He believed that his experience and "full knowledge of the mode of transacting public business" was not only irreplaceable but it had also prepared him for any duty that a "competent clerk might be called upon to perform." What is more, Burgess did not denounce his political sympathies, or what he referred to as "private-fireside political sentiments." Burgess, to be sure, was a Whig, but he had always made it his "principle...not to intermeddle with, or participate in—clamorously or scarcely at all—party questions." This, for Burgess, was the mark of a truly proficient and civically engaged clerk—someone who could labor competently while at the same time maintain a political perspective on decisive national issues. To let political sympathies interfere with public duties would be, Burgess insisted, "manifestly improper."⁸⁶

Secretary Meredith must have been at least somewhat persuaded. Richard Burgess

⁸⁶ Burgess to Albion Parris, April 29, 1849, Burgess to Meredith, March 26, 1849, Burgess to Corwin, March 15, 1852, Gallagher to Meredith, April 27, 1850, Burgess to S.P. Chase, April 26, 1861, file of Richard Burgess, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

returned to office, but with a salary reduction from \$1,400 to \$1,200. It was the first time during the 32 years Burgess spent as a clerk that he had received a salary less than \$1,400. Viewing the reduction as an insult to his pride, history within the department, and capabilities of a clerk, Burgess was not happy. He therefore sought ways to improve his salary and secure his position within the department. Shortly after his appointment, Burgess wrote to Second Comptroller, accomplished Democrat politician, political appointee, and former Main Supreme Court judge, Albion K. Parris, and put his name forward to lead an “inquiry and investigation” into the debts owed to the United States. His “familiarity with & knowledge of public accounts,” Burgess insisted, aptly qualified him to aid in the “recovery of considerable amounts of...old & long balances, or at least in ascertaining such as are entirely hopeless, so that the necessary authority to close them on the books might be obtained.” Burgess’s intentions, however, were not entirely selfless; he did ask for increased compensation. Burgess reminded Parris that his services “would not have been without precedent.” Burgess aptly recalled multiple scenarios where individuals had been listed to recover debts owed to the treasury. According to Burgess, some agents had even earned a contingent allowance of 25-50 percent of the debts recovered. Burgess’s proposal, however, was never carried through and a year later he submitted his resignation.⁸⁷

Mitchell Miller and Richard Burgess viewed themselves as competent, career-minded clerks engaged in the business of developing an efficient and productive bureaucratic state. But they were not alone; the government was regularly administered through the personal discretion of clerks and strengthened by the efficiency and innovation of long-term clerks within the departments. Many of these clerks were carryovers from the federal government’s first few

⁸⁷ Burgess to Albion Parris, April 29, 1849, Gallagher to Meredith, April 27, 1850, file of Richard Burgess, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

decades of development, individuals who viewed their position within the federal government as important, if not professional. As one clerk clarified in 1851, “The old clerks, in office at the time, had much to do in devising the scheme, processes, and methods of business, its routine and formulae, and in digesting, applying, and handing down that system of rules...which may be regarded as the common law of the Departments, and which is of daily use and necessity.”

Department heads, especially those newly rotated into office, did not have a clear grasp of the policies and procedures that shaped government business, and were commonly left dependent upon the “old-timers” to effectively see through the functionary of the government. In 1842, an early and major investigation into reforming the compensation and classification of clerks observed that it “would be impossible for Congress” to do so without the “information” derived from the clerks within the departments, rather than departmental heads.⁸⁸

To be sure, rotation in office did not strip a nascent administrative state from all of its resources. But in their personal letters, editorials to Washington newspapers, and memorials to Congress, career-minded government clerks commented on the propensity of patronage practices and its stifling of internal promotion, all the while hoping to influence administrative (and political) decision-making by attaching a venerated professionalism to public service. But in order for their claims to be accepted, government clerks had to demonstrate to a widely unsympathetic public the social value of their labor. This, however, was no small task. It demanded on behalf of clerks an argument that equated the worth of the federal government to the labor expended to develop and operate it. Finally, the development of Washington’s clerking

⁸⁸ *The United States Postal Guide and Official Advertiser*, 1, no. 7 (January 1851), 187; White, *The Jacksonians*, 349; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Retrenchment-Reorganization of Executive Departments*, H. Rep., no. 741, 27th Cong., 2nd sess., May 23, 1842, 20.

class was inseparable from the social, cultural, and political arenas taking shape in America at the time, particularly among its developing middle class. For this we must turn to the officeseekers, the individuals who assumed government offices throughout the antebellum era. An investigation into their practices and social make-up says much about middle-class formation and the developing Yankee Leviathan.

Chapter III

The Social Experience of Officeseeking: Public Relationships, Sociability, and Partisan Distinction in Washington City

Mr. Walt Whitman of New York writes me that he is seeking employment in the public service in Washington....he is known to me as a man of strong original genius, combining, with marked eccentricities, great powers and valuable traits of character—a self-relying, large-hearted man, much beloved by his friends; entirely patriotic and benevolent in his theory, tastes and practice. If his writings are in certain points open to criticism, they show extraordinary power and are more deeply American, democratic and in the interest of political liberty than those of any other poet.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1863)¹

Officeseekers flocked to Washington throughout the antebellum era and well into the latter half of the nineteenth century. So much so, Washington officeseekers rarely go unmentioned in the memoirs, correspondence, travel narratives, and descriptive accounts of Washington by its journalists, politicians, visitors, and residents. John Quincy Adams, for example, recorded in his memoir the details of a brief visit to the president's house in 1842. Forced to wait nearly half an hour before he gave up, Adams grudgingly noticed "eight or ten solitary strollers to and fro, waiting for admission." The frustrated Adams branded all of them, with the exception of one congressman, "wolves of the antechamber, prowling for offices." After accepting his appointment to Secretary of State by Andrew Jackson, Martin Van Buren had barely arrived at his hotel in Washington before he was greeted by an urgent crowd of men. To Van Buren's dismay the officeseekers followed him into his room, where, unwilling to leave,

¹ Ralph Waldo Emerson to Salmon P. Chase, 10 Jan. 1863, file of Walt Whitman, Personnel Folders of Notable Treasury Employees, 1822-1940, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 213, National Archives at College Park, MD.

they proceeded to press their claims upon him.²

Each presidential election brought with it an army of expectant and hopeful officeseekers. George Towle's instructive account of mid-nineteenth century American society drew attention to the large number of Americans who used the train to satisfy their business needs. Sitting alongside a mix of farmers and businessmen hoping to extend their trade within the national market, leisurely travelers awaiting their destination at a popular summer resort or fashionable hotel, and reporters in a frenzied dash to the latest celebration or noteworthy news scene, were eager and competitive officeseekers "crowded thick into the train for Washington." Traveling with their pockets stuffed with recommendations, Towle noticed a spirited scowl on the face of each officeseeker when forced to stand in too close proximity to one another. Washington correspondents and visitors commonly estimated the number of people in the nation's capital hunting for office to be in the thousands. In April 1849, New Hampshire's *Dover Gazette & Strafford Advertiser* reported that there were an estimated 3,000 officeseekers in Washington. Officeseekers could be seen lurking in the halls of the federal government building, roaming the streets, eavesdropping in the parlors of hotels and boardinghouses, and promenading up and down Pennsylvania Avenue—anything to garner the attention and persuasion of a top government official or politician.³

This chapter describes the social experience of officeseeking—that is, the social process

² *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795-1848*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, vol. 11 (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 156; *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1920), 231.

³ George Makepeace Towle, *American Society*, Vol. 1 (London: Chapman and Hall, 1870), 315; *Dover Gazette & Strafford Advertiser*, April 14, 1849.

officeseekers underwent in order to secure a public office and a government clerkship in particular. It takes as its primary frame of analysis the concept of social capital and more specifically the complex process of networking used by officeseekers to attain distinction. As demonstrated by historian Pamela Walker Laird, “Social capital exists in and flows through personal connections and individuals’ potential for making connections.”⁴ While the process of gaining government employment commonly began at home, outside of Washington, most officeseekers attempted to claim at least some personal or public connection to Washington; without it, they lacked the reputation or social capital needed to distinguish themselves from other applicants. Understanding how officeseekers went about exploiting their social capital at home and attaining distinction in the nation’s capital is thus a central concern to this chapter. The solicitation of testimonial letters, the travel to Washington, and the anticipated visit with the president or a high-ranking official were all essential components to the officeseeking process throughout the antebellum era.

Yet, in the cutthroat world of officeseeking, skill at these procedures did not alone elevate one officeseeker over the next. In order to secure an appointment, officeseekers were asked to display a variety of distinguishing attributes. Above all, however, it was the ability of the officeseeker to demonstrate distinction, either through personal connections, reputation, or devotion to party principles within the political and social ranks of Washington society. Both political parties, Democrats and Whigs, understood that certain language and social behavior—rituals—had to be employed if an officeseeker hoped to be successful. Doing all of these things

⁴ Pamela Walker Laird, *Pull: Networking and Success since Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 2. For a recent of social capital theory and its usefulness for historians, see James Farr, “Social Capital: A Conceptual History,” *Political Theory* 32, no. 1 (February 2004): 6-33; Dario Gaggio, “Do Social Historians Need Social Capital?” *Social History* 29, no. 4 (November 2004): 499-513.

did not guarantee success, but failing to do so surely would guarantee failure. My focus here is on the rituals that officeseekers employed to mobilize existing social capital or, in a few cases, build more social capital. Surely some officeseekers presented themselves as more connected, entitled, or poor than they actually were—but that in itself helped strengthen the intensity of the process. The personal activities of officeseekers were part of a multifaceted, multiplayer drama that was being played out in many locations, in real time, at the same time.

Party allegiance alone did not guarantee an award of office. Much of what shaped an officeseeker's opportunity for success occurred behind the scenes—that is, outside of the candidate's realm of control. In this sense, officeseeking was never a democratic and individual act. The ability to exploit social capital and participate in Washington's political and social networks often became the basis of devotion to a national political party, which affirmed partisan allegiance and, therefore, an entitlement to government office by the national political party in charge. Distinction was gained by actively taking part in the multifaceted and interconnected web of social and political networks that extended to, from, and within Washington.

In its purest form, Jackson's system of spoils was supposed to have dismantled the "monopoly of offices" by the nation's ruling class and open public office to members of any social class who actively supported the political party in charge—a measure of reform that, in the words of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "expand[ed] popular participation in the workings of democracy." More recently, historian Jeffrey Pasley reframes Schlesinger's argument within the context of Washington politics and society. According to Pasley, "Jackson's substitution of political for social standards in government employment can be seen as not just democratic, but even progressive, a step toward true meritocracy with open access and impersonally determined qualifications." The discursive battles that took place between Washington's Democrat and

Whig editors, and between Washington's residential and official community, exposed the emergence of a social crises that stemmed from the practice and application of rotation-in-office. As claimed by Pasley, the intense backlash by Washington's Whigs and residential elite to the prospect of having a city and administration full of "political minnows extoll[ing] the democratic forces that brought them into office" was indication of a contested beginning to democratization in the nation's capital.⁵

Nevertheless, this historical understanding of patronage and its bearing on the democratization of government office appears problematic when taking into consideration the importance of social capital within the officeseeking process, especially when the manner in which offices were administered and appointed is taken into account. In his analysis of the demographic composition of government officials during the first half of the nineteenth-century, historical sociologist Sidney Aronson concluded that Jackson's upper-level appointments represented no substantial socioeconomic difference than those of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. Jackson's official appointees did, however, reflect a change in the "social origins, but not the social-class positions of political elites"—that is, many derived from western regions of the United States and came from independently employed families.⁶ At least rhetorically,

⁵ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1945), 47; Jeffrey Pasley, "Minnows, Spies, and Aristocrats: The Social Crisis of Congress in the Age of Martin Van Buren," *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007): 615-616, 623. The democratization of officeholding, especially through the expansion of democratic rights to propertyless white men, has recently been emphasized in Sean Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 314-319; Donald B. Cole, *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 2004).

⁶ Sociologist Sidney Aronson in, *Status and Kinship in the Higher Civil Service: Standards of Selection in the Administrations of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Andrew Jackson* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 192. Studies emphasizing the

Jackson's policy of rotation did make public office available to a wider-range of citizens, especially the subordinate posts.⁷ But the emphasis on social capital within the officeseeking process reveals a sustained system of patronage that was firmly entrenched within an elite network of political officials. Social capital—as a matter of presentation, social obligations, and connectivity—increasingly and unequally rivaled merit as the determinative qualification for government office in the years prior to the Civil War.⁸

For many officeseekers, an official title in Washington marked the ultimate form of

inequalities and undemocratic tendencies of Jacksonian America are emphasized in Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961); Edward Pessen, *Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985). More recently, see Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Aronson's study lacks, however, an empirical analysis of subordinate government offices. He even goes as far as to suggest "it may have been that the major democratization of the civil service in Jackson's administration took place in the lower ranks of the federal civil service....[S]uch a policy in the elite would be reflected by the fact that elite members at the lower ranks of the elite hierarchy were of more lowly origins than those at the more important jobs," *ibid.*, 179.

⁸ Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu has emphasized the role social capital has played in the legitimization and reproduction of political and social inequality, as well as economic accumulation. See Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research in the Sociology of Education*, ed. John G. Richardson (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 241-258 (esp. 251-253); *idem*, "From the King's House to the Reason of State: A Model of the Genesis of the Bureaucratic Field," in *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics*, ed. Loic Wacquant (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005), 29-54. On the devaluing of public office and merit as a qualification for office, see Richard John, "Affairs of Office: The Executive Departments, The Election of 1828, and the Making of the Democratic Party," in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, eds. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 50-84; *idem*, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 206-280.

acceptance and approval, the hallmark of an honorable reputation.⁹ Once secured in office, office-seekers relished their association with a wide-range of public men and distinguished Washington residents. Take, for example, Benjamin Brown French. On December 21, 1833, French, at the age of 33, arrived in Washington from Newport, New Hampshire, for the first time, and a few days prior to assuming his post as assistant clerk in the House of Representatives. Like so many young men, French's decision to seek employment in Washington was partly motivated by failed professional and economic ventures. More specifically, he left behind a struggling career in politics, law, and journalism. "I am now here and I came here to earn money, not to spend it....duty called me here," French anxiously wrote in his journal at the end of the day. A well-connected Jacksonian Democrat when he first arrived, French welcomed the opportunity to extend his already firmly entrenched network of men within the upper-ranks of New Hampshire's—and to a lesser extent New England's—Democratic Party.¹⁰

Benjamin French regularly defined himself by who he knew, and praised his connection to those who held an elevated political and social station in Washington. Upon his arrival, French was greeted and introduced to the city by his boyhood friend, future president Franklin Pierce, and recently elected New Hampshire congressman, Henry Hubbard, who would later serve as a Democrat to the U.S. Senate and governor of New Hampshire. French would never

⁹ The importance of reputation to early national political culture is discussed in Joanne B Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the Early Republic* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).

¹⁰ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee's Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), Dec. 21, 1833, p. 35.

reach the elite status that either man had achieved, but he did nevertheless deeply value their association. He graciously remarked: “[E]ach of them shown themselves my *true* friends by their exertion in my behalf.” So as long as French could maintain his connections and support within the Democratic ranks of Washington, he too could potentially become a “great man.” Accordingly, he was delighted to have been introduced to Amos Kendall, “a name,” French remarked, “which will be connected with the history of this Union and which...will hereafter assume an importance which many dream not of.” French continued admiringly: “He is undoubtedly, the best political writer in the Country, and however much Gen. Jackson’s enemies may affect to despise him, they fear him. He is a great man.”¹¹ French’s assessment of Kendall was in many respects correct. Amos Kendall eventually rose from a humble newspaper editor to a fourth auditor in the Treasury Department to Postmaster General and distinguished member of Andrew Jackson’s “Kitchen Cabinet.”¹²

Benjamin French failed to achieve similar levels of professional and political fame, rising from assistant clerk to his cherished—albeit disappointingly brief—two-year stint as Clerk of House of Representatives beginning in 1845. Nevertheless, French maintained a relatively distinguished middling social position as a Washington resident for roughly 37 years, despite being inconveniently rotated out of office on multiple occasions. For public officials like French, social capital became a crucial object of striving, a way to enhance personal and familial investments. As early as 1838, while working as a subordinate clerk in the House of

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² For a political biography of Amos Kendall, see Donald B. Cole, *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

Representatives, French was able to use his “influence” to get his “friend” elected to the position of doorkeeper. Although his “interference” was contested by at least one Democratic congressman, Dixon H. Lewis, from Alabama—probably because he had intended the position for someone else, perhaps from Alabama—French’s ability to influence patronage-decision making suggests his connectedness with Washington’s social and political networks.¹³

Time and again, French was forced to muster enough political pull to avoid the partisan pitfalls of rotation in office, which was often met with limited success. In short, French’s professional life was marred with ambiguity. In addition to the numerous failed attempts to elevate himself through the administrative and political ranks of Washington, French endured a partially failed business venture in the Magnetic Telegraphic Company, which he partnered with Amos Kendall. But when business ventures outside of office failed to provide a stable financial backdrop, French was often able to muster enough political pull to find work in the government, even if the type of work and salary fell below his professional expectations.¹⁴

But what distinguished French from other officeseekers and government clerks was the degree of social capital that he had accumulated through his family’s association with prominent political men of New Hampshire, as well as his ability to acquire and hold on to the personal connections needed to elevate himself within Washington’s political and social circles. A devoted and reputable member of the Democratic Party, French developed a solid base of political and personal allies that would serve his professional interests throughout his life.

¹³ French, *Witness to the Republic*, July 11, 1838, p. 89.

¹⁴ Benjamin Brown French’s familial, personal, social, and political associations were extensive and certainly do not represent that of the average officeseeker or officeholder. On French’s business and community investments and activities, see French, pp. 7-8, 55, 648 (index).

Precocious and calculating, French never ceased to expand his network of friends when the opportunity presented itself. On September 12th, 1844, French, for instance, voluntarily attended a large meeting of Maryland's Democratic Party in Baltimore, which also included a "good portion" of members from the District of Columbia. In addition to addressing the "political signs of the times," French remarked that many of the assemblers were there "to tender to each other the greetings of political friendship." French continued to note proudly in his journal "that of the mass there assembled I was one." Additionally, French assured his reputation within Washington by actively participating in a variety of community activities, organizations, and national associations, all of which allowed him additional opportunities to foster beneficial public and private relationships. After attending a meeting of the Union Literary Debating Society at the Apollo Hall regarding "the right of suffrage & whether it ought be subject to a property qualification," French labeled the date as "dull" but more positively noted that there was in attendance a "large & respectable audience."¹⁵

French strived to integrate into, and elevate himself within, Washington's official and residential society by serving in a variety of capacities on city planning committees and institutional organizations. As a member of the city council, French took an interest in the city's benevolent institutions. In 1842, French, in his "ex officio capacity" as president of the city council assisted Mayor William W. Seaton and the President of the Board of Aldermen to visit the city's school for poor and homeless female children. French also promoted himself through the city's scientific and intellectual institutions. Among other preoccupations, he served as assistant secretary to Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, which was in its early stages of

¹⁵ French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, Oct. 20, 1844, p. 162, July 28 1842, p. 141, Jan. 10, 22, 1842, p. 135.

development by 1846. French described this opportunity as “refreshing” since it allowed him to surround himself with men of so much “ability, learning, and general knowledge.” In March 1853, French attended the First Fair of the Metropolitan Mechanic’s Institute. An officer of the Institute, he felt a sincere sense of pride that it “went off so well.” Nearly a year later, French delivered a lecture titled, “‘Lectures & Language’,” at the Columbia Fire House. Although attendance was small, much of the audience was “respectable;” many ladies were in attendance and his lecture was “well received.” The next morning, French met with a Committee of the Pomological Congress at the National Hotel, who sought his consultation on where to erect a monument dedicated to the American landscape gardener, Andrew Jackson Downing, who had recently deceased. French assured the committee that he would consult with his boyhood friend, President Franklin Pierce, in relation to it. After the meeting, French made his way to the Smithsonian Institution in order to attend a meeting of the United States Agricultural Society, where President Pierce was also in attendance. As one of the “oldest inhabitants” of Washington, French was asked to speak on behalf of the Washington Monument Society on July 4th, 1870. The event included a celebration and unveiling of a block of marble with an inscription dedicated to the society. Pleased by the event, French noted in his journal that his oration was enthusiastically received and that “he was congratulated by nearly every member of the Society and numerous others.”¹⁶

Socially and politically, French represented the model officeseeker and member of Washington’s burgeoning middling class. His reputation within a social network of well-connected politicians and friends helped him secure at different times various offices, some more

¹⁶ Ibid., July 28, 1842, p. 141, Dec. 11, 1846, pp. 190-191, March 27, 1853, p. 232, Feb. 26, 1854, p. 245, July 4 and 5, 1870, pp. 619-620.

lucrative than others, in the federal government. But while French was able to foster and expand his network of beneficial private and public connections, it should be additionally noted that he was born into an existing political and social network that enabled him to translate initial success into a long career in Washington City. By attaching himself to a series of social networks, firstly in New Hampshire through familial connections and then formally and informally within the Democratic Party, Benjamin French carried with him a considerable amount of social capital.¹⁷

I

With its architectural and social emphasis on classical and refined republican ideals and its centrality within national political patronage networks, Washington City stood apart from other burgeoning antebellum cities. Put simply, it did not share the same ethnic, racial, and class distinctions that shaped urban social relations. Unlike New York City or Baltimore, for example, Washington was not shaped by its low-end labor market, nor did it share the same origins of the southern middle class.¹⁸ It was a one-business town, with that business being the federal

¹⁷ Susan Radomsky's analysis of Washington's official society throughout the nineteenth century revealed that "the culture of the young capital offered a route to reputation and power scarcely equaled by any other spot in the country." See "The Social Life of Politics: Washington's Official Society and the Emergence of a National Political Elite, 1800-1876," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2005), 67. On the endurance of Washington's elite society, see Katherine Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995).

¹⁸ That is not to say, however, that these features did not exist in Washington; rather, they did not figure extensively into the economic, physical, and social development of the city. See James Borchert, *Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) and Carl Abbott, *Political Terrain: Washington, D.C., from Tidewater Town to Global Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999). On the development of antebellum cities with reference to their working class populations, see Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Frank

government. Accordingly, there were few urban sketches of Washington that detailed the cultural geography, social relations, and customs of the city's residents, such as what could be found in other antebellum cities with a diverse economy and population; rather, Washington was understood by outsiders through handbooks and guides that described the rules and rituals of official etiquette. As argued by historian Catherine Cocks, their "purpose was not to reveal the composition of and between class but to prescribe behaviors for people assumed to be middle or upper class." In this vein, Washington guidebooks assumed that the city's visitors were already part of, or seeking to be included in, the city's official social structure. Guidebooks recognized that many visitors to the city were commonly invited by a friend to attend a social function; therefore, they encouraged visitors to make note of the time and date of receptions held by high-ranking officials as well as those who were expected to attend.¹⁹

In a purposeful effort to maintain respectability, officeseekers subscribed to the social codes and rules of etiquette that shaped Washington society. In addition to offering descriptive accounts of federal architecture and social engagements, the city's directories and social guidebooks commonly provided information aimed toward officeseeking citizens. Specific to these books, was the attention devoted to the formalities of forging effective acquaintances and the social obligations that coincided. Published in 1829, E. Cooley's, *A Description of the Etiquette at Washington City*, acknowledged the importance of constructing a guide that offered a lens into the rules of officeseeking. Cooley outlined the formalities of being introduced to

Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004); and Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Early Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008). On the development of the middle class in the South, see Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Catherine Cocks, *Doing the Town: The Rise of Urban Tourism in the United States, 1850-1915* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 37-38.

Washington personages and the benefits of a personal introduction more specifically. Elevation through the social and political ranks in Washington began with the simple formality of being introduced; yet, there were informal rules to follow, most of which acknowledged rank and distinction. Cooley continued to note that the process of forming connections with members of official society had to be done “in proportion to the grades in office, or the celebrity of the person who may be introduced to each other.” Within the context of Washington society, introductions stood as informal social alliances, beneficial groupings that were determined by the degree of social capital attributed to each member in the process. As elaborated by Cooley, the amount of attention an officeseeker might receive was widely determined by the “celebrity” status attributed to a particular member of congress from which he was seeking support. Still, if no further acquaintance unfolded after a key introduction to a prominent member of Washington society, any stranger was likely forgotten. This futility of effort, according to Cooley, was an unforgiving occurrence that “all strangers not distinguished must generally expect.”²⁰

For the vast majority of officeseekers, acquaintances were difficult to forge. Cooley made this point clear: “the different modes that strangers pursue, to make themselves known on their arrival at the city of Washington, depends very much on their celebrity.”²¹ Accordingly, attributes of the officeseeking process played an influential role in shaping the form and content of nineteenth-century Washington guidebooks. One particular volume, *Etiquette at Washington*, written by an unnamed citizen in 1848, called attention to the social codes and forms of fashion most prevalent in Washington society. It highlighted the importance of invitation cards, morning

²⁰ E. Cooley, *A Description of the Etiquette at Washington City* (Philadelphia: L.B. Clarke, 1829), 15-17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

calls, and evening galas—the stepping-stones to distinction within Washington. The volume also gave advice on how to navigate the federal departments and official society by drawing out the various forms of etiquette and most appropriate manner in approaching the president and heads of the federal departments.²² Despite the utility of this particular volume for uninformed visitors, it did not exist without its flaws. One contemporary reviewer noted its lack of directness in addressing the needs of the officeseeker. As the reviewer claimed, “the author of this book would have accommodated a very large class in the community, and have secured a better sale of his book, if he had devoted a chapter to office-seekers.”²³

Social critic George Watterston noted that strangers to Washington were normally affected by the “style and fashion, which seem[ed] to pervade almost every rank of society.” Even the lower-ranking government office workers—clerks included—found it “unpardonable not to ape those above them, and be what is called *fashionable*.” In antebellum Washington society who was (or who was not) fashionable was of course a significant marker of distinction. In the eyes of ambitious officeseekers, fashionability thus stood within the realm of the attainable. But officeseekers had to be willing to submit partially, if not fully, to the social codes prevalent in Washington society. George Watterston found it a “little amusing, to witness the labored attempts at style of some, and the ridiculous figure made by others, in endeavoring to reach the pinnacle of their ambition.” Tyrone Power’s observation of Washington society in the early 1830s underscored the relative personal attainment of social capital through various forms of fashion. After attending a fancy ball, Power remarked, “[e]very man who either possessed, or

²² Citizen of Washington, *Etiquette at Washington, Together with the Customs adopted by Polite Society in the other Cities of the United States* (Baltimore, MD: J. Murphy, 1848).

²³ “Etiquette at Washington,” *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Feb. 1849, 127.

was supposed possessed of, an iota of taste, suddenly found himself greatly increased in importance.”²⁴

Embedded within the practices of officeseeking were formal and informal ways to promote oneself into office, and these primarily took place within the social centers of Washington’s public life. Washington social gatherings were as exclusive as they were ceremonious. Access to these social and highly partisan occasions was possible through the possession of invitation cards. As symbolic keys to Washington’s elite social networks, cards played a crucial role in defining political as well as social membership. For a stranger with few contacts or referrals in Washington, leaving a personal card or letter of introduction with an acquaintance or stranger offered an important first step in forging personal connections with the gatekeepers of public office. Contemporary journalist and Washington historian, Benjamin Perley Poore, offered an insight into the established custom of using invitation cards to obtain entry into fashionable parties. According to Poore, cards were issued after “long consultations” among distinguished members of society, including members of congress. Admission, however, did not grant equality among those in attendance. As Poore observed, “once inside the exclusive ring, the beaux and belles bowed beneath the disciplinary rule of a master of ceremonies.”²⁵

In addition to invitation cards, letters of introduction demonstrated a positive faith in the “fitness” of the person being introduced. In his brief tour through Washington, German tourist Francis Grund highlighted the process of gaining access to Washington’s “best society,” which

²⁴ Watterston, *Wanderer in Washington* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Press, 1827), 45-46; Tyrone Power, *Impressions of America, During the Years 1833, 1834, and 1835*, Vol. 2 (London: R. Bentley, 1836), 253.

²⁵ Benjamin Perley Poore, *Perley’s Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Hubbard Brothers, 1886), 1:73.

could be granted through “a single letter of introduction” from a distinguished member of Washington society. Similar to invitations, letters of introduction allowed officeseekers to acquire social capital by uniting one friend or acquaintance to someone with advantageous Washington connections. Grund recalled that it was not uncommon to hear men ask one another early in the morning if they knew of a party in the evening and whether or not they were invited. Without an appropriate introduction, the mechanisms of social capital were hard to come by. But for those hoping to attend the evening’s dinner party or social ball without the proper introduction, access could still be granted with a proper letter of introduction or by using the card of a personal friend or acquaintance. According to Grund, it was ordinary for the “*habitués*” of the city to “make it their business to procure invitations to parties for strangers.”²⁶ As witnessed by Grund, it was not uncommon for individuals to leave reception cards at the bars of the city’s hotels for someone else’s taking—generally a recent acquaintance or friend of a friend. Indeed, efforts to obtain invitations to the city’s social events became a popular and noteworthy endeavor.

Whether Whig or Democrat, officeseekers sought success by attaching themselves to Washington’s political and social circles. The informal spaces that constituted the backbone of these circles afforded unique opportunities for officeseekers when they could not directly address a high-ranking government official. While officeseekers could forge beneficial connections at a variety of social events, their housing choices afforded the greatest level of intimate and attentive conversations. In addition to serving important political functions within the Washington community, boarding houses and hotels were also temporary homes to a mass of Congressmen,

²⁶ Francis J. Grund, *Aristocracy in America, from the Sketch-book of a German Nobleman* (New York: Harper, 1959), 254.

and thereby played a pivotal role in reinforcing political hierarchies and party affiliation. In 1843, there was reported to be nearly 200 boardinghouses in Washington, most of which were occupied by Congressmen. Washington messes, or private boardinghouses, accordingly served as informal political institutions. Members from the same political party and geographic region commonly stayed in the same mess, a dynamic that only strengthened political and social boundaries in Washington. Access to these messes thus rested primarily on the officeseeker's partisan claims—a claim strengthened by testimonials and proven connections within the party. Unless a personal contact was formed within the mess, no one was rightly admitted.²⁷

Officeseekers, as well as current officeholders, thus employed their best judgment in choosing their appropriate dwelling place. Not only was cost taken into consideration, so was its conduciveness to sociability—that is, opportunities to garner social capital. The National Hotel, the Metropolitan Hotel, and Willard's Hotel were commonly sought by politicians and distinguished visitors. Caleb Atwater's recollection of Washington highlighted the necessity for outside visitors to acquire "local information." For officeseekers, this represented valuable details regarding the particulars of patronage appointments, and could be obtained at various boarding locations throughout the city. For those seeking information on the various executive departments, Atwater suggested Fuller's, or Mrs. Galabrun's on the avenue, or Butler's on F street, or Mrs. Tilley's on tenth, near the avenue." As suggested by Atwater, the process of

²⁷ Marie Jenkins Schwartz, "Politics in a Social Setting: Congressmen in Washington City During the Early 1840s" (Master's Thesis, George Washington University, 1987), 52-56. *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 13, 1843. Nathan Sargent, *Public Men and Events from the Commencement of Mr. Monroe's Administration, in 1817, to the Close of Mr. Filmore's Administration, in 1853* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1875), 23.

networking regularly began along Pennsylvania Avenue.²⁸

The social involvement and costs that officeseekers endured in Washington boardinghouses and hotels were addressed in popular periodicals. A correspondent for *Harper's* who "worked like a slave" in the election of Franklin Pierce had hoped to receive a public office in return. This particular campaigner had his goal set on a Post Office appointment in his hometown, only to be outranked by over a dozen officeseekers with a "longer list of 'backers'" than he could ever provide. His next attempt was backed by a letter of recommendation from an unnamed but more notable congressman from one of the politically important western states. Again, the officeseeker found his efforts thwarted by more prominent and connected officeseekers. These setbacks forced the officeseeker to reconsider his lofty ambitions and "make application for some small place." Meanwhile, his bills at Washington's National Hotel were "running on pretty heavily." The costs of forging public relationships had a price. In addition to living expenses, "sundry bottles of Champagne" were shared and drank with a young man who "*seemed* very familiar with the authorities." Through social interaction hope for an important contact was formed, which for an officeseeking applicant with few connections in Washington "proved...a very shabby investment."²⁹

Due to their relative powerlessness within the national political system of rotation in office, officeseekers, as well as clerks, recognized the importance of social alliances in securing government positions. The personal degrees of sociability conducive to the forming of social alliances could be accessed most easily in the public spaces of hotels. A brief visit to Willard's

²⁸ Caleb Atwater, a Citizen of Ohio, *Mysteries of Washington City: During Several Months of the Session of the 28th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: G.A. Sage, 1844), 205.

²⁹ June 1853, *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 131.

Hotel in 1857 left Benjamin Brown French awestruck over the diverse assemblage of officeseekers. He recorded in his journal: “[what] I saw there assembled I have seldom laid eyes upon at a hotel. Men in office seeking...to be retained. Men out of office seeking to get in. And men who have come here to buttonhole their friends in, or their enemies out. There I saw at least 50 whom I knew, and some hundreds whom I did not know, from the North, South, East & West!” French was an astute observer. But as someone already immersed within Washington society, he found it difficult to make sense of the officeseeking process. Unlike those hoping to receive a government job through the national patronage system in later decades, French got his start via local connections in New Hampshire and New England states, and kept it by maintaining and expanding his network of powerful and influential friends in Washington. He recognized only a few officeseekers, which indicated that at least some had a personal connection to Washington. But a vast majority of the officeseekers he witnessed had filtered into the capital from all parts of the nation. Moreover, many did not have the influential local connections that helped French get his start in Washington; instead, they hoped to acquire gainful employment by securing a personal and influential connection—someone to help them get their “foot in the door.” It is also possible that the officeseekers French witnessed were part of a political faction to which French had no association. As the size of the nation grew throughout the antebellum era so too did the scope of officeseekers. And for those officeseekers like French, who arrived decades earlier and were able to maintain a relatively comfortable and secure position as a government official and resident of Washington, their view of rotation also changed. As someone who initially benefited from the political system of rotation in office, French had come to believe by 1857 that it was “one of the curses of our republican system.”³⁰

³⁰ French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, March 19, 1857, p. 280.

By the 1850s, the capital's landscape had changed from a refined and aristocratic landscape, to one that would cater to a network of national political patronage. The city's hotels and boardinghouses became part of the deceptive, calculating, and self-promoting conditions of national politics. Popularly referred to in Washington as a "hanger-on," one Washington correspondent wondered if this officeseeker's aim was for anything more than "stray drinks at the bar, and influential social alliances." An "extremely judicious fellow" and "well-informed conversationalist," the hanger-on strategically navigated Washington's social scenes, all the while observing and predicting "what is in the wind" in regard to public office.³¹ The proximity of congressional boardinghouses to elite hotels further accommodated the mingling and introduction of visitors and hangers-on to Washington's official society, especially before and after government business hours. Contemporary historian James McCabe acknowledged a "silent, deserted air" in the cities' hotels throughout the day. But when the business of the government was finished for the day, the "halls, sitting rooms and gentlemen's parlors [were] crowded to excess." It was here—away from the formal application of politics that took place within government buildings—that personal connections were formed and personal capital was strengthened.³²

Throughout his time in Washington, Benjamin French understood the importance of Washington hotels in forming beneficial public connects. It was not uncommon for French to visit Washington hotels with no reason other than to "look about" and "see who was to be seen."

³¹ Ibid, 132.

³² Helen Nicolay, *Our Capital on the Potomac* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 128; James Dabney McCabe, *Behind the Scenes in Washington* (New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1873), 65.

For those who visited Washington hotels, it was not uncommon to see or even brush shoulders with a heralded politician or government official. Officeseekers could also eavesdrop on conversations shared by other officeseekers, gaining an important inside advantage in the form of information. Leads or rumors regarding a potential opening or removal of office could potentially serve as an important source of working capital and could be advantageous to the officeseeking process. After dining at the National Hotel one February evening in 1854, French made his way to Willard's Hotel, where he "spent an hour" discussing among other things the doctrine of popular sovereignty with the popular general and politician, Lewis Cass. A few years later, French reminisced in his journal over the first time he was introduced to the infamous congressman from South Carolina, Preston S. Brooks, prior to Brooks' attack on Charles Sumner. Brooks' passing in 1857 impelled French to make a note of the first time they met, which took place at a dinner in the National Hotel.³³

As key channels of communication, boarding houses and hotels provided informal and personal opportunities for officeseekers to move up official ranks and acquire degrees of social capital and forms of information crucial to the officeseeking process in ways otherwise unattainable. Within these spaces, words were uttered and expressions were formed, providing visitors a political and social language that if used effectively could grant access into Washington society and, importantly, secure a government office. As observed by contemporary historian and social critic, E.F. Ellett, political "friendship[s] were cemented or formed" in Washington messes. Additionally, the identity and reputation of Washington messes were to an extent determined by the degree of social interaction and the level of distinction among those residing

³³ French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, Jan. 1, 1852, p. 225, Feb. 10, 1854, p. 245, Feb. 1, 1857, p. 276.

there. Access to Washington hotels and boarding houses, specifically the unparalleled level of social interaction that took place in their meeting rooms, thus played a vital role in nurturing a multitude of officeseeking ambitions. As noted simply by one contemporary historian, George Rothwell Brown, “here news was swapped, and stories told—and invented.”³⁴

The process of acquiring distinction could also be found in the streets and avenues running to and from the city’s hotels and boardinghouses. Beginning at 3 o’clock in the afternoon, a “gay promenade” along Pennsylvania Avenue began to ensue. Washington historian Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan best described the scene on Washington avenues as an “out-of-door social affair with constantly changing groups, as acquaintances greeted each other and then joined others.” But this form of social interaction also played an important role in determining membership to Washington’s official class of citizens. The hierarchical display of social distinctions and the symbolic capital that could be claimed by seeing and being seen along Pennsylvania Avenue helped legitimize Washington’s most influential networks. The process of gathering at a designated public place to mutually acknowledge social respectability and political attainment was characterized by the process of inclusion and exclusion—a social drama that placed emphasis on distinction, rather than democratic and public displays of equality.³⁵

Officeseekers were a ubiquitous presence in the nation’s capitol. In order to acquire political favors, they commonly exploited the city’s personal and social spaces. Washington

³⁴ E.F. Ellet, *The Court Circles of the Republic; Or, the Beauties and Celebrities of the Nation* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Publishing Co., 1869), 228; George Rothwell Brown, *Washington, a Not Too Serious History* (Baltimore: The Norman Publishing Co., 1930), 334.

³⁵ Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, *A History of the National Capital: From its Foundation Through the Period of the Adoption of the Organic Act*, vol. 2 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916), 276. On the social and political implications of promenading in nineteenth-century urban cities, see David Scobey, “Anatomy of the Promenade: The Politics of Bourgeois Sociability in Nineteenth-Century New York,” *Social History* 17, no. 2 (May 1992): 203-227.

satirist, George Watterston, chronicled the lively interaction between Washington's visitors and residents. In his aptly titled *Wanderer in Washington*, Watterston poked fun at the officeseekers who auspiciously found their way into the parlors and dance floors of the city's residential and official elites. His officeseeking character could have been anyone belonging to "that class of beings who annually migrate to the city, in quest of office;" but Watterston chose to exemplify a nameless "frisky little round-faced gentleman," who in a concerted effort to elevate his social capital tried "to dance himself into the notice of his partner, an antique belle." Despite receiving "what he thinks as assurances of success," mockingly proclaimed Watterston, "this [was] his third winter, and he is as far from the goal as ever." By illustrating the extremes and follies that officeseekers endured in Washington, Watterston underscored the importance of social capital within the officeseeking process. "The poor and obscure, whatever be their merits are not apt to be preferred before those whose own political importance or that of their friends is considerable," wrote Watterston. As put forward by Watterston, it was folly to believe a single officeseeker could act as an independent agent. He was thus astounded by the lurking presence of officeseekers in Washington who were ready to jump on the "slightest occasion" that "they may turn to their advantage, and of which they may make a handle." For Watterston, there was no limit to the officeseekers quest to secure an appointment: "He attends the levees, parties, drawing rooms, etc., into which he has sometimes been obliged to force himself, leaves his card at a foreign minister's, waits upon a member's wife or daughter, performs the duties of a gallant, whenever his services are required, and renders himself useful in a thousand humble ways, to those who have the power to benefit him."³⁶ In Watterston's capital city, social rank and distinction flourished, and the gift of public office could only be met by successfully elevating

³⁶ George Watterston, *Wanderer in Washington*, 122-125.

oneself through Washington's social and political ranks. Watterston's satire, combined with French's personal experiences, suggest that social capital—and even merit—was measured by civility and manners, all of which facilitated the process of social networking.

II

Many officeseekers carried with them to Washington a significant amount of social capital and were therefore exceedingly confident in their likelihood to receive a clerkship. Take for example William Waller, who began the officeseeking process in 1849 with an application letter to the Department of Treasury. With no response, Waller heeded the advice of “some prominent friends” of Zachary Taylor's Whig administration in Pennsylvania to go to Washington, where he was assured that “vacancies would exist.” Growing increasingly impatient, Waller left his residence in Columbia County, Pennsylvania, and arrived on the Washington scene in April. As Waller indicated in a personal letter to the Secretary of Treasury, William M. Meredith, he would remain in Washington and wait for a vacancy to occur that he might fill on a whim's notice. Waller held at his disposal “the strongest and most urgent” testimonies of prominent and distinguished men within Pennsylvania's Whig Party, including those of acting U.S. Representative, Chester P. Butler. If that was not enough, Waller assured Secretary Meredith that he could “procure the names of every Taylor man” in his congressional district, all of who contributed as much “to the election of the present State and National Administration as any other District in the States.” But when regional distinction seemed to not be enough, Waller shortly thereafter boasted a “near relative” status to two former prominent Washington residents and assistant postmaster generals, Abraham and Phineas Bradley, brothers who “devoted” their lives to “building up the Post Office Department,” only to be turned out of

office during the “reign of Gen. Jackson.” But the extent of Waller’s social capital was not limited to his personal relationship with distinguished public men within the Whig Party. Indeed, his family’s past also stood as a potential asset. During the Revolutionary War, Waller’s maternal grandfather was proclaimed to have been an “officer of merit.”³⁷

For officeseekers like William Waller, job qualifications—the ability to perform the duties of a clerk adequately—seemed to be of little concern; rather, it was the capacity to demonstrate influential political connections. Accordingly so, Waller was perhaps aptly overconfident in his application for a clerkship. To his surprise, Waller’s request was repeatedly rejected or quite simply ignored for a series of months. Nearly six months after his initial application for office, Waller revealed both his frustration and certainty in a private letter to a member of the prominent Bradley family, former Washington mayor, and current city postmaster, William A. Bradley. He expressed openly to Bradley: “When the Whigs of an entire Congressional District write in asking the appointment of one man to a simple clerkship—and the leading Whigs of District in an adjoining State write in the same request—and ample and strong testimony is offered—vouching for the high moral standing and *capacity* of the applicant—can it be necessary that any further evidence be required?” Waller shared with Bradley that it was “under precisely these circumstances” that he made his hopeful journey to Washington. “I still remain here,” Waller frustratingly remarked; with “influences so strong,” he

³⁷ William Waller to William M. Meredith, 24 April 1849, p. 510, Charles Miner to William M. Meredith, 30 May 1849, p. 511, Letters Received Relating to Appointments of Clerks, 1844-51, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 211, Vol. 2, National Archives at College Park, MD (Hereafter referred to as Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP).

faithfully determined that his application “*cannot and will not...be disregarded.*”³⁸

Like many other officeseekers, Waller’s expectation and confidence however soon turned to a dubious sense of urgency. Bradley was a prominent Washington resident and government official and therefore knew his way around Washington’s social and political circles. Although little is known about the relationship between Waller and Bradley, it can be presumed that Waller maintained a close enough relationship to Bradley in order to justifiably “request” a “favor” from him. Waller maintained that Secretary Meredith just needed “to examine *some* of the testimonials now on file in his office or cause them to be examined.” This, for Waller, was “all that is necessary.” But how was his application going to suddenly appear at the top of the hundreds of officeseeking applications received by Meredith? Waller was convinced that he just needed a little pull; he thus requested the support of Bradley to “conveniently” bring the “subject” of his application to the “notice” of Meredith. Since Waller’s letter to Bradley is among those found in his application, it is safe to assume that Bradley at least presented the letter to Secretary Meredith on Waller’s behalf.³⁹

Although William Waller failed to receive a clerkship, the process in which he attempted to garner influence on his behalf is revealing. When application and testimonial letters to high-ranking government officials failed to generate an appointment—or at least an encouraging response—it was in the best interest of the officeseeker to seek temporary residence in Washington where possibilities for personal and public friendships could be formed, if not strengthened. Not only did taking up residence in the nation’s capital provide officeseekers more

³⁸ William Waller to William A. Bradley, 22 Sep. 1849, p. 504, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP. On William A. Bradley and the Bradley brothers, see Charles S. Bradley, “The Bradley Family,” *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* 6 (1903): 123-142.

³⁹ Ibid.

opportunities to capitalize on pre-existing public connections in addition to forming new ones, it also provided officeseekers increased opportunities to push their applications on high-ranking public officials. Most importantly, it allowed calculating officeseekers an opportunity to seize office vacancies as soon as they occurred. If a clerkship were to be opened due to a sudden removal, resignation, or expansion of office, officeseekers wanted to be certain that their names were the first to come to mind when appointments were being distributed. For those with no personal connections inside Washington, it was at least tactically advantageous to place oneself closer to the most recognizable political figures in Washington. And for those who exhausted all other potential resources, the president represented the last hope for success. One editor offered a derisive overview of this process, at the same time underscoring the various dimensions of officeseeking:

They leave their cards where they are acquainted, and where they are not; they chase after every member of Congress; lay siege to every office door; squeeze up to every Secretary, smile at everything; hint at the influence they have at home; of the number of their political friends, of the vote they or their friends can throw at every poll. And if the great men of the cabinet do not readily listen, they talk louder and louder still, and say if their friends are not gratified in their wishes they will show it at the next election. If this does not avail, as it seldom does, they bolt off, and place themselves and their claims, the merits they possess, and their friends, plump in the President's face.⁴⁰

The process of obtaining a government clerkship was a complicated and calculated process comprised of personal and geographical advantages. Yet officeseekers also understood that they could not present themselves as overly aggressive and seemingly desperate. In the cutthroat world of officeseeking, a bothersome officeseeker could easily be rejected by an already overburdened public official who was more than willing to turn away any one of the hundreds of applicants for office. In April 1850, A.J. Dallas, who perhaps brushed shoulders

⁴⁰ Quoted in *New-Hampshire Statesman and Concord Register*, February 28, 1829.

with William Waller during his stay in Washington, knew full well he was competing for employment with a herd of officeseekers. After failing to receive the desired recognition from Secretary Meredith, Dallas approached him directly in what appeared to be an urgent and final attempt to solicit an appointment. Dallas was relatively straightforward in his approach. In addition to “the anxiety, and state of painful suspense” in which he had currently found himself, Dallas reminded Meredith that he could no longer “afford to remain idle” in Washington, or at least “any longer than [he] could possibly avoid.” Dallas understood that his directness was a risky and potentially injurious approach; to plead in such a manner—one that so closely resembled begging—could tarnish the applicant’s character. Dallas thus assured Meredith that his message was out of “urgency” and hoped that it would not “impair” his application.⁴¹

Officeseekers understood the risky nature of approaching government officials directly and were careful to not be overly aggressive. A. L. Gillespie arrived in Washington hoping for a private interview with President Polk, but failed in numerous attempts. Gillespie was thus “consequently compelled” to write Polk directly, a “mode of approaching” a high ranking government official that Gillespie assured Polk was “not so congenial to [his] feelings.”⁴²

Officeseeking demands were often burdensome to government officials and Washington residents. In 1853, these demands were particularly taxing on Benjamin French, but this time French was on the other side of the desk as Assistant Secretary in the President’s office. A noted Democrat, connected Washington resident, and personal friend of incoming president, Franklin

⁴¹ A.J. Dallas to William M. Meredith, April 8th, 1850, Washington, p. 125, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP.

⁴² A.L. Gillespie to J.K. Polk, 14 March 1845, file of A.L. Gillespie, Applications and Recommendations for Positions in the Washington, DC, Offices, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 210, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP).

Pierce, French reluctantly devoted a significant amount of personal time that had been “filched” from him by “office beggars.” “If anything can vex a man it is to have men intrude upon him without the least shadow of right,” French privately recorded in his journal. As a result of his ability to accumulate social capital over time, French had become a sort of middle-man in Washington’s web of contacts and communication channels. So much so, that even officeseekers unconnected to French’s web of social and familial contacts felt inclined to push their officeseeking agenda on him. “There are many who I am pleased to serve, but I can see no propriety in persons whom I have before never heard of or seen, coming to me to aid them to obtain office,” French frustratingly wrote. “No matter where I am or what I am doing they *must* be attended to as a matter of right.” Despite his frustrations, French knew that it was in his best interest to respond in an attentive and considerate manner. Not only was his reputation at stake, the interests of the political party he represented were as well. Importantly, French also had to consider who he might offend higher up the political chain. Accordingly, French tried to “bear” the demands of officeseekers with “patience,” a mode of action that soon turned to an overwhelming “bore.” French eventually resolved to “speak out plainly” to the officeseekers, whether to “offend or not.” Due to his frankness or perhaps unwillingness to aid indiscriminate officeseekers, French admitted that officeseekers were slowly beginning to understand his “position,” and as a result he soon began to feel a sense of relief from the “enormous burden” that had been placed upon him.⁴³

As much as French felt burdened by itinerant Washington officeseekers, he could only sympathize with their attempt. In March 1853, French’s “old friend & companion, Frank Pierce” was inaugurated into the presidency. At the time, French hoped that he would not forget those

⁴³ French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, March 27, 1853, p. 232.

who helped him “in his elevation” to the nation’s highest office. Pierce’s election offered French the opportunity to fulfill a personal desire and claim a prominent and distinguished government job. Not only was French a personal friend of Pierce, he was also very close to the president’s wife, Jane Pierce. French reflected on his relationship to Mrs. Pierce in his journal: “We were boy & girl together in Chester, N.H.,” he wrote, “and now we are here amid the hurly-burly of Washington.” French believed that his personal connections to the president and his wife would make him a viable candidate for Marshal of the District of Columbia. Indeed, he believed it would give him the political influence that he needed. But despite a profound desire to carry the title of Marshal, President Pierce understood that the appointment carried with it profound political consequences, and thus opted to provide for French elsewhere. Pierce first put French’s name forward as a candidate for the Secretary of the Senate. After the incumbent was reelected, French’s name was put forward to be Chief Clerk, but that too failed. French thereafter declined an offer to have him take on the newly developed position of Reading Secretary—that is, of course, if the resolution designed to create the position passed. All these positions were “terribly annoying” to French, if not “intended” to diminish his chances of becoming the district’s marshal. French thus committed himself to declining all offices and “go straight ahead for the Marshalship.”⁴⁴

French, however, unhappily discovered that personal connections and political pull only went so far, and that national political party issues sometimes trumped personal friendship. This was especially true for prominent politically-appointed positions. French shortly thereafter met with President Pierce in order to discuss this very issue. The conversation that ensued exposed the complexity of political appointments as well as the limits of “long and unwavering personal

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 233-234.

friendship.” Pierce explained to French that he could not appoint him merely because they had been friends for so many years. To which French angrily exerted that did not expect him to do so; rather, he did so purely “on the score of competency on my part, and the wishes of the people of the District, of whom I believe $\frac{3}{4}$ at least are in my favor’.” Pierce quickly responded by asking, ““Do you mean democrats or citizens without reference to party’?” French answered, ““I mean citizens generally, but have little doubt a majority of the democratic party of the District are in my favor’.” Pierce then asked French why he did not supply him with a list of democrats who supported his appointment. Confident in his popularity and connections throughout Washington, French supposed that it would not be necessary to go through the arduous and timely process of procuring a list of names.

French’s conversation with President Pierce exposed not only the importance of social connections when it came to receiving an appointment to office, but also the necessity of using government appointments to maintain the stability and growth of political appointments. As for the latter, these were circumstances outside of French’s control. The most he could do was maintain beneficial public connections and hope that he would be awarded with a respectable office. With the national political party at stake, there were simply too many implications for French to overcome. To be sure, Pierce considered his personal friendship as well as French’s “faithful & useful services to the Democratic party” when it came to distribute public office. French was accordingly assured by Pierce that he would be provided government employment in some capacity, perhaps a “stepping stone” to the Secretary of the Senate. But French did not desire an ordinary clerkship or a notable but temporary office that might lead to something more prominent down the road; he thus took it upon himself to prove to Pierce how he “stood in the

hearts of the citizens of the District.”⁴⁵

French quickly went to work the following day, utilizing whatever social capital he had in Washington. He first turned to his “friends,” asking them quickly to “make an effort on his behalf.” French thought this effort was “crowned with complete success.” He was able to garner signatures of roughly 800 Democrats in the District of Columbia petitioning for his appointment to Marshal in roughly a day’s time. Despite French’s best effort to make his case for Marshal, Pierce informed French a few days later that he would not appoint him. French immediately assumed that disparaging “representations” had been made to Pierce regarding his character. Pierce responded “most emphatically in the negative” to French’s assumption, adding that there were other reasons for not giving him the appointment. In addition to possibly receiving a “better office from the Senate” in later months, Pierce did not want the appointment to be “construed as an act of favoritism” for an “intimate friend of his and a New Hampshire man by birth.” Disappointed and discouraged, French immediately asked Pierce who he would appoint. Pierce responded by stating he did not know, but that it would be “the person most fit for the office, whom the citizens seemed most to desire.” This in particular frustrated French, for he had presented petitions with enough signatures to demonstrate the social capital needed to be favorably considered for office, including those of a “large majority” of the citizens and Democrats of the District. Pierce, however, questioned the “character of petitions” and alerted French that he would determine the “choice of the citizens” by “consult[ing] with prominent citizens,” including the newly elected mayor, John W. Maury, a Democrat, and Robert Armstrong, the influential later proprietor of the *Washington Union*, a Democrat newspaper. So it appeared, French’s influences and political connections, although noteworthy, did not extend

⁴⁵ Ibid., April 3, 1853, pp. 234-235.

far enough into the Democratic Party, particularly among its evolving characters and players in Washington. To his regret, French was impelled to accept the position Pierce offered, that of Assistant Private Secretary to the President. Although he could not help but feel “degraded,” French left his appointment as clerk in the General Land Office and hoped that his new position would elevate him to a position with more social, political, and monetary cachet.⁴⁶

Despite his new title, French’s occupational duties changed little; but he would soon find himself on the opposite side of the desk taking applications from officeseekers. His job as Assistant Private Secretary was initially to sign Land Patents on behalf of the President. But soon thereafter President Pierce carried through with his promise to French and appointed him to the office of commissioner of public buildings, a position that included the supervision and power to appoint and dismiss public employees. An elevation no doubt from his previous positions, French eagerly accepted the title, which officially began July 1, 1853. As soon as the position was publicly announced, French’s doorbell rang “continually” throughout the day and well into the evening when he was at home. Even worse, his office at the President’s was also “continually filled with applicants for office,” forcing him to take his “work home, & evade the hordes of officeseekers.” Now French was in the contentious position of influencing patronage decision-making. Although French would be dismissed from his position two years later for political reasons, officeseekers continually sought out French in their effort to attain office.

French’s personal and political connections with Washington, especially his close proximity to Pierce and later President Abraham Lincoln, placed him within the center of Washington social and political networks. Under Lincoln’s presidency, French briefly occupied the office of clerk of the committee on claims in 1861. During this time, French concluded his

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 235, April 10, 1853, pp. 236-237.

life to be “indolent” and “inefficient.” “I am, daily, bored, more or less by people after office, who seem to think I am bound to assist them *all*,” French wrote. That same year, Lincoln would reappoint French as commissioner of public buildings. Shortly after the announcement, French recorded in his journal that his “house had been filled with people after office, or in relation to office,” which prevented him from extensive journalizing.⁴⁷

Throughout the antebellum era, officeseekers invaded the homes and offices of high-ranking officials and presidents. In 1861, the *New York Times* sympathetically acknowledged that the highest-ranking government officials were “ceaselessly beset by pertinacious fellows, armed with petitions, recommendations, testimonials of party service—showing their fitness or unfitness, perhaps, for any possible office, from a diplomatic mission down to the smallest postmastership.” The pressure officeseekers placed on subsequent presidents grew so burdensome that measures, although loosely applied, were taken to restrict officeseeking visits to specific hours of the day. This, however, did not stop officeseekers from finding their way into the president’s home and press their claims on him for office, especially during the evening hours.⁴⁸

Yet, as Benjamin French demonstrated once he assumed the power to influence patronage decision making, government officials and presidents did not always respond to officeseekers tentatively, favorably, or even fairly, relying more so on recommendations from friends and ranking political party members. Thusly so, Washington’s spaces—public and private, political and social—intersected, creating a social style with rules of engagement that

⁴⁷ Ibid., April 24, July 31, 1853, pp. 238, 240, June 26, Aug. 8, 1861, pp. 361, 370.

⁴⁸ *The New York Times*, March 8, 1861; for sentiments from earlier years, see *Norwich Aurora*, April 21, 184, and “Experience of an Office-Seeker,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 29, 1861, 8.

differentiated itself from other nineteenth-century cities. Rather than approach and press government officials directly, many officeseekers found hope through Washington's social spaces. Here officeseekers could potentially take inside avenues, discover inside information, and pursue leads on office vacancies in ways that were more beneficial than direct presentation. Of course navigation of and access to these spaces required on behalf of the officeseeker a significant knowledge of the manners and customs that shaped antebellum Washington society.

III

Above all, the degree of social capital that officeseekers brought with them to Washington played a consequential and important role in the reception of public office. Letters of officeseekers that included the support and backing of ranking members of the political party in charge were sent to Washington—sometimes through mail but most commonly in person—throughout the antebellum period. For many officeseekers, the endorsement of local political party officials often provided the social capital needed to elevate one particular officeseeker over another. As a result, the accumulation of signatures and letters of support became an indiscriminate and calculating business within the national system of party patronage. Ohio's *Scioto Gazette* reported that there was “scarcely a man of any influence belonging to the Jackson party, throughout the whole Union, whose name is not appended to a recommendation” supporting someone's application to office. When Boston officeseeker John Barton Derby made his attempt to secure a patronage appointment in the 1830s, he carried with him to Washington letters of introduction from high-ranking officials within Boston's Democratic Party. Of course, the quantity of officeseeking letters grew burdensome for influential party members and government officials. Whig editor, Horace Greely, lamented the constant requests he received

for letters of recommendation, particularly by those that demanded he exceed his normal course of action and write especially “strong” letters.⁴⁹ *The North American Gazette* reported in 1841 that Daniel Webster had nearly “two bushels” of application letters that had reached Washington either by mail or personal delivery, all of which were still waiting to be read.⁵⁰

These letters were written by both politicians and members of society connected through what historians Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin have described as a “political geography that underlay the institutional pyramid linking local party activists to state leaders.” All officeseeking roads seemingly led to and from Washington. Rightly so, when it came to national political patronage, the local commonly defined and shaped national decision-making. As a way to secure elections, national political parties encouraged applicants for public office to come forward. But as institutions, political parties also worked to create a relatively direct line of contact between the local political peripheries and Washington, the center of political power. National political parties were able to build coalitions at the local and state level; but the personal and political link between high-ranking politicians and successful officeseekers was a small and inclusive world, limited by access to, and knowledge of, political connections. It was, however, letters of officeseekers that demonstrated this link. In their communicative form, they constituted the mortar that held national patronage networks together.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *The Scioto Gazette*, March 11, 1829; John Brighton Derby, *Political Reminiscences, Including a Sketch of the Origin and History of the ‘Statesman Party’ of Boston* (Boston: Homer and Palmer, 1835), 52; Horace Greely to Thurlow Wood, New York, February 19, 1841, published in *The Galaxy*, 15, no. 3 (March 1873), 376.

⁵⁰ *The North American Gazette*, March 29, 1841.

⁵¹ Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 41. See also John,

At the onset of the federal government's establishment in Washington, social capital—most commonly through familial connections—played a central role in public appointments; political affiliation, however, played less of a determinative role. Take for example John Compton's 1817 application for a clerkship in one of Washington's departments. Having been "bred to the Mercantile business" one letter-writer assured the 2nd Auditor of the Treasury Department, Peter Hagner, that Compton's "capacity and Industry" would make him a valuable addition to his office. Hagner, furthermore, was assured that Compton's "connections" were "very respectable and his Department correct."⁵²

While letters of officeseekers in subsequent decades certainly highlighted the applicant's professional distinctiveness, partisan loyalty grew increasingly important. Officeseekers understood that success could be achieved by working the patronage system, even if that entailed manipulating or even breaking party lines. Firstly, applicants strived to demonstrate their political credentials and loyalty to the particular party in charge. Secondly, it was important for applicants to garner the support of an influential politician, government official, or distinguished citizen. Personal connections helped applicants gain entrance to the web of political influences extending throughout the nation. Former Washington residents John and Mary Logan underscored the necessity of having a degree of "political pull" in applying for a government post. "(U)nless you have good endorsers, or 'backers'," the Logans advised, "the chances are about 999 to one that you will not" receive an appointment. "You must, therefore, secure an endorsement of your Senators, Congressmen, and those leading men in your locality whom your

Spreading the News, 213.

⁵² John S. Haid to Peter Hagner, 9 May 1817, file of J.S. Compton, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

Senators and Congressmen recognize as influential at election times.” But “no matter what his position,” the Logans proclaimed, “if he can marshal a few votes, his name is worth more than that of a man of world-wide reputation who can command no vote but his own.”⁵³

By providing the necessary link between party loyalty, personal character, and entitlement to office, recommendation letters served as material evidence of social power at work. Take for example the numerous applications made for office by Thomas Rodney, a well-connected Whig from Delaware. Although closely allied with Senator John M. Clayton and other elite members of the national Whig party, Rodney’s application for public office was not likely to succeed without support from respected individuals from his home state. Coming from a deeply influential family with a long history in Delaware politics, Rodney was able to forge influential connections at an early age. This allowed him to play a substantial role within the Whig campaigns at the state and local level through the course of his life. Although it is difficult to gauge his contributions, Rodney was able to acquire enough political pull through his work in the Whig Party to make a plausible claim to federal office.⁵⁴

Despite an encouraging letter of recommendation from John Clayton to President William Harrison in 1841, Rodney found a patronage appointment to be difficult to come by. Nevertheless, the persistent and optimistic help of Clayton ultimately helped secure Rodney a coveted federal appointment as a foreign consul in Cuba later that year. Like Benjamin Brown

⁵³ Mrs. John A. Logan, *Thirty Years in Washington: Or, Life and Scenes in Our National Capital* (Hartford, CT: A.D. Worthington, 1901), 463. The application process for federal clerks is described in, Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 97-115.

⁵⁴ Peter T. Dalleo, “‘Both Pockets Full of Letters’: Thomas M. Rodney, John M. Clayton, and William R. King, and Whig Patronage Politics,” *Delaware History* 30, no. 2 (2002): 85-119.

French, Rodney effectively worked the system of patronage, and remained a public servant in various forms throughout a significant portion of his adult life. So as long as the Whigs remained in control of the Delaware and federal government, Rodney could rely, or at least turn to, his friends and political connections to write letters of support. Alternatively, when the opposing political party was in power, Rodney relied on his reputation as a connected gentleman and competent public official in order to retain office. Rodney's reputation remained strong in both cases, particularly through the support of testimonial letters that circulated to and from Washington. Even if party coalitions were unstable, Rodney's career as a government official suggests that political parties had reason to keep well-connected members of the other party in hope of encouraging support.⁵⁵

Thomas Rodney's career tells much about antebellum patronage appointments in the federal government. Importantly, it demonstrates the close proximity to political power that successful officeseekers were able to place themselves. Although his position and ability to access Whig political networks, and later the Republican Party's, may have been unique, the means in which Rodney claimed entitlement to and secured public office was not exceptional. Officeseeker Joseph B. Pleasant understood this dynamic well, hence his urgency to secure a letter of recommendation from former Virginia State Whig Senator and current U.S. Secretary of the Navy, William Ballard Preston, in 1849. "This is to solicit again your kind interference in my behalf," Pleasant wrote to Preston. "You are not presumed to have any particular interest in my case, but coming from my state knowing that my large and influential family have all been devoted to the Whig cause—not one of whom to my knowledge ever received anything at the hand of government... you may feel disposed to say a word which might assure my success."

⁵⁵ Ibid.

Pleasant's application was further bolstered with numerous testimonials and signatures from the "intelligence and wealth of Virginia." Nonetheless, Pleasant found it difficult to garner enough influence to get an appointment, and was left "*feeling* of the ingratitude of politicians."⁵⁶

Similar to Joseph B. Pleasant, thousands of applicants found it imperative to request assistance in the forms of written testimonials. Applicants lacking a direct connection to influential political personas commonly attempted to prove that their appointment would help secure a solid political base and votes come election time. Like so many other newspaper editors throughout the country, Clement Bennett of Penn Yan, New York, made a firm claim to public office. In March 1845, Bennett visited Washington with the hopes of securing a clerkship in one of the federal departments, only to find the streets and appointment ledgers overcrowded with officeseekers. Unable to shed the cloak of anonymity within this crowd, Bennett was just another officeseeker in a desperate attempt to obtain office in Washington. As a result, he chose not to waste his efforts to obtain an interview with the President. "[B]eing unacquainted personally with any of the gentlemen of your cabinet, and without the influence which would from this section of the country overweigh the many strong recommendations of the numerous other applicants," Bennett decided to write President Polk directly from his home in Penn Yan. With limited direct connections to Washington's political networks, Bennett staked his claim on the grounds that his region of the state was underrepresented by the Democratic Party and that he had always been a "consistent advocate of democratic principles."

Bennett's efforts to obtain a public office in Washington lasted for nearly two years. Finally, in 1847, Bennett was offered a clerkship in the Treasury Department. During those two years, Bennett was persistent in his efforts to garner influence from prominent men and state-

⁵⁶ Joseph B. Pleasant to Ballard Preston, 23 May 1849, p. 343, Joseph B. Pleasant to William M. Meredith, 9 Oct. 1849, p. 349, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP.

level congressmen, all the while arguing his case on the grounds that his part of the state had lacked adequate representation in the share of government patronage. Bennett's attachment to the local *Penn Yan Democrat*, which was established by his father in 1818 and to which he had served as one of its editors, further bolstered his patronage claim. As evident in the many letters sent to Washington, Bennett's qualifications for office were determined on these grounds. This point was clearly stated in a letter to the Secretary of Treasury, Robert J. Walker:

The Congressional District in which I reside had never yet to my knowledge asked for any of the various Clerkships in the Departments at Washington, or received a portion of the Government patronage of this nature; from these reasons I am induced to ask for a appointment as Clerk in the Treasury Department.

I have been for several years past and still am connected with the Democratic press of this County, and establishment which was commenced by my late Father in 1818.⁵⁷

In epistolary form, Bennett's qualifications and claims resembled that of numerous other applicants for office. Lacking a direct and personal connection to Washington, Bennett solicited the epistolary help of friends and acquaintances from his home town. One friend, Judge William Oliver, was the connection that Bennett sorely needed to access elite Washington officials. Former First Judge of the Yates County Court, member of the New York State Senate, and United State Representative, Oliver's intervention would play an influential role in securing Bennett's appointment. Whereas Bennett was incapable of garnering the attention of powerful Washington officials, Oliver could potentially influence Robert J. Walker's response to Bennett's application. Although Oliver did not address Walker in person, he did maintain an epistolary acquaintance with C. Johnson, who evidently had personal contact with Walker in Washington. "Do for us what you can and oblige your old friend," Oliver asked, "and urge upon

⁵⁷ Clement W. Bennett to James K. Polk, 8 July 1845, Clement W. Bennett to Robert J. Walker, 10 Oct. 1845, file of Clement W. Bennett, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

Mr. Walker the propriety of his making provision for my friend Bennett.” Knowing full well the electoral implications of patronage appointments, Oliver reminded Johnson: “Allow me again to say that here in Western, NY, we have as yet had nothing in the way of Public favor, Or appointment to any clerkship at Washington, and remember that forgotten Western New York gave Mr. Polk the State.” Oliver continued to work effortlessly, using his special relationship with Secretary Walker to Bennett’s advantage. Political implications aside, Oliver wrote to Walker in his closing line that he would “regard his appointment as a personal favor to myself and shall be extremely obliged to you for your interference in his behalf.”⁵⁸

Clement Bennett’s political pull was solidified through a network of personal and political contacts that extended from his familial acquaintances in Penn Yan to high-ranking state politicians, including former governor, William C. Bouck, to Washington politicians with a political base in western New York. Nevertheless, Bennett’s appointment to office did not come without a great deal of epistolary engagements and repeated attempts to garner political influence. In October 1846, Bennett once more pressed his claim to public office on President Polk. Bennett repeatedly emphasized his political pull, even going as far as to provide petitions from different portions of his congressional district supporting his appointment. He even wrote to Penn Yan’s Democratic member of U.S. Congress, Samuel S. Ellsworth, expressing his dismay and desperation over not receiving an appointment. “I have felt disappointed in not yet receiving a favorable answer, particularly as Judge Oliver informed me that Mr. Walker had expressed a willingness to give me a post and an assurance that he would do so,” said Bennett. According to Bennett, Walker had informed him in a personal letter that claims for office from New York were numerous, and thus found it difficult to offer an immediate appointment. But

⁵⁸ William Oliver to C. Johnson, 10 Oct. 1845, William Oliver to Robert J. Walker, 10 Oct. 1845, file of Clement W. Bennett, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

Bennett perceived Walker's advice as an "intimation" to strengthen his application so that "no injustice might be done to other applicants." Bennett thus continued to strengthen his political capital by gathering the support of additional Democratic members of the New York's Legislature. In the end, Bennett's application was supported by a wide-range of influential political officials. Bennett's ability to acquire political pull in support of his application was indisputable. He was able to prove himself to be a distinguished and most loyal party member, someone whose appointment was unlikely to upset ranks within the party or encourage anyone to reconsider their political sympathies toward the Democratic Party. His reputation fully secured, Bennett once more sought the aid of his coveted Washington contact, Congressman Ellsworth, and asked him to "bring the subject again before the attention of Mr. Walker." Bennett's reputation and popularity throughout western New York left Ellsworth with little inclination but to support the application to office by one of his constituents.⁵⁹

Letters and memorials sent to Washington commonly proclaimed that the appointment would lead to a profound source of gratification from the town or region of the country in which the applicant resided. Saul K. Ruggles, of St. Clairsville, Ohio, applied for a clerkship in the Treasury Department in 1850. A letter supporting Ruggles's application, noted that Saul was as "competent" and "deserving" as anyone else in Corwin's "whole tribe of clerks." The writer proceeded to remind Corwin that Saul's father—who "feels the deepest solicitude for his son"—had "done more to promote the interests of the Whig Party, and especially the interests of a certain 'Tom Corwin'." The writer then proceeded to confirm to Corwin, "if the people of this section of our state have one wish above another it is that the feeling the Venerable judge

⁵⁹ Clement W. Bennett to James K. Polk, 23 Oct. 1846, Clement W. Bennett to Sam S. Ellsworth, 9 May 1846, file of Clement W. Bennett, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

Ruggles be fully gratified.” G. Johnston’s request for office included a memorial signed by the “most respectable citizens” as well as “all the men of influence of both parties” in Fredericksburg, Virginia. A letter sent from the Mayor of Fredericksburg even noted that the memorial was designed without “any agency or interference” on the part of Johnston. His ability to demonstrate unyielding local support from prominent members of his community helped assure party officials that Johnston’s appointment would be met with few political consequences.⁶⁰

From the onset of the application process, success stemmed from the close proximity of political power that the officeseeker was able to place himself. Throughout the antebellum era, the desks of high-ranking government officials and politicians—the president’s not excluded—were overlade with countless letters of officeseekers that made similar claims to those of Clement W. Bennett and Saul Ruggles. In one form or another, these letters attempted to demonstrate political loyalty, which was substantiated by the distinguishment and support of influential local politicians, congressmen, and government officials. Party loyalty was the umbrella, but personal loyalty to local political factions was the bond that connected officeseekers from all parts of the nation. But access to sources of political power—made real through testimonial letters—is what distinguished one officeseeker from the next.

While politicians frequently discussed their disdain toward the patronage system, it had become an accepted practice within each political party throughout antebellum America. The political party in power, whether Whig or Democrat, claimed that their use of patronage to mobilize and build national political parties was uniquely democratic and a justifiable American

⁶⁰ James Weir to Corwin, 14 Oct. 1850, Container 3, Thomas Corwin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; April 2, no year given, file of G. Johnston, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

practice. But to what degree were the practices of patronage and officeseeking in particular democratic? While popular descriptions commonly highlighted the rapacious and disorderly rush for public office, an analysis of the officeseeking process both within and outside of Washington shows the relative close proximity to political power that applicants were able to place themselves. Success in officeseeking also stemmed from careful navigation of Washington's social channels. But access into these networks was difficult to come by without demonstrating a significant degree of social capital—that is, without having the appropriate social resources and political connections, and commonly within Washington. In antebellum Washington, distinction was the essential officeseeking resource.

In his *Reminiscences*, German immigrant and later public official, Carl Schurz, recalled the time when he was first informed of the patronage system. He asked editor and politician, Francis Grund, why so many men throughout America sought office. Grund plainly responded: “Partly the distinction and influence which official position confers, and partly the pecuniary emoluments.”⁶¹ Party loyalty aside, for many officeseekers, public office was but one rung in the social ladder, another mechanism of success. But an analysis of the social and political dynamics of officeseeking also offers an insight into antebellum politics, especially the national project of democratization as it related to the patronage system. Officeseeking applicants found through partisan politics the social capital needed to secure themselves economically. The importance placed on political and social distinction as a qualification for government office, however, only pushed public administration further from its meritocratic origins. On the other hand, the social backgrounds of officeseekers still placed them within the nation's middle and

⁶¹ Carl Schurz, Frederic Bancroft, William Archibald Dunning, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz*, vol. 2 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page & Company, 1917), 26; also quoted in White, *The Jacksonians*, 387-388.

upper classes. The emphasis placed on acquiring political pull within the officeseeking process left public office open to a relatively select few. Indeed, the majority of the nation's population could not access the political power commonly needed to secure office. This, of course, conflicted with Jackson's rhetorical intentions of eliminating social standards for public office.

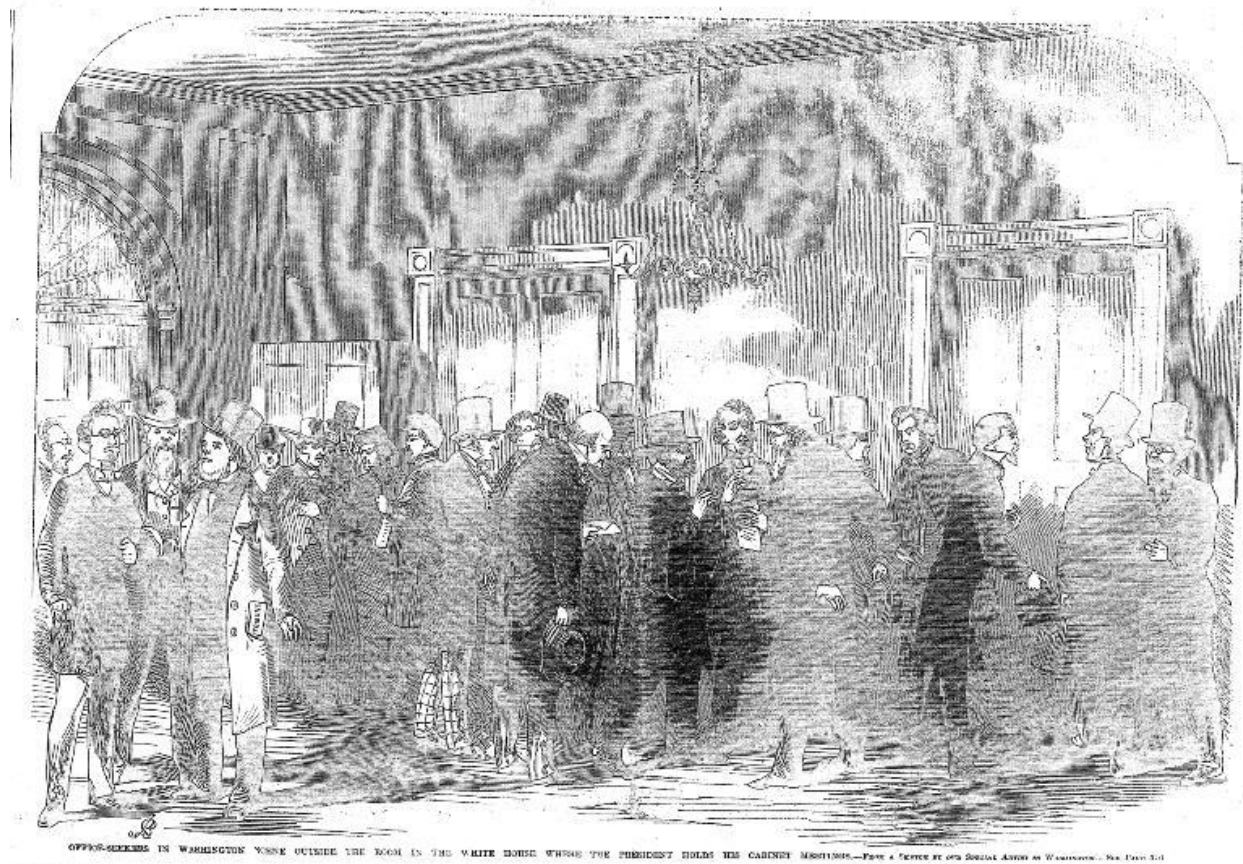
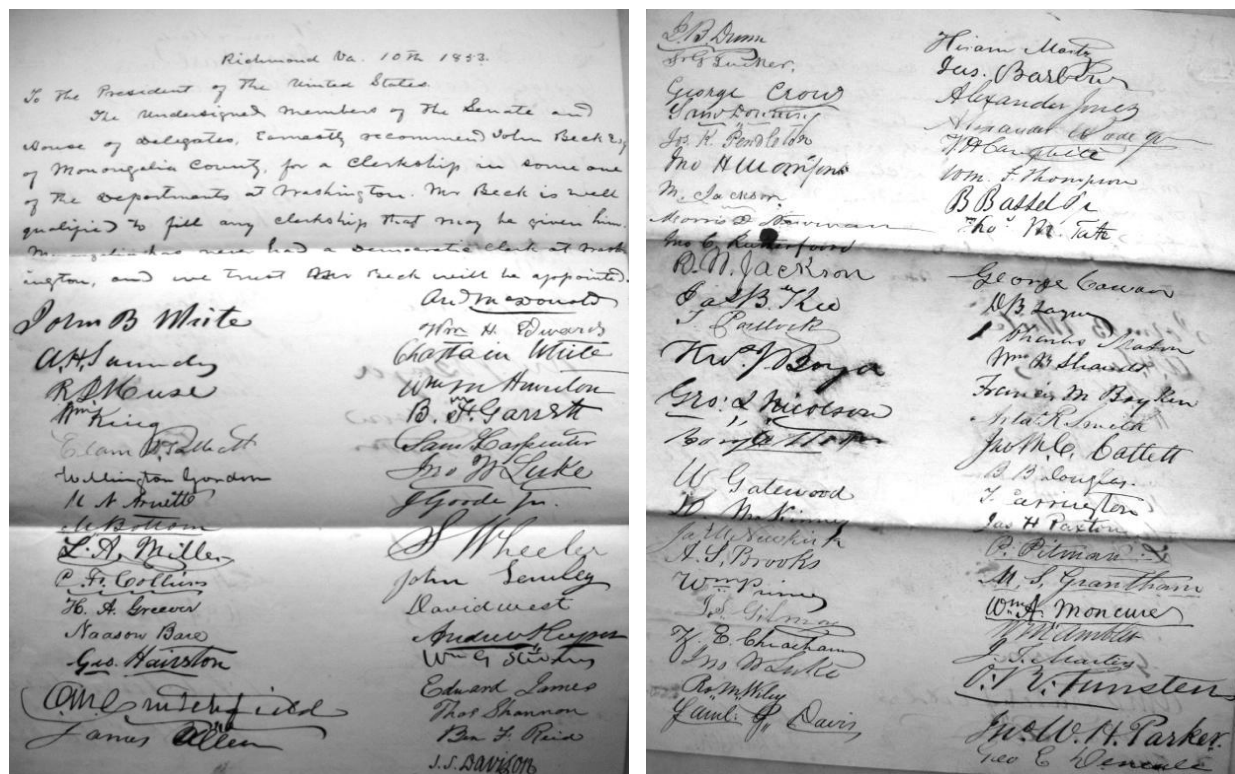


Figure 1: “Office-Seekers in Washington Outside the Room in the White House Where the President Holds His Cabinet Meetings.” Popular representations of officeseekers rarely commented on the close proximity of political power that officeseekers were able to place themselves. The depiction above attempts to capture the social dimensions of the officeseeking crowd. Surrounding a detached and hunkered officeseeker with a single letter in hand are more affluent and interactive officeseekers in the process of forging beneficial public connections by taking part in an animated level of social interaction. (Source: *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, April 6, 1861)



Chapter IV

“For a poor man to realize a competency”: Officeseeking Memoirs, Honest Failure, and the Political Economy of Importuning for Office

“I am *nearly* 56, a *cripple*, and not worth \$5 upon earth.”

—Isaac K. Hanson, District of Columbia, 1845¹

By July of 1850, Ferdinand S. Van Harlingen had grown unhappy with his economic station in life. If his struggling career in the legal profession was not enough, Van Harlingen had a wife, a two year-old boy, and a six month year-old girl dependent on him for support. So he decided to take “a line of action” and write from his home in Lebanon, Ohio, a personal and intimate letter to Whig Treasury Secretary Thomas Corwin in the nation’s capital in order to solicit a clerkship in his department. Van Harlingen’s epistle adopted a line of reasoning—a justification for public office—that went beyond party service. Van Harlingen made clear that his actions were done out of particular “necessities,” and would not have been done “under other circumstances.” He proceeded in detail to discuss his failure as a lawyer, current economic hardships, and inability to properly care for his family. “I have labored ten years in my profession, and am poor—not because I have not had a full share of the [legal] practice, but, rather, because it does not yield a fair *cash* compensation for the labor attendant upon it; there is in it too much pauper labor, for a poor man to realize a competency,” humbly confessed Van Harlingen. “My babies are crying for bread, my creditors for money and my necessities for employment.” Van Harlingen was careful to underscore the damaging effects his economic situation could potentially have on his expanding family, which Van Harlingen humbly

¹ Isaac K. Hanson to Robert K. Walker, June 6, 1845, file of Isaac K. Hanson, Applications and Recommendations for Positions in the Washington, DC, Offices, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 210, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP).

acknowledged only added to an already burdensome debt of “responsibilities and expenses.”²

A falling patriarch, Van Harlingen’s sense of self was at odds with popular nineteenth-century conceptions of self-made manliness and what was deemed as proper economic living for middle-class men and their families.³ Above all, Van Harlingen proclaimed that his impetus and motivation for seeking office was done in order to guarantee the “happiness and welfare” of his family, and not out of selfish interests or other “earthly considerations.” Rather than subject his family to potentially fateful destitution, Van Harlingen sought out the economic protection and security offered by government employment. “I have struggled along in life thus far...and thus far been enabled to keep my family above want and respectable,” he wrote to Corwin. “But...should any accident deprive them of my aid & support, however feeble & inefficient it may be, what must then become of them?” Hoping to capture the sympathy of a fellow Ohioan and former Lebanon resident and attorney of Warren County, he reminded Corwin that his manhood, his gendered-identity to provide for his family, was in peril:

Of the members of *my own* family they could not reasonably look for support—God knows they are too poor almost to aid themselves—And I hope that it is not a culpable pride, that would make me shrink for imposing the burden of the support of my children upon the relation of my wife. I mean to say that when I look upon life in this light,...that necessity, which make the husband & father solicitour [sic] for the welfare of those placed under his care, compels me to ask of you a favor & whilst asking I am reminded that no act of mine entitles me to expect that

² Ferdinand S. Van Harlingen to Thomas Corwin, 25 July 1850, 27 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³ On self-made manhood, see E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 18-25; Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 13-42.

favor will be granted.⁴

Van Harlingen's epistle to Corwin told of a life of honest failure, of a man who had fallen on hard times and left unable to sufficiently provide for his family. He did so by employing, in short form, a descriptive memoir, a tactic used by multitudes of men—and some women—who sought government office in order to secure their family's financial and social futures. Above all, Van Harlingen hoped that his letter would fall upon Corwin's sympathetic and favorable eye. By describing a life of honest failure in sentimental language, men like Van Harlingen hoped to keep any degree of respectability or social capital attached to their name.⁵ Accordingly so, officeseekers like Van Harlingen also attempted to combine their brief descriptive memoirs with an additional justification for office, a line of reasoning that situated them within the patronage-client network that shaped local and national politics.

In 1850, Van Harlingen, along with countless other Ohioans, found a ripe opportunity to put their names forward for office. The Whigs regained control of the presidential office a year earlier. To his advantage, Van Harlingen found in the newly appointed and high-ranking public official, Ohio's former Whig governor and congressman, Thomas Corwin, a prominent public official and potential ally who once knew Van Harlingen as a "young lawyer." Van Harlingen

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For studies on the evolution of begging letters as a social and cultural practice in America and their significance in understanding the identities of nineteenth-century men, see Scott A. Sandage, "The Gaze of Success: Failed Men and the Sentimental Marketplace," in *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture*. eds. Mary Chapman and Glen Hendler (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 181-201; idem, "Gender and the Economics of the Sentimental Market in Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Politics* (Summer 1999): 105-130; and Ruth Crocker, "'I Only Ask You Kindly to Divide Some of Your Fortune with Me': Begging Letters and the Transformation of Charity in Late Nineteenth-Century America," *Social Politics* (Summer 1999): 131-160.

accordingly employed his best source of social capital and sought the assistance of Milton Williams, a well-regarded lawyer in Warren County who maintained legal and political connections to Thomas Corwin.⁶ Williams graciously wrote a recommendation letter supporting Van Harlingen's application for a clerkship, wherein he warned Corwin not to "overlook [his] own household" and give a "crumb" to a fellow resident of Warren County who had a dependent family and a financial debt "pressing upon him." Williams called upon Corwin to not forget his obligation to a valued political constituent. Additionally, Van Harlingen's financial crisis provided ample justification for government employment—emphatically more so than his skills in the "flourishing of a pen over paper" or in keeping an accountant's book in "good style," which were only slightly emphasized.⁷

Van Harlingen's economic realities are difficult to determine. His profession and beneficial public connections within Warren Country, Ohio, hardly reveal him to be an individual from the lower economic ranks of society. Yet it is plausible that in 1850 Van Harlingen's socio-economic status was uncertain at best. Though the 1850 and 1860 censuses do not reveal Van Harlingen to have owned any real or personal property, the 1870 census revealed that he had accumulated a personal property value of 300 dollars.⁸ Modest to be certain, it is fair to say that Van Harlingen's middle-class existence and aspirations were dependent upon a secure

⁶ Josiah Morrow, *The History of Warren County Ohio* (Chicago: W.H. Beers & Co., 1882), 387-388.

⁷ Milton Williams to Thomas Corwin, 25 July 1850, Ferdinand S. Van Harlingen to Corwin, 25 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

⁸ *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*, Lebanon, Warren, Ohio, 24, *Eight Census of the United States, 1860*, Lebanon, Warren, Ohio, 219, *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*, Lebanon, Warren, Ohio, 415.

and fruitful income. Like so many other officeseekers of the time, Van Harlingen therefore used his social capital to access Washington networks and bolster his opportunity to obtain a government clerkship. But his chief claim to government office rested on the personal economic crisis that was preventing him from achieving independence and an idealized sense of masculinity as the household patriarch.

Van Harlingen hoped to find in government work an opportunity to regain what he had lost, or feared would never be fulfilled. Van Harlingen thus wrote to beg for a government clerkship from a past mentor and influential public figure, someone perhaps sympathetic to a young man's inability to reconcile his occupational pursuit with a desired and respectable social status, despite showing perseverance and determination. In doing so, he chose his words carefully, deploying a language on par with mid-nineteenth century middle-class cultural practices of sentimentalism. He begged privately through the informal economy of letter and personal exchanges, an interaction that was venerated through a language of sentimentalism.⁹ By giving up his deeply personal and sentimental memoir, Van Harlingen hoped, as did other officeseekers, a government clerkship would be reciprocated. Accordingly so, Van Harlingen did not simply beg for personal charity; rather, what Van Harlingen proposed was more of a *quid pro quo*. If he were to receive a clerkship, Van Harlingen guaranteed to Corwin that he would forever be in debt to him. He pleaded, "I will mortgage myself to you soul & body, conditioned for the faithful performance of my duties—I believe that since I was fourteen years old, this is the first time I have ever troubled a friend in this way—and though but a poor hand to beg. I am

⁹ I am influenced here by the ideas expressed in Sandage, "Gender and the Economics of the Sentimental Market," 105-130.

not slow to appreciate the favor of a friend.”¹⁰

The fact is failure permeated the officeseeking process and the antebellum period more broadly. In the tradition of early republican political economy, manly independence could be achieved through property ownership and self-employment. The ideological bedrock in which the nation was founded, this ideal had profound political and social implications throughout the nineteenth century, giving birth to the cultural ideal of the self-made man.¹¹ Historians, however, are now just beginning to paint a fuller picture of the antebellum economy by examining the ways in which Americans encountered degrees of failure despite vast economic expansion.¹² While scholars have drawn attention to the economic gains the industrial revolution wrought on America in the nineteenth century, the popular economic boom cycles of the 1830s and 1850s were balanced by national, regional, and personal moments of economic decline, including panics, depressions, bankruptcies, and job loss. For many Americans, the ideal of economic independence was difficult to realize. It was a risk economy to be certain, ripe

¹⁰ Ferdinand S. Van Harlingen to Thomas Corwin, 27 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

¹¹ The development of independence as a political and social ideal following the Revolution, is explored in Richard L. Bushman, “‘This New Man’: Dependence and Independence, 1776,” in, *Uprooted Americans: Essays to Honor Oscar Handlin*, ed. Richard L. Bushman, et. al. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1979), 97-124; Rowland Berthoff, “Independence and Attachment, Virtue and Interest: From Republican Citizen to Free Enterpriser, 1787-1837,” in *Uprooted Americans*, 77-96.

¹² For a fresh and informative overview on the social, cultural, and economic issues tied to failure in the antebellum era, see the diverse contributions to “Hard Times,” Special Issue, *Common-Place* 10, no. 3 (April 2010). <<http://www.common-place.org>>. See especially the contribution by Sharon Ann Murphy, “Doomed ... to eat the bread of dependency”? Insuring the Middle-Class Against Hard Times,” who argues that the growth of the insurance industry in the nineteenth-century provided “safety-net” for middle-class families’ socioeconomic future.

with anxiety, insecurity, hardship, and even failure.¹³

How then did the developing middle class, with their emphasis on nonmanual and social aspirations, navigate the economic and cultural terrain of the period? What was to become of its members, whose unstable incomes left them in fear of losing their perceived social status? For at least one segment of the nation's burgeoning and insecure middle class, government clerkships offered a compensatory backstop to a perceived, if not real, destitution. Ferdinand Van Harlingen knew that a middle-class existence was dependent upon a life comprised of more than "economical living." A proper government office, he believed, would help him "rear & educate" his family "respectfully." A regular and steady income, hoped Van Harlingen, might secure his family's socio-economic future. For without one, he worried, "what must then become of them?"¹⁴ Van Harlingen's epistle to Thomas Corwin underscored the complex relationship between gender identity, economic failure, and the impetus to seek office that so many antebellum men shared. The popularity and relevance of such letters provide important insights into the social backgrounds of government officeseekers and clerks, as well as the conflicted development of America's middling class in the nineteenth century. For Van Harlingen, a government job was more than a reward for party loyalty and service; it also offered assurance and protection against the modern economy.

¹³ For studies that examine these issues, see Edward J. Balleisen, *Navigating Failure: Bankruptcy and Commercial Society in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); Peter J. Coleman, *Debtors and Creditors in America: Insolvency, Imprisonment for Debt, and Bankruptcy, 1607-1900* (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1974); Bruce H. Mann, *Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Scott Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

¹⁴ Ferdinand S. Van Harlingen to Thomas Corwin, 25 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

This chapter takes as its primary source of evidence the application letters sent by government officeseekers who hoped to receive a clerkship and, in effect, government assistance in order to resolve their financial burdens. The rise of patronage politics and officeholding corresponded with the facilitation of national systems of transportation by the federal government throughout the antebellum era. Local newspapers, commonly the organs of political parties, frequently reported high-ranking and subordinate patronage appointments, connecting Americans from the periphery of the country's regions to the political and official workings of the government.¹⁵ Not only did new lines of communication, including roads, railroads, and canals, allow officeseekers to travel to and from the nation's capital with relative ease, it also allowed officeseekers to more easily navigate patronage networks by sending application letters through a national postal system.

Officeseeking emerged in its modern form as an important component within the communications revolution that was taking place in the first half of the nineteenth century. Before qualified systems of merit and civil service exams, patronage begging letters were systematic to the capricious world of officeseeking—a broadly participatory world that was made possible through epistolary communications. In fact, officeseeking was organized around personal correspondence. Historian Daniel Walker Howe has recently demonstrated the importance of communications in democratizing American political life throughout this period. As argued by Howe, newspapers and a variety of other forms of mail played an “essential role in making representative government meaningful and in fostering among the citizens a sense of

¹⁵ On the importance of newspapers in building political parties in the early republic, see Jeffrey Pasley, *“The Tyranny of Printers”: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001). On the transmission of news, see Richard D. Brown, *Knowledge is Power: The Diffusion of Information in Early America, 1700-1865* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

American nationality beyond the face-to-face politics of neighborhoods.”¹⁶ Historians have specifically identified the United States Postal System—and later the telegraph—as an important federal contribution to the development of a national system of communication in the early republican period. Although newspapers primarily constituted the mail delivered by the Post prior to 1830, personal letters grew in popularity and importance in subsequent decades. According to historian David Henkin, the personal letter had become “an instrument of everyday sociability among ordinary people.” Although increasingly popular and routine, personal letters took their form around “the production of codes and ideals of intimacy.”¹⁷

Officeseeking begging letters were formulaic and included a given set of codes specific to the patronage-client networks, demonstrating the applicant’s character as well as a justification for public office. In this sense, the difference in officeseeking letters was a matter of degrees, commonly differentiated by the amount of social capital a particular officeseeker could attach to their name. But patronage begging letters were also part of a communicative practice that intimately linked citizens to the federal government as well as national political parties.¹⁸

¹⁶ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 228. On the rise of print material in urban spaces, see David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

¹⁷ David Henkin, *The Postal Age: The Emergence of Modern Communications in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 93. On the important role of the Post Office in developing national communication networks, see Richard R. John, *Spreading the News: The American Postal System from Franklin to Morse* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1-168.

¹⁸ I am influenced here by the work of David Henkin, who argues that “a great deal of cultural work went into the production of the codes and ideals of intimacy that shaped epistolary communication” in the mid-nineteenth century. See *The Postal Age*, 91. In *Epistolary Practices: Letter-Writing in America Before Telecommunications* (Chapel Hill: University of

Closely related to the personal letter, patronage begging letters were intensely private forms of communication used by officeseekers hoping and willing to trade their personal story for a government office. By providing a brief memoir of honest failure, officeseekers helped construct an understanding of the government and the relationship of citizens to it, creating both a real and imagined sphere of intimacy between the government and its citizens. As much as citizens and journalists decried government work and patronage appointments, at least some government officeseekers were willing to exchange economic independence for a livelihood dependent on a government salary for support.¹⁹

I

The rise and sheer volume of officeseeking letters throughout the antebellum era suggests that many middling Americans viewed government office as a source of economic security, if not an avenue to improve their social capital. Despite the popular perception that government work was not a viable alternative to labor, a significant portion of the middling population shared

North Carolina Press, 1998), 5, William Merrill Decker has persuasively shown that “epistolary communication has always been...inevitably associated with intimacy.” On the significance of print media in transforming the relationship between citizens and the state in the eighteenth century, see Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

¹⁹ This and the previous chapter challenge historical claims that party loyalty was the sole criterion for patronage appointments. See Martin Shefter, *Political Parties and the State: The American Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 303-305. For a perspective that deemphasizes political engagement and loyalty in the nineteenth century, see Glen C. Altschuler and Stuart Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and Their Politics in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000).

an interest in government institutions and nonmanual labor in general.²⁰ Thousands of begging letters from officeseekers sat on top of the dusty desks within the federal departments. In what was likely an intended overstatement, *The New York Times* estimated that there were nearly a million men in pursuit of “the sixty thousand great and small offices within the gift of the government” following President Lincoln’s inauguration in 1861. Especially burdensome was the amount of mail received by government officials. As noted, the mailbags were “heavy with letters from every point of the compass, begging office in every style of chirography and grammar, and under every possible plea.”²¹

As early as 1829, Andrew Jackson had become aware and uneasy of the importuning and eagerness of those who likened patronage appointments to charitable donations. He acknowledged in a personal letter to his friend and confidant, minister Hardy M. Cryer of Tennessee, that there were “more distressed people here [in Washington], than any person could imagine.” He offered to Cryer a brief illustration that underscored the politics of failure that would shape the officeseeking process throughout the antebellum era:

Would you believe it, that a lady who had once rolled in wealth, but whose husband was overtaken by misfortune and reduced to want, and is, and has been an applicant for office, and well recommended, applied to me with tears in her eyes, soliciting relief, assuring me that her children were starving, and to buy them a morsel of bread she had to sell her thimble the day before.

With so many “applications for relief,” Jackson found it difficult to ignore “real charitable

²⁰ The emergence of republican manhood and its rhetorical significance among the nation’s producing classes has been thoroughly explored in Bruce Laurie, *Artisans into Workers: Labor in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989). For the emergence and separation of manual from nonmanual labor as part of the middle class experience, see Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760-1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 66-137.

²¹ *The New York Times*, March 8, 1861.

objects,” a dilemma that infringed the theoretical practice of appointing individuals based on party loyalty.²² This was particularly troublesome to Jackson, since he figured “any and every man can get recommendations of the strongest kind” and that it would require “great circumspection to avoid imposition, and select honest men.”²³

Despite writing to a notable public figure, officeseekers scripted their letters with ideals of privacy and intimacy, hoping to secure both a tangible relationship and emotional response with those who influenced patronage decision making. In 1850, John Sampler of Meadville, Mississippi, importuned Secretary Corwin for a clerkship. Whereas Ferdinand Van Harlingen struggled to make ends meet in the legal profession, Sampler sought employment in Washington after he had failed in the printing business. Like Van Harlingen, Sampler was born in Ohio and apparently had some “knowledge & acquaintance” of Corwin from an early age, though he presumed Corwin had “long since forgotten” him. Accordingly so, Sampler began his letter by refreshing in Corwin’s memory of their relation, which included not only Sampler’s personal knowledge of Corwin but also past and distant familial ties and other associations. This connection, Sampler hoped, would provide an “ample” apology for taking the “liberty” to importune Corwin. Having established a tangible connection—a face to the name on the letter—Sampler continued to make his intentions clear. Like Van Harlingen, Sampler hoped to procure a “situation in the employ of the government” that would offer “at least a comfortable support,”

²² Andrew Jackson to Rev. Hardy M. Cryer, 16 May 1829, John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1929), 4:14, 33.

²³ Andrew Jackson to John Coffee, 22 March 1829, 30 May 1829, *ibid.*, 39.

especially in the raising and education of his children.²⁴

In making his case to Corwin, Sampler thought it wise to present in earnest a “short history” of his disappointing professional career. A young, ambitious man, Sampler left his home in Ohio and entered the cutthroat business world “upon [his] own responsibility.” Just four years later, at some point in his late-twenties, the ambitious Sampler decided to stake his economic future in the printing business. The time seemed right. Campaigns for the presidential election of 1836 were about to take off, and Ohio’s Whig, William Henry Harrison, was about to assume his first run for presidency against the Democrat, Martin Van Buren. Sampler jumped at the opportunity to use his printing business to “promote the interest of the Whig Party in general, and with a special view to the success of Harrison.” But Sampler’s ambition would also turn out to be his failure. “I gave all I had for that purpose,” wrote Sampler. “[M]y all was gone and I was compelled to give up everything I had in the world to pay my debts, and did not then succeed.” If that was not enough, Sampler’s wife died, leaving in his “hands a dependent family of motherless children.” Sampler assured Corwin that his failure was honest, the result of sacrifice for a cause beyond his own self-interest. In 1837, Sampler moved to Mississippi “with the hope of recuperating” his financial loss—a move, however, that only added to Sampler’s financial woes. “My age is 44 years,” wrote Sampler. “Fourteen years and more have passed away since my little stock was wrecked and carried away by the political storm, that submerged not only our party, but our country into difficulties, from which many of her good citizens have never recovered—and I am one of them.” A counter narrative to self-made manhood, Sampler confessed that he now found life “very difficult” and had run out of alternatives. He had “struggled long” and exhausted “his own energies to recover.” Rather than infusing his outlook

²⁴ John Sampler to Thomas Corwin, 6 Sept. 1850, Container 2, Thomas Corwin Papers.

on life with determined optimism, Sampler feared he might “never be able” to recover his loss without the help of a government job. “I fear I have been an *unprofitable* [my emphasis] servant to my country,” he wrote. “All I ask is assistance.” Or more opportunely, “a sufficient guarantee of that essential called a salary.”²⁵

Labor in one of the federal departments in Washington was viewed by many middling men as an avenue of redemption, a momentary opportunity to avoid social failure. This course of action appeared in the popular social commentary on Washington society, *Annie Grayson; or, Life in Washington*. Published in 1853, the novel took shape around the colorful socialite, Annie Grayson, whose family relocated to Washington from New Orleans so the father could work as a clerk in one of the government offices. Once a member of the “commercial and fashionable circles of New Orleans,” Annie’s family was forced to claim bankruptcy. A series of “large speculations” had “turned out unfortunate,” forcing Annie’s father to turn all of his savings and assets over to his creditors. “[U]nfit to brave the trials of poverty,” Annie’s father was “persuaded” by a family friend to go to Washington, where he would use his influence to land him a situation in one of the federal departments.

With nowhere else to turn, Annie’s family moved to Washington. The family friend worked hard on behalf of Annie’s father. His influence and letter of recommendation eventually granted Annie’s father access to the Secretary of State. Annie’s father graciously met with the Secretary, and returned from the visit with “a lighter heart in his bosom than he had felt since his failure.” Nonetheless, weeks went by and no “candid answer” was made as to whether a clerkship would be granted. As it turned out, the patronage game would not be to Annie’s father’s liking. After weeks of uncertainty and discouragement, he was left “prostrated on a bed

²⁵ Ibid.

of sickness, brought on by anxiety and care,” only to die a few weeks later.²⁶ A moral warning to officeseekers, the story of Annie’s father’s financial collapse and his subsequent attempt to redeem himself by procuring work in one of Washington’s federal offices underscores the experience of failure for many middling men.

Nevertheless, the fact remained that government clerkships could only be accessed through patron-client networks. Accordingly so, a significant number of officeseekers couched their cry of honest failure with an additional appeal of party devotion. Indeed, participation in democratic politics was for many applicants a redemptive and manly quality that could easily be accessed when trying to procure a public office in Washington. This was especially true for those hoping to avoid the social stigma of being labeled a beggar. Joseph Pleasant, for example, knew that his character—perhaps his most reliable asset—could be called into question due to his repeated entreats for a government job in Washington in 1849. Pleasant made it clear in his letter that his claim was based firstly on “party service,” to which he devoted a great deal of personal “time” and “money” to the Whig presidential victory in 1848, and would thus “forbear any further detail of [his] poverty and of the unfortunate domestic circumstances which...have kept [him] in the abject position of an *office beggar*.”²⁷ Like Sampler, Pleasant surreptitiously stylized his letter to present himself as a faithful servant to his party, a sacrifice that in part led to his financial ruin. Service and loyalty, Pleasant hoped, would supersede any potential stigma of being labeled an office beggar.

²⁶ N. P. Lasselle, *Annie Grayson; or, Life in Washington* (New York: Bunce & Brother, 1853), 147-149.

²⁷ Joseph B. Pleasant to William Meredith, 24 Aug. 1849, 14 Oct. 1850, p. 345, 9 Oct. 1849, p. 349, Letters Received Relating to Appointments of Clerks, 1844-51, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 211, Vol. 2, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter cited as Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP).

Recompense for political loyalty took up a significant amount of space in the epistles of officeseeking beggars. But these stories were generally presented to offset the popular notion that the officeseeking applicant had failed as a result of a deficient self—that is, of someone quite incapable of achieving manly independence. Accordingly, officeseeking beggars frequently used their epistles to convey not only a brief history of personal failure, but also one of political devotion. This was certainly the approach that R. Chambers took in his 1850 officeseeking letter, in which he carefully outlined an embellished narrative of his unwavering devotion to the “Whig Doctrine and to those Leaders that have represented them.” Moreover, Chambers wrote that he was the “first man” in Caroline County, Maryland, to support the election of John Quincy Adams to the presidency in 1824. But Chambers was never one to approach political campaigning in the form of public speaking. Rather than risk acquiring the “modern title of Demagogue,” Chambers humbly committed himself “to go to men and reason with them, to write political essays and short reviews, and to circulate popular documents”—a strategy that he thought was “more successful than any other.” “In the circulation of Books and papers and conversing with people, I will yield to no man,” wrote Chambers. “I have done as much as any man, but not arrogantly or selfishly.” As a result of his unwavering loyalty and high moral character, Chambers testified that he was “strongly solicited” in 1841 to work on behalf of the Whigs in the election of 1844, to which he complied by investing “more than three years in getting up publishing and circulating Mr. Clay’s speeches, and in distributing public documents and speeches that were furnished [to him].”²⁸ Chambers continued to outline his political actions and any noteworthy connection to respected individuals within the Whig party,

²⁸ R. Chambers to Thomas Corwin, 29 no month 1850, Container 3, Thomas Corwin Papers.

only to stop at midpoint and offer a brief introspection. “I never received 5 Dollars for my time and services,” uttered Chambers. “I should reflect upon myself and think how I arrived at my present pecuniary embarrassment.” He asked, “Now under all these circumstances and facts am I not entitled to some pecuniary indemnity for my services and expenditure, either as a donation from the Whig party as a party collectively or from the present distribution of Patronage—am I not a great sufferer for the party?”²⁹

Uncontested political loyalty, Chambers imagined, distinguished him from the rest of the applicants. Framed by the practices of political devotion, Chambers told to a high-ranking government official a recognizable and honorable story—one, he hoped, that could be exchanged for a public job. Like many other officeseekers, Chambers had to acknowledge a devotion to party service in order to form a reciprocal bond with the addressee. The ability of Chambers to prove allegiance to the Whig Party made it possible to approach a high-ranking government official and beg for a government appointment. As representatives of the political party in charge, it was in the official’s best interest to assert at least a modicum of gratitude and interest in the officeseeking applicant. Indeed, it was this interpersonal and political form of exchange—that is, retribution for political service and loyalty—that formed the foundation of political power and government officeseeking.³⁰ Nonetheless, it was the need for financial compensation—a steady living—that accentuated the epistles of a vast majority of officeseeking beggars. Even Chambers, who presented his claim chiefly on the grounds of party service, admitted that his impetus for seeking office was partly (if not entirely) out of financial need. Partisanship and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 416-420.

involvement in political parties, Chambers hoped, would serve his economic well-being if he should suffer some misfortune. What is for sure, a vast majority of applicants strived to weave these two matters together.³¹

Although the financial circumstances of those who invoked personal failure in their application letters are difficult to determine, it can be assumed that a large proportion of officeseekers and government clerkship holders shared similar social backgrounds. They were not men from the highest rank of society, nor did they build their reputation on the ownership of land; rather, they were part of a developing middle class—men that sought to build their livelihood within the communications revolution, the evolving market economy, or in one of the developing professions, all of which took place in an uncertain and unstable economic world. Figuring most prominently into this list of applicants were indebted merchants and financiers, failed editors and newspaper proprietors, and permanently and temporarily displaced members of the turbulent legal profession. Popular criticism of government officeseeking aside, these men saw in political patronage—and the government indirectly—an opportunity to revive their own economic station in life.³² And so it seemed, failure had become an important cultural institution in the nineteenth century—one that not only shaped forms of personal self-identity, but one that also propelled individuals to seek out material forms of redemption. A public office in Washington was but one venue within the diverse antebellum workplace.

³¹ Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*, 44-46.

³² On the social backgrounds of government officeholders, see Mathew A. Crenson, *The Federal Machine: Beginning of Bureaucracy in Jacksonian America* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 11-17, 31-46; Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 13-39.

II

The majority of officeseekers claimed some degree of economic or social failure. Many declared insolvency and an unremitting inability to properly provide for their families—a social dishonor that violated deeply cherished republic principles. Patronage begging letters thus underscored intense personal experiences. And by packaging these experiences into brief sentimental memoirs, these individuals attempted to invoke a particular social currency, a degree of intimacy that distinguished themselves from the less credulous and redeemable proportion of the begging population.³³ As stated by historian Scott Sandage, “Sentiment was both a genuine feeling and an idiom of middle-class conduct that exalted virtues like sincerity and trustworthiness.”³⁴ Officeseekers begged and wrote of failure in an effort to invoke a sentimental response from the intended recipient, someone whom the sender could commonly claim some personal connection and who held enough political capital to influence such charitable transactions. Moreover, by constructing a narrative of personal failure and sending it to a high-ranking government official or politician, officeseeking applicants hoped also to garner a redeemed sense of manhood. Their efforts were thus gendered as well as political transactions.

Industrial life in antebellum America brought with it material success. But it also left a significant number of men, despite their personal ambitions, in debt and financially ruined.

³³ The proliferation of beggary and its emergence in nineteenth century discourse is explored in Ann Fabian, *The Unvarnished Truth: Personal Narratives in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 9-48. From the perspective of reformers, see Bruce Dorsey, *Reforming Men and Women: Gender in the Antebellum City* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 2002).

³⁴ Sandage, “Gender and the Economics of the Sentimental Market in Nineteenth-Century America,” 107. For influential readings on the masculine, emotional form of sentiment, see Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler, eds., *Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

Some men, accordingly, sought economic retribution through the political parties that failed to uphold beneficial economic policies—or, in other words, their end of the bargain. Maryland's Alexander H. Brown was but one of many Americans facing hard times as a result of the multiple economic depressions that occurred throughout the 1830s and 1840s. So in 1850, at the advice of a politically connected acquaintance from Ohio, Brown applied to Secretary Corwin for office. Brown's father was one of the "pioneers" in the early manufacturing of wools. He started his own business in 1811, only to hand it over to his son (Alexander) in 1829 after suffering a significant financial loss. Faithful that the government would provide a favorable system of tariffs to facilitate growth in domestic manufacturing, Brown embraced Henry Clay's American System. But by 1850, after witnessing the dismal attempt of Whigs to instill a beneficial system of tariffs to improve the national economy, Brown had grown weary of his uncertain place in the manufacturing of cloths. With others "dependent" upon him, Brown, albeit "constrained" and out of "necessity," looked to the government for "some little recompense for the losses" he had endured. No longer could he rely on "the hope that the policy of the government would do some thing to sustain the industry and skill of her country." Brown further confessed to Thomas Corwin: "[W]hile struggling as a good Whig to Sustain the American System I find myself reduced to a condition produced by the instability of our Tariff system."³⁵

A once established manufacturer in the woolen business, Alexander Brown knew quite well the benefits of supporting the Whig party. Brown accordingly wove his political interest into his daily life. Though he was not a "*noisy politician*," he assured Corwin that he was able to

³⁵ Alexander H. Brown to Thomas Corwin, Sept. 1850, p. 58, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP. On the political struggle over tariffs in 1842, see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 588-595.

“exert a strong influence” on elections by employing men who were also sympathetic to the Whig cause. In doing so, he was able to garner the recommendation of influential Whigs who were closely connected to Washington politics. To be sure, Brown was not without his social capital.³⁶ But politics and public issues were undeniably important to Brown, particularly in relation to his business. Perhaps because of this, Brown felt he was entitled to a clerkship in the federal government. In Brown’s view, the government failed to uphold its end of the bargain by preventing him from reaching his full economic potential within the manufacturing business. A clerkship, accordingly, would go a long way in mending his personal loss, as well as fulfill the implied contract that existed between political parties and their constituents.

Other officeseeking applicants, however, demonstrated less interest in public affairs. Although the structure and content of officeseeking letters shared a common form, all were unique in their attempt to disclose a representation of a sympathetic self. Much depended on the circumstances of the applicant as well as his (or hers) relationship to the addressee. Of course, in the cutthroat world of officeseeking, the charitable transaction that took place was more likely to be achieved if the officeseeker effectively presented himself as a sympathetic figure. Henry A. Barron was fully aware of this dynamic. A resident of Virginia, Barron had evidently spent a considerable amount of time lurking about Washington while seeking office in 1850. During this time, it had been rumored to him by a confidant that Secretary Corwin had been leaked information pertaining to Barron’s economic well-being. More specifically, that Barron maintained “considerable property in Virginia” that allowed him to live comfortably. Instead of writing to Thomas Corwin directly, Barron took a different approach to making his claim by writing a letter to an acquaintance who regularly conversed with Corwin. Barron thought, like

³⁶ Ibid.; Washington to Thomas Corwin, 26 Sept. 1850, p. 60, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP.

other officeseekers, it was imperative to give a “true history” of his financial affairs. By doing so, Barron hoped that his acquaintance might “mention” it to Corwin and clarify the issue. Less than a year earlier in 1849, Barron jumped on an opportunity to enter the mercantile business in Brentsville, Virginia. With good credit to his name,” Barron dived into the venture by purchasing “a large stock of goods on credit.” As for the land he owned, Barron had hoped to sell off his real estate before it was time to pay back the credit due. According to Barron, “land in the neighborhood” would be needed in order for the Alexandria & Gordonsville railroad to pass through. In the age of go-ahead, it seemed to Barron that his business venture could not miss. But speculation and ambition would only get him so far. He was unable to sell his land, and “at the end of six months” his business had proved to be a “poor one.” As for his creditors, Barron was forced to make a “deed of trust” that included “all of [his] estate, real and personal.”³⁷

Barron’s life, so it seemed, had culminated into a life of dependency, the antithesis of republican manhood. Having failed in the economic marketplace and living off of credit, Barron was left with few alternatives to avert his potential loss of social status. Boasting the encouragement and support of “nearly every voter” from where he heralded in Virginia, Barron made his way to Washington hoping to secure a government clerkship. Alexander Brown had pleaded to his confidant that he had “no resources” to fall back on, as well as a physical inability to conduct any “laborious work.” Barron, however, assured his confidant that he had been trying to find “light employment” in Washington but each attempt had been met with limited success. Barron additionally pleaded, “I have not had for the last two or three weeks a dollar to purchase the least little comfort for myself or wife.” In debt and unable to resolve his financial dilemma,

³⁷ Henry A. Barron to Thomas Corwin, 23 Dec. 1850, Container 5, Thomas Corwin Papers.

Barron succumbed to the fear of failure. “I don’t know what will become of me,” he cried out. On the other hand, Brown maintained influential political connections and could even boast of “hav[ing] been a strong friend to the Whig party,” especially to the congress of 1844 and 1848, to which he claimed to have spent a “good deal of time and money.” For that reason, it was time for the administration to pay up. “[N]ow that I am poor indeed,” pleaded Barron, “I do think that the administration ought to do something for me.”

Countless other officeseeking applicants shared a similar expression of entitlement to office. William Brewster, for example, saw his money and manhood come and go in just a couple of years. A former resident of Detroit, Michigan, Brewster made a “large fortune” in the mercantile business and as partner and agent of the American Fur Company, only to lose it unexpectedly in 1857. By 1850, Brewster had accumulated over \$20,000 worth of real property. By 1860, however, census records show that that amount of real estate owned had been almost completely depleted. Brewster thus found himself suddenly “dependent on his [own] labor for support,” and consequently sought out government service as a “suitable” last resort, a nonmanual employment that did not necessarily undermine his and his family’s middle-class existence. Unlike countless other officeseeking beggars, Brewster was awarded a clerkship.³⁸

Alongside merchants and mercantilists, white-collar professionals also looked toward the federal government for economic relief and a redeemed sense of manhood. James H. Rainey’s application for a clerkship was accompanied by multiple letters of recommendation from notable friends, attorneys, and distinguished members of Ohio’s Whig Party. While the testimonials

³⁸ Unknown name to Abraham Lincoln, 1 Aug. 1861, file of William Brewster, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP. William Brewster, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*, Detroit, Wayne, Michigan, 140; Maria Brewster, *Eight Census of the United States, 1860*, Lebanon, Warren, Ohio, 219, *Eight Census of the United States, 1860*, Detroit, Wayne, Michigan, 68.

confirmed the influential and relatively privileged connections that Rainey maintained in Ohio, it is also clear that Rainey struggled within the legal profession. Rainey had “not succeeded *Well* at the Bar,” stated one letter-writer. “[L]ike many others who have chose that profession, he has not succeeded satisfactorily in practice, and being one of them who are dependent upon their personal exertions for the man to live, he now asks for a clerkship, the duties of which he is qualified to perform.” Another testimonial noted that Rainey’s inability to continue with his profession was due to his declining state of health. Nevertheless, Rainey, unable to practice law, was “induced...to yield to the solicitation of his friends.” Undeniably, Rainey was able to draw from a large and influential circle of friends to assist him. The high number of endorsing signatures testified to his reputation among a class of professional and political elites, each of whom were sure to note that Rainey’s appointment would be extremely gratifying to themselves as well as the community in Ohio from which Rainey heralded. As told in one of Rainey’s letter writers, “[Rainey] goes [to Washington City] with such emotions of fears & hopes as are incident to persons whose *all* depends upon the kindly office of strangers. We, in this “neck of woods, wish that he may succeed.”³⁹

Although James Rainey struggled in the legal profession, he recognized an opportunity to salvage himself financially and reconcile any manly ambitions he had failed to achieve. For middling men like Rainey, a career as a lawyer was supposed to have provided an entry into a culture of professionalism that was becoming a distinguishing feature of middling sensibilities throughout the nineteenth century. According to historian Burton J. Bledstein, the status of a lawyer or physician provided young ambitious men hoping to succeed with a “symbol of

³⁹ N. Evans to Thomas Corwin, 9 May 1849, p. 361, N. Evans to J. Collamer, 4 May 1849, p. 372, Warfield to Meredith, 14 May 1849, p. 354, James Weir to Thomas Corwin, 8 May 1849, p. 371, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP.

professional authority.” To become a member of an accepted profession meant having enough social capital to be accepted into an elevated and distinguished social class—a class in which economic independence, self-governance, and personal autonomy formed its ideological base. But what happened if a person failed to muster up the discipline, charisma, fortune, and affluence needed to emerge successfully in their profession? As suggested by James Rainey’s experience, the professionalization of American lives in the antebellum period did not come without its uncertainties and anxieties.⁴⁰ Fortunately, Rainey found help through the assistance of influential and powerful friends willing to take a personal interest in his economic security. As emphasized in one letter of support, Rainey worked hard and was an honest man, but for whatever reason found it difficult to succeed satisfactorily in his profession. This, his backers contended, was why he “never asked for any office whatever until now.”⁴¹ Evidently, Rainey was able to muster enough economic and political justification for office; he was awarded a Washington clerkship in 1849 with an annual salary of \$1,150.⁴²

The solicitation of recommendation letters from more reputable and powerful members of the political and immediate community—most commonly friends and acquaintances—constituted a form of begging that was part and partial to the officeseeking process. It was certainly a way to garner social capital. But the men who sought office in order to ward off

⁴⁰ Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism*, 80-105, quote taken from 98. The disarray of the legal profession and its impact on the personnel of government offices is explored in, Crenson, *The Federal Machine*, 33-38.

⁴¹ May 9, 1849, p. 362, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP.

⁴² U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks in the Treasury Department*, Ex. Doc., no. 37, 31st Cong., 2nd sess., March 3, 1851, 7.

financial destitution and provide a safeguard for the economic future of their families, were also forced to tell their life's financial story in private form to those who could garner the most influence in Washington. Importantly this act of soliciting an old friend or acquaintance to write a letter on behalf of someone in financial need was based as much on sentimental obligations as party loyalty. Those who wrote recommendation letters for officeseeking beggars commonly did so as part of a patron-client network that ultimately shaped the political culture of each state.⁴³ Stories of personal failure provided supporters and letter-writers an opportunity to take part in an intimate form of charity, an occasion to help restore the financial future and sense of manhood for someone of high moral standing but no longer able to claim independence. Moreover, the chance to attach one's signature to the application of a failed entrepreneur or professional stood as a distinguished mark of self-identity, an assurance that *he* not only had "made it" but could exhibit enough social capital to aid in the recovery of a failed man. So it would seem, the advantage of being middle class in the nineteenth century rested not so much on one's self-ambition and ability to define oneself autonomously, but the ability to fall back on various degrees of social capital that had been accumulated throughout one's life history.⁴⁴

Officeseekers increased their likelihood of being chosen for office if they could demonstrate significant popular and regional support. This is why A.L. Russell noted in his recommendation letter for Charles Schreiner in 1849 that his patron's "severe misfortunes has

⁴³ An informative and usable example of "patronage-client" networks is illustrated in Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 246.

⁴⁴ On the importance of social circles, see Pamela Walker Lair, *Pull: Networking and Success since Benjamin Franklin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

attracted the observation and received, as they merit, the commendation of this entire community.” This sentiment, of course, only made Schreiner’s claim all that more compelling. At the age of 33, Schreiner pleaded his case to the Treasury Secretary, insisting that a government clerkship in Washington would aid his ailing wife by removing her to a “warmer climate.” Schreiner’s wife had been for many years “grimly afflicted,” perhaps with a severe case of rheumatism. Careful to underscore the transactional dimension to the request, Schreiner went on to note that he would forever “confer” his “lasting obligation” to the person who “enable[d] him to procure *something* that [would] yield a support to a helpless family.”⁴⁵ Evidently, Schreiner’s push for public office worked. In 1851, Schreiner was awarded a clerkship in the third auditor’s office of the Treasury Department, a respectable position that carried with it a salary of \$4 per day or \$1,252 per year. By 1855, Schreiner had increased his yearly salary to \$1,400.⁴⁶ Schreiner and his family, which included a wife and child, left their life in Pennsylvania and began anew in the nation’s capital, where they lived as boarders in one of many Washington boarding houses. By 1860, Schreiner had accumulated roughly \$400 of personal property. Schreiner continued to work as a government clerk in various capacities for the next twenty years, prior to beginning a new career as a real estate agent in Washington.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ A.L. Russell to Sam Calvin, 16 March 1850, p. 393, Charles Schreiner to William M. Meredith, 6 March 1849, p. 397, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP. The *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, Washington, District of Columbia, 14, lists Charles Schreiner’s wife, Mary, as disabled due to rheumatism.

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks in the Treasury Department*, Ex. Doc., no. 44, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., February 4, 1852, 17; U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks-Treasury Department*, Ex. Doc., no. 55, 33rd Cong., 2nd sess., Feb. 6, 1855, 15.

⁴⁷ Charles W. Schreiner, *Seventh Census of the United States, 1850*, Harrisburg East

The desperate image of a helpless family evoked republican fears of dependency and a declining household economy. The head of household carried with it a great deal of social responsibility as well as virtues of manliness. The inability of men to properly care for their families violated deeply cherished republican principles. According to republican ideology, the manly ideal could be realized through the pursuit of economic independence and service to his family. To properly provide for the household economy was a primary prerogative of all fathers in the early republic. A government clerkship could provide a mends to a potentially destructive element of civil society. But at what point and under what circumstances would it be deemed necessary for political parties to provide a basic economic security for its patrons, even if it violated the precepts of rotation in office? By confessing his inability to properly provide for his wife and family, Schreiner hoped, along with others like him, to summon a moral economy of exchange, a sentimental response—one that would aid him in procuring a clerkship. Importantly, he also underscored the transactional—quid pro quo—dimensions attached to the gift of office. As clarified by Schreiner, he would be forever obligated to support the person (or party) that provided the economic security to care for his helpless family. For Schreiner, a government clerkship provided an ample opportunity to fulfill the moral responsibility of being the head of household—a redemption in manhood—conferred by not just another influential and powerful man but the political party in charge.⁴⁸

Ward, Dauphin, Pennsylvania, 48; *Eight Census of the United States, 1860*, Washington Ward 2, Washington, District of Columbia, 106; *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870*, Washington Ward 3, Washington, District of Columbia, 308; 1880, *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880*, Washington, District of Columbia, 14.

⁴⁸ Sandage, *Born Losers*, 226-247. For a definition of “transactional manhood,” see idem, “Gender and the Economics of the Sentimental Market in Nineteenth-Century America,” 108-110.

Of course, of the hundreds if not thousands of applications received, it was difficult to decipher which applicant was more entitled to office. Accordingly so, officeseekers attempted to demonstrate what they believed—or at least hoped—to be a clear entitlement to office. A discussion with “friend Democrats” working in the General Land Office persuaded Richard L. Clarke to invoke his skin color when soliciting a government job in 1845. Clarke put forward to the Treasury Secretary, Robert J. Walker, a proposition to remove a “colored man” from the position of messenger in the General Land Office, whose “salary of thirty dollars” per month Clarke “would gladly take.” As justified by Clarke, “I have to maintain my father’s family and my widowed sister’s orphans look up to me for support.” A white male citizen, Clarke believed he was entitled to the distribution of government office.⁴⁹

Beale C. Compton also invoked a feeling of entitlement to government office, although on different grounds, when he applied in 1855. Compton had been employed as a merchant’s clerk in New York prior to receiving word that his stepfather, a clerk in the Treasury Department, had passed. Compton, who according to his employer, writes “a good business hand, copies with care & attention ...& profess[es] a knowledge of Book Keeping,” found in his stepfather’s passing an obligatory opportunity to leave his current position and fill the vacant position left by his stepfather. Compton rationalized his intentions to seek office by stressing his “desire to aid & support” the “large family” that his stepfather left behind.⁵⁰ When Thomas B. Addison implored the “hand” of the president for a clerkship in 1838 he did so by professing that he had a widowed mother and several sisters “almost exclusively dependent on [his] exertions

⁴⁹ Richard L. Clarke to Robert J. Walker, 12 June 1845, file of Richard L. Clarke, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

⁵⁰ Beale C. Compton to Peter Washington, 15 March 1855, J. Pyrre to Peter Washington, 23 Feb. 1855, file of Beale C. Compton, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

for their support.” A government office was needed to effectively attend to “their necessities.” Importantly, Addison considered his “case as one of peculiar nature.” Addison’s mother, he revealed, was from a family “who pledged their lives, their fortunes, and...honor for the maintenance of our National Independence.”⁵¹ Such letters did little to acknowledge public issues, devotion to party principles, or the applicant’s place within the political party in charge; rather, economic security, social circumstance, and familial history, among other claims, justified entitlement to office.⁵²

Officeseekers emphatically placed emphasis on the self and family as a distinct social unit worthy of government support. But the willingness to solicit a government clerkship as a means to support a helpless family was not merely circumstantial; rather, it reflected a decline of patriarchal authority within the middle-class household that had been underway since the first two decades of the nineteenth-century.⁵³ Once the hallmark of early republican political economy, individual and household independence had become for farmers, merchants, artisans, and professionals increasingly difficult to obtain. “The clerk’s wage,” as suggested by historian Michael Zakim, “could thus be said to have replaced both the products of the soil and the social

⁵¹ Thomas B. Addison to Martin Van Buren, 15 May 1838, file of Thomas G. Addison, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

⁵² On the development of entitlement rights in the early republic as a precursor to the welfare state, see Laura Jensen, *Patriots, Settlers, and the Origins of American Social Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁵³ For the decline of patriarchal authority, see Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class*, 18-65; Shawn Johansen, *Family Men: Middle-Class Fatherhood in Early Industrializing America* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 96-125.

order that rested on the patriarchal household.”⁵⁴ Take, for example, James Wilson of Steubenville, Ohio. By 1850, Wilson’s “means of living” as a newspaper editor was no longer as fruitful as it once was. Wilson accordingly found it increasingly difficult to provide the financial support needed to care for his children. Personally connected to Secretary Corwin—indeed, they could speak of “old times” together—Wilson thought it opportune to procure for his son a government clerkship after Corwin was elevated to the secretaryship. His son, Robert, who had worked alongside his father in editing *The Steubenville Herald*, was currently “out of business.” “Unless you can do some thing for him,” portended Wilson to Treasury Secretary Corwin, Robert would have to “recast” himself “to working as a journeyman at his trade”—a fate that potentially carried with it a decline in social status. Wilson thus yielded to the side of caution. Perhaps more forthright than other applicants, Wilson clearly saw in a government clerkship a less risky opportunity to secure his family’s middle-class existence. Had he been able to provide for his son the necessary “pecuniary aid,” Wilson assured Corwin, he would have refrained from pushing his son’s application forward.⁵⁵

Alex Delorac’s sentimental story of personal “ups and downs” was accentuated by his inability to properly provide not only for himself but also for his wife. Delorac “had been looking for a favor from [the] government” for nearly ten years. “I [now] beg and hope that something will be done for me,” he wrote to Secretary Corwin in 1850. As early as 1841, when

⁵⁴ Zakim, “The Business Clerk as Social Revolutionary,” 572. On the decline of artisanal independence, see Gary J. Kornblith, “Becoming Joseph T. Buckingham: The Struggle for Artisanal Independence in Early-Nineteenth Century Boston,” in *American Artisans: Crafting Social Identity, 1750-1850*, eds. Howard B. Rock, Paul A. Gilje, and Robert Asher (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 123-134.

⁵⁵ James Wilson to Thomas Corwin, 25 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

the last Whig administration was in power, Delorac had reportedly sent a “bundle of documents” to Washington supporting his application for office.⁵⁶ Like so many other officeseekers, Delorac was keen to the capricious nature of patronage practices, and evidently kept a scrupulous eye on the process of removals in Washington that followed each administration. Delorac’s epistle revealed that he had maintained an association with Corwin and ranking members of the Whig Party for a number of years, although the exact form of the relationship is uncertain.

Despite repeated attempts to solicit office, Delorac was denied a place in one of the federal departments in Washington. Secretary Corwin dismissed Delorac’s application on the grounds that there were “no vacancies” in the Treasury Department. Delorac responded to Corwin’s rejection by reminding him of his “power to remove,” and specifically called attention to a Locofoco currently working under Corwin’s supervision. According to Delorac, the Locofoco had “held office for years,” long enough to provide a decent financial support for himself. Delorac had become increasingly frustrated over the application process. So much so, Delorac rationalized, if not demanded, that Corwin should allow “others to have a chance to hold on to and sit [in office] for a few years,” or at least long enough to garner some of the necessities to help support himself and his wife. Acknowledging that he was just one of “thousands applying for office,” Delorac respectfully suggested to Corwin that he write in “large letters” his name and hang it on the wall. That way his name would always appear before him whenever he was looking over the list of applicants. Whereas the majority of officeseekers were reluctant to accept anything less than a first-class clerkship, Delorac was willing to accept the lowly salary of

⁵⁶ Alex Delorac to Thomas Corwin, 30 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

a doorkeeper or messenger.⁵⁷

Alongside officeseekers claiming government support for a helpless family, were young men hoping to use a patronage job to elevate their professional authority and gain a foothold in society. After immigrating to Ohio in 1840, George Johnson was “compelled by financial consideration to abandon his [legal] studies, and ask for some situation” as a clerk in Washington. He hoped to “lay up a sufficient sum to meet the future expenses of his legal course.” As indicated by the numerous recommendations and signatures of support from notable men, Johnson evidently maintained an esteemed network of friends. As proclaimed by numerous members of Maryland’s Senate and House of Delegates, the “helping hand” of a government job would help “place in a proper position” a “struggling genius...who is destined to exert no small influence upon society.” Despite his personal qualities and privileged social position, Johnson found little opportunities for success in his chosen profession. He explained to Treasury Secretary, Thomas Ewing, that there were too “many old, and established practitioners” of law in Annapolis for him to gain any “success” in the profession, and thus needed to be “engaged in more active employment.” Although a “worthy young man,” W.B. Smith also faced financial “adversity” in his path to become a lawyer. Without a financial boost, he feared that he would be unable to complete his legal studies and “rise to that position in society, which would command respect.”⁵⁸

Although not outwardly expressed, the letters and requests of officeseekers invoked

⁵⁷ Ibid., 17 Aug. 1850.

⁵⁸ Members of the Senate and House of Delegates of Maryland to Reverdy Johnson, 18 June 1841, George Johnson to Thomas Ewing, 25 June 1841, file of George Johnson, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP; James to Meredith, 28 June 1849, p. 422, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP.

contract theory and values of moral free agency, both of which comprised the core of nineteenth-century law, economy, and society.⁵⁹ In many respects, officeseekers and their supporters used epistles to propose implied contracts. The bestowing of government office was accordingly part of a medium of exchange. As free white male citizens, officeseekers attempted to make deals to not only advance themselves but also to secure their families' economic security. Politicians and government officials offered appointments not just out of patronage precepts—the filling of quotas—but also to uphold their end of the social, as well as political, contract. By giving an active partisan a government job, it was easy for political parties to at least perceptibly uphold their end of the bargain. But time and again, officeseekers invoked more than partisan loyalty by couching their appeal around economic need, honest failure, and personal obligations. As suggested by one recommender, the unfortunate fall of a man who had properly engaged the business world and made a name for himself, should render “some sympathy” for a government clerkship. New York mercantilist, Chester Deming, was such a man. Deming suffered a severe misfortune by losing his right arm, and was thus “compelled to relinquish his mercantile pursuits.” Deming was not without his social capital. His application, of course, drew attention to his “large circle” of friends—including New York governors William H. Seward and William Boucke—as well as the “citizens at large” who were aware of his “misfortune” and “peculiar circumstances,” but, more importantly, would appreciate his appointment. To further bolster his

⁵⁹ See Lawrence Friedman, *Contract Law in America: A Social and Economic Case Study* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965); Anthony T. Kronman, “Paternalism and the Law of Contract,” *Yale Law Journal*, 92 (1983), 763-98; C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962); Amy Dru Stanly, “Home Life and the Morality of the Market,” in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political, and Religious Expressions, 1800-1880*, ed. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 74-96; *ibid*, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Christopher Tomlins, *Law, Labor and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

claim for office, Deming evidently kept track of the representation of men in office from specific states and reminded Treasury Secretary Meredith that New York had “comparatively but a very small proportion of clerks in the [Washington] Departments,” and therefore his case was entitled to at least a “little consideration.”⁶⁰

According to republican ideology, every man had the right to achieve independence so as long as they chose the right course of action. The manly ideal could thus be realized through the pursuit of economic independence and service to family. It was, of course, assumed that men chose their situations freely; the inability to achieve independence thus indicated a failure on behalf of men to uphold their end of the contract. Such a course of action was antithetical to the self-made man, someone who freely entered social and economic contracts, did not fall into debt, and secured his family’s socio-economic position along the way. He was the nineteenth-century free agent personified, the hallmark of success. But what about the officeseeking applicants who claimed themselves “helpless,” “useless,” and victims of “adversity?” A man who failed to properly maintain the household economy and provide for his family violated social and liberal economic contracts.⁶¹ Accordingly, officeseeking applicants hoped to avoid the attachment of dishonor or shame to their name by claiming honest failure. Their condition and economic need, they insisted, were due to circumstances beyond their control, despite how hard they labored. Despite confessions of honest failure, officeseekers were free agents who sought patronage-

⁶⁰ Henry Bennett to Meredith, 12 March 1849, p. 142, Henry Bennett to Millard Fillmore and William H. Seward, 12 March 1849, p. 140, Chester Deming to Meredith, 17 March 1849, p. 137, William Boucke to Zachary Taylor, 25 Jan. 1849, p. 141, Seward to Meredith, 14 Jan. 1850, p. 148, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP. On male applicants with physical disabilities after 1860, see Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 103.

⁶¹ Sandage, *Born Losers*, 44-69.

government-office contracts in order to improve their economic situations.

Of course, men with a physical inability to perform manual labor were limited in their ability to enter economic contracts freely, so they too looked toward patronage-government jobs for support. Physically impotent, crippled, and disabled officeseekers attempted to utilize whatever sentimental capital they could call upon to improve their chances of receiving a government clerkship. Commonly, these applicants needed to demonstrate at least some degree of capability. It was duly noted in one of Chester Deming's letters of support that Deming, despite losing one arm, had "succeeded in learning to write quite well with his left hand" as a result of "close application."⁶² William H. Gill occupied the position of Postmaster in Bloomfield, Virginia, but thought a clerkship in one of the departments in Washington might be more suitable. Although "still able to discharge the duties of office," Gill had "become a cripple for life" and "consequently, unable to procure a living by manual labor." For this reason, one recommender suggested that a government job "would be just."⁶³

The recognition of physically disabled men as suitable placements for government office escalated through and after the Civil War. Just as it did for those who claimed economic insolvency years earlier, the implied contract of government office for those harmfully impacted by the war helped secure in the applicant's mind a new ideal of independence. Like many other Civil War veterans, William H. Bailey made an application for a clerkship in Washington in 1865 as a disabled soldier. A member of New York's 23rd regiment, Bailey was wounded and

⁶² William Boucke, 25 Jan. 1849, p. 141, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP.

⁶³ William H. Gill to Robert Walker, 10 July 1845, file of William H. Gill, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

captured in the 2nd Battle of Bull Run on September 20th, 1860. Physically unable to perform his duties, he was discharged from the service two years later. Bailey stated his reasons for seeking office more directly than other men, listing them in numerical form. In the first, he explained: “I am a disabled soldier with a broken leg, a large, helpless family depending upon my labor for their support, and in my present helpless condition, I find it impossible to render them that support, except I can do so by the use of the pen.” Evidently, Bailey’s disability would surmount his second “claim to the sympathy of the Government:” party loyalty. He reminded the Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, that he had always been a “firm and ardent supporter of the Government,” someone who had twice “been thrown out of employment...on account of [his] anti-slavery sentiments.” But Bailey was now 48 years of age, and although “by profession a teacher, holding numerous certificates of *First Grade* qualification and...a quick legible rapid writer,” Bailey’s chief form of currency came in the form of sentimental capital derived from his status as a disabled soldier.⁶⁴

Alongside disabled soldiers, those who suffered economic loss during the Civil War also sought recompense through patronage government jobs. Indeed, many argued they were entitled to such forms of public employment. In 1863, Joseph B. Clarke offered his “excuse for being an applicant for public employment.” Clarke was not motivated by partisan loyalty nor did he share a common concern for public policy; rather, Clarke’s “excuse” was found in the “adverse results” the war placed on his “professional business and domestic relations.” At the beginning of the Civil War, Clarke’s legal firm in Dowagiac, Michigan, provided “ample employment” for himself and his partner. But two years later, profits had significantly reduced in size, while

⁶⁴ William H. Bailey to Edwin M. Stanton, 3 March 1865, file of William H. Bailey, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

expenses “largely increased.” So it seemed the weight of the war on Michigan’s local economy was enough to entice Clarke to apply for government employment. Clarke had additional sentimental aces to bolster his claim. At the beginning of the war, Clark claimed to have encouraged his nephew to volunteer to fight in the war, although his mother and siblings were “dependent upon him.” Unfortunately, his nephew was wounded and “discharged permanently disabled,” leaving his family partly dependent on Clarke for financial support. The “demands” placed upon Clarke’s “resources” were further increased due to the death of his son who was killed heroically while “leading his company in the desperate charge” at the Battle of Port Hudson, Louisiana.⁶⁵

Not only had the war wreaked havoc on Joseph B. Clarke’s ability to pursue economic contracts freely, thus limiting his ability to provide for his family and pay his debts, he was also placed in the arduous position of securing the future and well-being of those newly dependent on him for support. Hoping to “avert pecuniary ruin,” Clarke made his claim for government office clear: “my pecuniary circumstances are such as to make it absolutely necessary that I save a certain income.”⁶⁶ Although Clarke was not impoverished by any means, he knew that a middle-class existence was dependent on a regular income. Clarke’s brief testimony and justification for office evidently seemed appropriate. In 1864, he was awarded a clerkship in the Interior Department, which included a salary of \$1,200.⁶⁷ Although Clarke did not remain a

⁶⁵ Joseph B. Clarke to Samuel P. Chase, 18 June 1863, file of Joseph B. Clarke, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks and other Persons Employed in the Interior Department During the Year 1864*, Ex. Doc., no. 65, 38th Cong., 2nd sess., Feb. 13,

government clerk for long, his one-year appointment surely helped secure his family's economic well-being.⁶⁸

III

In 1857, the *Saturday Evening Post* offered a suggestive sketch of officeseeking life in Washington by drawing attention to the place females occupied in the officeseeking process. "This business of officeseeking in Washington," enumerated the author, "is not exclusively confined to our [male] sex." In fact, many women made their way to Washington out of "motherly interest." The "old woman" centrally depicted in the article had, according to the author, "come from an excellent old family in Boston." Unfortunately, she was now unwillingly "sharing the mutations of our plebian republic" and watching her family's economic status decline "while excellent new families [were] creeping up." The author explained that this particular female officeseeker had "long been a widow" who found it entirely unproblematic to take a trip to Washington in order to secure a clerkship for one of her several sons after hearing of a vacancy in one of the federal departments.⁶⁹

From the federal government's early beginnings, women played an active role in influencing patronage practices, using government office to both elevate their family's social

1865, 10.

⁶⁸ It is difficult to determine the impact the Civil War had on Joseph B. Clarke's finances. The 1850 census indicates that Clarke, at the age of 51, employed a domestic servant, owned \$3,500 worth of real estate, and \$2,000 worth of personal property. The numbers change little in the 1870 census, which states that Clarke employed a domestic servant, owned \$3,000 worth of real estate, and \$3,000 worth of personal property. See Joseph B. Clarke, *1860 United States Federal Census*, Dowagiac, Cass, Michigan, 16; idem, *1870 United States Federal Census*, Dowagiac, Cass, Michigan, 34.

⁶⁹ "Office-Hunting," *Saturday Evening Post*, April 4, 1857.

status and lend a helping hand to a close, personal acquaintance. After the national capital moved to Washington from Philadelphia in 1800, elite women influenced patronage decision-making by partly controlling access to the political networks that took shape within the city's unofficial spaces. As explained by historian Catherine Allgor, patronage appointments were secured by elite women to further their family's personal and social interests. In doing so, early republican Washington women helped establish a principal link between government jobs and their charitable usefulness. Elite Washington women often worked effortlessly to secure government jobs for fathers and sons from families with personal connections to Washington's official society and who needed some type of financial, social, or professional support. A clerkship for a friend or relative was commonly achieved through a "language of benevolence and sentimental emotion"—"the language of heart"—rather than a steadfast commitment to partisan principles. This commitment of extending patronage privileges to care for a family in need would carry through the nineteenth century, and women would continue to play an active role in shaping the boundaries of patronage appointments.⁷⁰

While the political avenues that allowed elite Washington women to negotiate patronage favors grew less pervasive after Jackson's arrival on the Washington scene, it did not stop women from attempting to solicit patronage favors for a husband, son, or relative. Whereas women in the early republic negotiated patronage appointments in the city's unofficial and private spaces, antebellum women attempted to do so through patronage-client networks and in a

⁷⁰ Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which The Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 128-144, quotes on pp. 138, 141. On the significance of benevolent and charitable associations in shaping female political activism in the nineteenth century, see Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

more direct, public fashion. Similar to men, women from across the nation attempted to appeal to the president or high-ranking government official by employing a sentimental language of a helpless mother. Hoping to gain some form of financial support, a significant majority of women who wrote letters to and visited government officials and high-ranking politicians asked for a government office for a husband or son, all the while employing a language of benevolence and charitable assistance not entirely dissimilar to that used by elite Washington women a few decades earlier. In seeking government assistance for what was deemed a private, domestic matter, women throughout the antebellum era essentially opened their home to the government, blurring the lines between private and public, home and government.⁷¹

Women residing near or within the District of Columbia held a distinct advantage in soliciting government jobs. A holdover from early republican practices of soliciting patronage, these women normally appealed for government jobs by soliciting a friend or relative who maintained a close proximity to political power. In these cases, familial connections proved highly advantageous. Andrew Jackson, for example, wrote to Treasury Secretary Samuel D. Ingham in 1829, describing an attempt made by a Mrs. McPherson to solicit an office for her brother, Robert T. Washington. McPherson, a sister-in-law of a recently deceased clerk, approached Jackson one evening “with a tale of woe and distress,” and as a result “aroused” in Jackson a great deal of “sympathy.” McPherson explained to Jackson that her brother-in-law’s death had left her the responsibility of caring for “two small orphan children without any means of support.” McPherson thus pleaded to Jackson that the “vacated office” left by the death of

⁷¹ For an extensive discussion of begging letters that were written by women from all parts of the nation during the antebellum period, see Richard C. Rohrs, “‘Public Attention for... Essentially Private Matters’: Women Seeking Assistance from President James K. Polk,” *Journal of Early Republic* 24, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 107-123; Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 103-105.

Mr. Lewis be filled by her brother, who would then “take and raise the children.” Evidently Mrs. McPherson had invoked in Jackson a deep sentimental response, at least enough for him to warrant writing a private letter on her behalf to Secretary Ingham.

Despite Jackson’s deeply sympathetic response to Mrs. McPherson, her proposal presented a bit of a conundrum for Jackson and his intentions of reforming what he viewed was an entrenched and corrupt federal bureaucracy. He cautiously explained to Ingham regarding the appointment of Washington: “Judge Anderson speaks well of the young man, but it appears that his father and brother are both in office here and there is difficulty in the way as our rule is not to permit any family to monopolize office.” Nevertheless, Jackson asserted, “charity speaks aloud in favour of these little orphans,” and that he would side with Ingham “on any arrangement for their support.” If a clerkship or some other “provision” could not be made, Jackson insisted that he would charily “supply them [the orphans]” with “their wants.”⁷²

But this was not the only incident when Jackson was forced to contemplate the limits of governmental authority. In 1834, Jackson wrote a personal letter to Amos Kendall, addressing, like so many of his personal letters, a potential patronage appointment. Jackson had been approached on multiple occasions by an elderly woman who hoped to have her son, a clerk in General Post Office and who was in “ill-health,” replaced by her “equally competent” other son. A former friend of Jackson’s deceased wife, the “old lady” explained to Jackson that the “aid from her son” would “enable her to take care of her family and particularly an unfortunate daughter, who [was] unable from ill-health to render her any aid.” While Jackson resolved that it was not in his place to appoint a clerk that would run “contrary to [Kendall’s] wishes” and

⁷² Andrew Jackson to Samuel D. Ingham, 24 Sept. 1829, John Spencer Bassett, ed., *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1929), 4:77.

“views of propriety,” he assured Kendall that the appointment would be deeply “gratifying” on a personal level.⁷³ Time and again, Jackson and subsequent presidents would be challenged by officeseeking beggars to balance patronage appointments that would be made along partisan lines with those that would satisfy a sympathetic individual or familial need for government assistance.⁷⁴

The numbers of women seeking office for family members escalated throughout the antebellum period. During his 1844 stay in Washington City, Caleb Atwater described an unsettling personal situation that occurred upon his visit to the White House one early morning. Well aware of the difficulty of arranging a time to meet with the President, Atwater arrived “first on the spot by half an hour.” As a result of his prompt arrival, he was graciously given “the key of the door that led to the President’s room, upstairs.” But as Atwater slowly began to open the door, in shoved ahead of him, wrote Atwater, “an ugly old lady woman” crying “out aloud, ‘W.....ought to be clerk, W.....ought to be clerk’.” The woman continued “proclaiming, at the top of her voice, until she reached the president’s room, where seating herself without leave or license, she continues her clamor for some minutes.” Atwater, also present in the room, carefully recorded the conversation. The nameless woman explained to the President that she had lived in Washington for nearly a year and had yet to request an office. She had kept a boardinghouse during this time, but her undertaking had yet to yield a profit. She thus “modestly insisted” that her situation warrant a clerkship for her husband in one of the departments.

⁷³ Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall, 25 Oct. 1834, Ibid., 5:302-333. E. F. Ellet, *The Court Circles of the Republic; Or, the Beauties and Celebrities of the Nation; Illustrating Life and Society Under Eighteen Presidents* (Hartford, CT: Hartford publishing co, 1869), 373-374.

⁷⁴ For these interpretations, see Jeffrey Pasley, “Minnows, Spies, and Aristocrats: The Social Crisis of Congress in the Age of Martin Van Buren,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 27 (Winter 2007): 599-653; Rohrs, “‘Public Attention for...Essentially Private Matters’.”

Astonished by the occurrence, Atwater thereafter learned that women from the surrounding region “constantly” came to the White House “soliciting offices for their sons, husband and other relatives.” But women officeseekers, Atwater derisively declared, only represented a portion of the thousands of “humbugs” who traveled to Washington “asking for national aid and support.”⁷⁵

Women desirous of obtaining a government clerkship for their husbands understood the process and importance of forging beneficial public relations. Georgetown resident Margaret Getty attempted to obtain a clerkship for her husband, Charles Getty, by appealing directly to President Tyler. Margaret explained to Tyler that her husband had left his business in Cumberland, MA, and moved to Georgetown in order to support his “widowed mother and little brothers.” His father, Robert Getty, had occupied a clerkship in the 4th auditor’s office, and Charles thought he too might occupy the same position but “failed after making every exertion possible.” Sympathetic to Margaret’s appeal, Tyler directed her to the office of Treasury Secretary, John C. Spencer, with a brief note—underscored by Tyler’s signature—stating that Charles’s case was “entitled to a favorable consideration.” Sister Mary Cecilia Brook of the Georgetown Monastery was also asked by her sister to solicit a clerkship for Charles, who was “at present without employment” and had a “helpless family depending on him for support.” Although Brook had been reluctant at first to accept the request due to “a natural timidity in such matters,” she eventually agreed out of “sisterly affection.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Caleb Atwater, a Citizen of Ohio, *Mysteries of Washington City: During Several Months of the Session of the 28th Congress* (Washington, D.C.: G.A. Sage, 1844), 224-226, 208.

⁷⁶ Margaret Getty to John C. Spencer, 13 Oct. 1843, file of Charles Getty, Mary Cecilia Brook to Levy Woodbury, 12 March 1838, file of Laub, Applications and Recommendations,

The frequency of females pressing high-ranking government officials in public spaces for a patronage job proved troublesome. The idea that women could lay bear a particular “female influence” in soliciting government jobs only tarnished the popular image of officeseekers and public office more generally. The notion that men were tactically employing their wives to solicit office for them was in particular a central object of scorn. In 1853, *The Cleveland Herald* remarked that officeseeking applications had begun to “assume the ludicrous as well as the serious.” “When the diplomacy of husbands fail, they enlist that of their wives, and women’s bright eyes and peculiar tact often penetrate where the most skillful artifices of men are at fault,” the newspaper reported. A few years prior, President Polk recorded in his journal that it had “become quite common for men to send their wives to importune” him for offices.⁷⁷

Whether or not men actively convinced their wives to solicit a government office on their behalf is difficult to determine; female officeseekers, nevertheless, garnered the attention of government officials in ways that men could not. James McCabe’s derisive expose on Washington society confided to readers that cabinet members were not immune to the gentle persuasion of female officeseekers. “A would-be-appointee who can retain a sensible and beautiful woman in his personal interest is reasonably certain of persuading or coercing a considerable slice of the public patronage,” wrote McCabe. This was not to suggest that a great majority of the president’s cabinet members were corrupt, reminded McCabe; rather, they were victim to a “double deception.” Cabinet members who were solicited by female officeseekers

210, NACP.

⁷⁷ *The Cleveland Herald*, March 14, 1853; Milton Milo Quaife, ed., *The Diary of James K. Polk during his Presidency, 1845-1849* (Chicago: A. C. McClure & Co., 1910), 3: 136. On the blurring of gendered roles, see Aron, *Ladies and Gentleman of the Civil Service*, 103-104, and Rohrs, ““Public Attention for...Essentially Private Matters’,” 116-117.

were expected to not only “palm” themselves off as interested and concerned servants, they were also supposed to uphold the “spurious claims” of the president and political party in charge. In the end, McCabe proclaimed if an “elegantly inhabited” woman kept “up appearances at the department, the chance is ten to one that she will get her nominee sent in.”⁷⁸

But this was the mark of a “professional woman office-hunter”—that is, a woman capable of cultivating and simulating a “sympathetic, cultivated, energized honorable womanhood” in order to broker a government office for her husband. In McCabe’s depiction, professional female officeseekers were deceitful, if not tricksters. “If there is a weak carnal spot in a secretary’s constitution, he will soon betray it, and gradually, but not precipitately, will she recognize and act upon it.” Professional female officeseekers were relentless and willing to go to any lengths to solicit an appointment, even if it included attempts at seducing an additional secretary or senator “by most questionable means.” The professional officeseeking woman accosted influential men in all places, from the Senate parlor to the city’s fashionable hotels—actions, according to McCabe, that were all part of a “politico-socio” strategy akin to Washington politics.⁷⁹ McCabe also made clear that there was also another class of less enhanced female officeseekers who infiltrated Washington’s public spaces, that of a hapless or widowed mother. Here too McCabe was quick to direct sardonic praise. A child accompanying a widowed female officeseeker, especially after the Civil War, provided “an interesting object.” For McCabe, “the very existence of the youngest is demonstrative of paternity, and proof presumptive of matrimonial maternity and subsequent widowhood, inasmuch as the responsible

⁷⁸ James Dabney McCabe, *Behind the Scenes in Washington* (New York: Continental Publishing Company, 1873), 234-236.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 236-240.

man never appears.” Letters of introduction, asserted McCabe, only went so far. A fatherless child, however, demanded a sympathetic response of government officials. But the image of honest poverty, according to McCabe, was also contrived, a slice of the “greater art” of garnering political influence.⁸⁰

Using female officeseekers as a point of derision, McCabe called attention to a larger problem within the officeseeking process. In a world of strangers connected primarily through patronage-client networks and officeseeking letters in particular, it was difficult to decipher sincerity from hypocrisy. McCabe’s representation thus provided less truth as it did a commentary on what historian Karen Halttunen has called “the problem of hypocrisy” that plagued “middle-class norms of social conduct” in urban antebellum America. Rather than simulation, McCabe desired sincerity, transparency, and even honesty in the officeseeking process.⁸¹ Here again, just as it was for men, sentimental tropes of honest failure and poverty came into play for female officeseekers. Whether out of a tactical necessity or duty to aid a family member, women actively pressed for a government clerkship by utilizing a sentimental language of familial service in order to ward off any potential loss of class status.

By seeking office for their husbands, women also sought to redeem for them a lost sense of manhood by securing an economic contract or transition that they otherwise failed to achieve. In doing so, women made an effort to convey the message that their husbands did not intercede in their attempt to solicit office. Marion Williamson, for example, wrote at the top of her

⁸⁰ Ibid., 241, 246.

⁸¹ Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 33-55, quote on p. 50.

officeseeking epistle, “private,” alerting to the reader that the letter should be read in confidentiality, without her husband’s knowing. According to the doctrine of self-made manhood, a successful man triumphed without the aid of women. By asking for discretion, Mrs. Williamson hoped to protect her husband’s manhood and reputation. It was thus common for women to at least present the appearance they were writing and seeking office in confidentiality, outside of their husband’s influence and awareness.⁸²

To be sure, women could say things that honor forbid a man to confess. Robert W. Middleton, editor and proprietor of Lancaster, Pennsylvania’s *Union and Tribune*, was by 1849 left unemployed and with a large family dependent on him for support. His “only reliance for employment” came by way of Zachary Taylor’s administration. Middleton thus sent along to Washington a bundle of recommendation letters supporting his application for a clerkship. Included among them was a letter written by his wife with the inscription “In Confidence” marked on top. Mrs. Middleton wrote to Treasury Secretary Meredith directly, hoping that she could improve his chances by clarifying their family’s circumstance more “minutely.” Mrs. Middleton spared few details regarding her husband and family’s past successes and current failures.

Underlying her sentimental narrative was the unnerving account of a failed family. With a wife and nine children to support, Middleton was reduced to sending two of his daughters to work daily in the city’s cotton mill. “[N]ever accustomed to such labour & confinement of 13

⁸² F. Marion Williamson to Corwin, 4 Dec. 1850, Container 4, Thomas Corwin Papers; Rohrs, “‘Public Attention for... Essentially Private Matters’,” 116. Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 178-185; James V. Catano, *Ragged Dick: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001). For a discussion on the relationship between women’s household labor in relation to wage labor for men, see Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

hours per day,” the eldest daughter was reduced to such an impaired state of health that “consumption” had been “preying upon her.” To Mrs. Middleton, these were dark, unimaginable times. In order to avoid adding to her husband’s apparent shame, Mrs. Middleton admitted discreetly that her husband “often sheds Tears of Sorrow” when he contemplates his family’s current economic circumstance. But Mrs. Middleton intended more than to secure her husband’s manhood and restore his rightful place as the household patriarch. Mrs. Middleton also feared a loss of class status. Though their two daughters had been “tenderly raised & educated,” she worried that their current jobs in the cotton mill might “shut [them] out from the society where they might shine,” Mrs. Middleton pleaded. If their father “could obtain anything to make a living for us they should quit.” In closing, Mrs. Middleton went on to address any insincerity that might be taken from the letter. Although a “long letter from a female and a stranger,” she insisted that she had no other concern other than “the welfare” of her family. In a final attempt to not undermine her husband’s manhood, Mrs. Middleton noted that she would gladly carry out any additional correspondence in private, thereby keeping the appearance of an ordinary patronage-client transaction.⁸³

While both men and women claimed to seek office out of family duty and economic desolation, the tone and content of female officeseeing letters tended to differ. The letters of male officeseekers retold in narrative form their failed accomplishments in the economic marketplace and its consequential influence on their sense of manhood and ability to wield household authority. But they were also quick to underscore their participation and personal connections within the political public sphere—that is, their loyalty to and influence within a

⁸³ Thaddeus Stevens to Meredith, 30 July 1849, p. 304, Mrs. A. E. Middleton to Meredith, 16 March 1849, p. 307, Applications and Recommendations, 211, NACP.

particular political party. While this effectively demonstrated an entitlement to patronage, it also existed as a last bastion of manhood for someone who had been reduced to a near state of beggary. Indeed, many men hoped they would be judged less by their financial embarrassments and more so on their past political accomplishments and devotions. The two rhetorical strategies worked alongside one another in garnering the sympathy of an appointing official. Rather than pursue the manly right to negotiate a patronage position on account of party devotion or through representation of social capital, women were more apt to plead and beg on account of their economically vulnerable family.⁸⁴

Importuning government officials for office was one way for women to assert some measure of control over the economic failures of men. One female who went by the initials L.L.W solicited office for her husband, Ward, who she set apart as slightly incompetent. She recognized that her “hope for the future” was “feeble,” especially if she was to entrust her husband in providing “bread and a roof for the ensuing year.” Evidently, she had pressed for office the previous year. During that time, her husband had “failed to raise a dollar,” the end result of his unwillingness to heed the advice she had given him. She pleaded to Secretary Thomas Corwin: “Ward says he has written you—but I was not satisfied; he is too proud to tell you how reduced we are; many little valuables I have parted with, and have many left—but I hate to let them pass into other hands....I apply to *you* now in my hour of darkest need.”⁸⁵

When their husbands were not around or found work elsewhere, middle-class women, especially those within the District of Columbia, solicited government jobs for their sons in order

⁸⁴ Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 102.

⁸⁵ LLW to Corwin, 25 July 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

to secure their family's future. Georgetown's Mary A.B. Cummins pleaded for an "act of benevolence" from Thomas Corwin in the form of work for her two sons. According to Cummins's epistle, her two sons were about to relocate to California to find work. Her sons, no doubt encouraged by the adventurous and individualistic gold rush stories being told in the East, would, their mother feared, "perish" and leave her "broken hearted." Rather than risk the socio-economic future of her family, Cummins sought the protection offered by a government clerkship. Her two sons, Edmund and Charles, she insisted, needed employment for one year, enough for them to both effectively support their mother and pursue their education. Careful not to push her demands too heavily, Cummins insisted that "anything" would be acceptable, even that of a messenger, for she could not "survive the loss of [her] children." Utilizing a language of emotion and sentimental failure, Cummins pressed upon Corwin the infinite affection that a mother shared for her two sons in order to receive an advantageous, sympathetic response.⁸⁶

But Mary A.B. Cummins's attempt to invoke such a response also ran much deeper; it also demonstrated the ability of women, like men, to actively engage governmental authority in order to prolong the survival of their self as well as their families. Consequently, national political parties were forced to contemplate—often on sentimental grounds—the logic of patronage apportionment, as well the role government would play in protecting middling white men and their families from falling further into debt and increasingly unable to provide for themselves. The moral economy of distributing government offices thus took into consideration a variety of factors—economic, social, and political. As a question of political economy, political leaders were actively (perhaps unthinkably) shaping the distributive nature of the federal

⁸⁶ Mary A.B. Cummins to Corwin, 12 July 1850, *ibid.* On the influence of the Gold Rush on young middle-class men, see Roberts, *American Alchemy*.

government, for each appointment involved an expenditure of public money, if not an expansion in government. While party loyalty and work granted access to patronage jobs, the ability of officeseekers to define themselves as worthy of economic assistance pushed the limits of national political authority. Officeseekers saw in patronage politics and the state indirectly an implied contract and reciprocal obligation. Indeed, it was the practice of distributing government resources through patronage channels that helped establish the institutional arrangements for the expansion of Civil War social benefits.⁸⁷

Though part of the outgrowth of participatory democracy, and rooted in a complex system of patronage politics, public employment and government clerkships in particular were increasingly sought out by an anxious and economically precarious middling segment of the population in the years leading up to the Civil War. That is not to say officeseeking applicants did not share a political interest; rather, it was woven into daily life and used partly to serve self-interested economic ends.⁸⁸ The growth of public jobs in the antebellum period paralleled the development of a distinct middle-class experience. It is no coincidence that at the same time middle-class families accommodated the growth of insurance industries, applications for patronage jobs increased. At least one life insurance company, *Baltimore Life*, was aware of the potentially lucrative and developing market of salaried employees working in the nation's capital, men who not only shared social and professional aspirations but who were also

⁸⁷ See Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 67-151; Jensen, *Patriots, Settlers, and the Origins of American Social Policy*. On the rise of centralized government power more specifically, see Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁸⁸ Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic*, 43-46.

“‘notoriously improvident’.” Add the potential of being turned out of office at any given time to their “modest incomes,” *Baltimore Life* figured that government clerks and their families were likely vulnerable to economic failure and social displacement, making them ideal candidates for life-insurance policies.⁸⁹

Not only did white-collar government labor become increasingly professionalized and rationalized, and redefined for middle-class audiences, it also provided compensatory backstop to a multitude of middling households that were not entirely secure in their social status. In this sense, patronage jobs helped perpetuate the development of America’s middle-class in the nineteenth century. Indeed, many government offices throughout the antebellum era were commonly occupied by men with a privileged social background but had failed to achieve a noteworthy professional status and a desired respectability. These men found in public office a source of financial redemption, a security blanket to a declining social status. A clerkship in the nation’s capital, in effect, represented an arena of social striving; antebellum officeseekers looked to the federal government to serve social and familial ends. Finally, these issues would become important factors in laying the groundwork for civil service reform in the post-bellum decades.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Murphy, “Doomed ... to eat the bread of dependency”? *Common-Place*. On the emergence of a middle-class experience, see Stuart M. Blumin, “The Hypothesis of Middle-Class Formation in Nineteenth-Century America: A Critique and Some Proposals,” *The American Historical Review* 90, no. 2 (1985): 299-338; idem, *The Emergence of the Middle-Class*, 230-257.

⁹⁰ John, *Spreading the News*, 131; idem, “The Lost World of Bartelby, the Ex-Officeholder: Variations on a Venerable Literary Form,” *New England Quarterly* 70 (December 1997): 633.

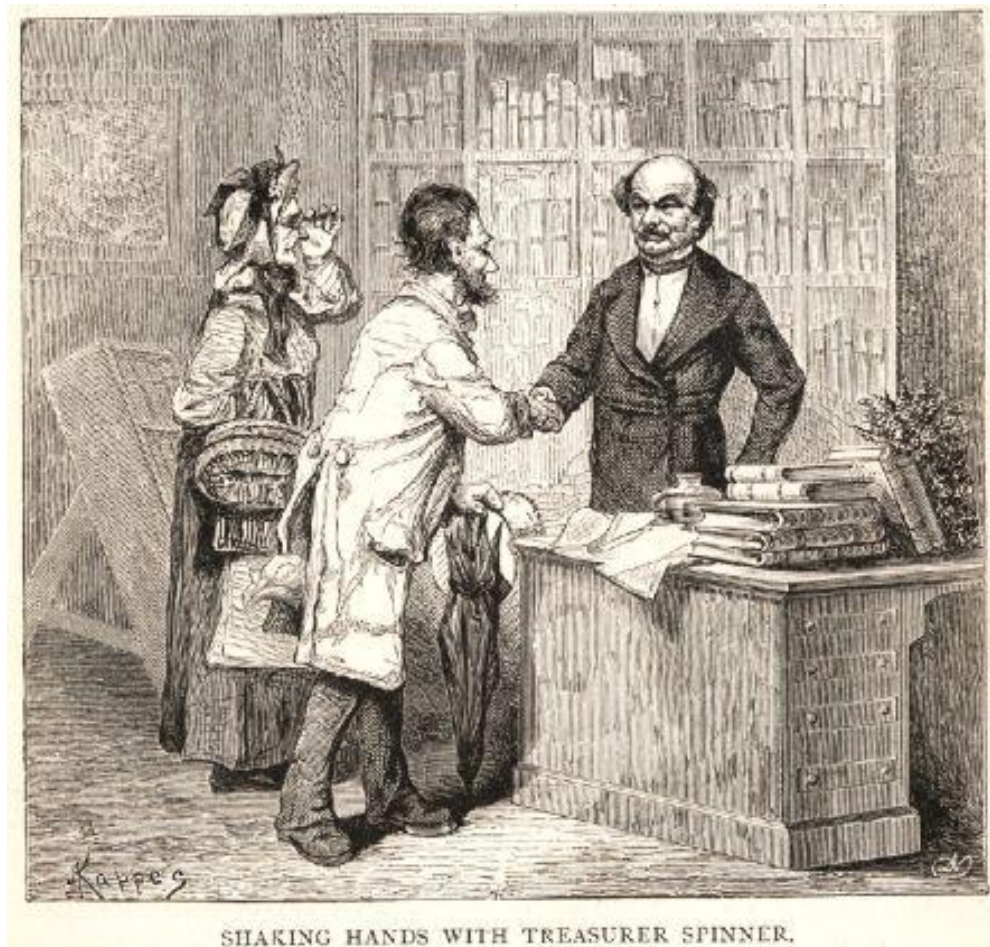


Figure 3: “Shaking Hands with Treasurer Spinner.” Treasury Secretary under Lincoln, Johnson, and Grant, Francis E. Spinner stood as an increasingly visible symbol of central government authority, especially as the federal government took on an active and visible role in resolving the economic problems of postwar America. The depiction above suggests the imagined intimate sphere between the government and its citizens, a reciprocal obligation that patronage begging-letters emphasized. Secretary Spinner stands at the service of a downtrodden husband and wife seeking financial assistance. Their dress in tattered but once respectable clothing reveals their fallen social status.⁹¹

⁹¹ Illustration taken from Ben Perley Poore, *Perley's Reminiscences of Sixty Years in the National Metropolis*, Vol. II (Philadelphia, PA: Hubbard Brothers, 1886), 333.

Chapter V

“To live in any better style than mechanics and labourers?”: Personal Independence, Domestic Crisis, and the Push for Merit-Based Reform Prior to the Civil War

...it is a strange experience, to a man of pride and sensibility, to know that his interests are within the control of individuals who neither love nor understand him....If the guillotine, as applied to office holders, were a literal fact instead of one of the most apt of metaphors, it is my sincere belief that the active members of the victorious party were sufficiently excited to have chopped off all our heads, and have thanked Heaven for the opportunity.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Custom House,” introductory to the *Scarlet Letter* (1850)

In 1817, a group of government clerks in Washington proposed the formation of the Provident Association of Clerks in order to provide monetary grants to families of ill and deceased members. Two years later, the association was incorporated by Congress and approved by President Monroe. Distinctly public in character, postings to solicit membership and classified ads were frequently displayed in Washington newspapers alongside publications of organization funds and meeting activities. Meetings were held at various times and in different locations throughout Washington to discuss donations, dividends on stock, forfeitures, fees, payouts, and affairs of the organization, including the election of officers. Funds were to be established through quarterly and annual contributions from each member and through the holding of stocks in various banks in Washington. Monetary relief to the families of deceased clerks would be distributed based on term of membership and amount of contribution.¹ In 1825, the Provident Association reported in the *Daily National Intelligencer* its annual “statement of affairs” that it had paid out \$705 to the families of deceased members and still gained \$1291.55 in revenue. By 1832, a total of 69 members in fifteen years had contributed over \$7,000, and

¹ *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 25, 1820; *Daily National Journal*, April 28, 1826; *The Globe*, March 27, 1835.

payouts to deceased family members had reached nearly \$4,500. A portion of the accumulated funds even included contributions from Washington residents who deemed the association “a valuable institution” within the city.²

The existence of a mutual benefit and protective association such as the Provident Association of Clerks reflected the cooperation and security that early government clerks held in their job and the willingness of Congress to distribute governmental authority to the association. With little financial assets to fall back on, other than their salary, early government clerks united and petitioned to Congress in order to preserve through a state-sponsored beneficiary association the livelihoods of themselves and their families.³ Their actions were motivated in part by a belief in permanent employment in Washington. Beginning in 1832, the association’s members pressed Congress for the renewal of its charter, which expired in 1834. At the time, one of its members asked that “no definite period be assigned for the continuance of the association.” “Such a provision,” it was suggested, “would insure a durability commensurate with the faithful administration of its concerns.”⁴ The charter was renewed by Congress but the bank failures of 1836 left irreconcilable financial damage to the organization, which had owned stock in several of the banks in Washington. In 1836, it asked Congress to extend its “paternal care” and

² *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 06, 1825, June 11, 1828. Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 384

³ On American associationalism as a form of state-sponsored governance, see William J. Novak, “The American Law of Association: The Legal Political Construction of Civil Society,” *Studies in American Political Development* 15, no. 2 (October 2001): 163-88.

⁴ House of Representatives, *Memorial of the President and Board of Officers, of the Provident Association of Clerks, In the District of Columbia*, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., April 20, 1832, House Doc. 211, 2-3.

contribute a grant to the organization so that it could be relieved from its financial “embarrassments, and enable it fully to accomplish the salutary and benevolent purpose for which it was incorporated.” While Congress did not comply with their wishes, it did grant the organization the power to invest more freely and without its consent. An 1837 report in the *Daily National Intelligencer* of the organization’s annual meeting noted that the association was still “productive” despite the national economic downturn. Though it gained only nominal revenue between 1835 and 1836, the organization still managed to distribute nearly \$2,500 to families of deceased members.⁵

Nevertheless, due to the relative instability of holding government office in the age of spoils, membership to the Provident Association dwindled. For clerks fearing removal or expecting only a brief tenure in office, a financial commitment to such an organization hardly seemed lucrative. Divided along partisan lines and fearful of being replaced in office, the cohesiveness among Washington’s clerking class diminished. Additionally, a clear disconnect emerged between members of Congress and departmental clerks. By 1858, the association asked Congress to “dissolve” the charter “on just and equitable principles” and to distribute the assets of the organization appropriately to its remaining members and relative to the amount of funds they contributed to the organization. “The practical operation of the charter,” its supporters declared, had “demonstrated the fallacy of the hypothesis on which it was predicated.” According to the memorialists, the “stability of the association and a sure realization of its promises” had plundered. To put it into numbers, the entire assets of the organization were at a “full sixty percent less” than the actual amount needed to benefit the families of deceased

⁵ *Memorial of the Provident Association of Clerks, Praying for and Alteration of their Charter, and for Aid*, 1st sess., January 18, 1836; White, *The Jeffersonians*, 384; *Daily National Intelligencer*, April 30, 1837.

members. And since the assets were not likely to increase proportionally, “bankruptcy and total loss” was “inevitable.” The bill to have the charter dissolved and the funds distributed appropriately to its members was sent to the floor of the senate. Since it was a “private bill” that “put the government to no expense,” the demands of the memorialists were granted with little debate. Understandably, one of the senators involved in taking up the bill had little knowledge that such a society even existed.⁶

The formation and decline of the Provident Association of Clerks suggests the changing status of government clerks in Washington in the years leading up to the Civil War. The federal government had been in existence in Washington for less than twenty years, and its clerks had already begun to put forward a rudimentary, albeit innovative, form of social security, if not a precursor to the development of federal employee unions and system of pensions at the turn of the twentieth century.⁷ Nonetheless, the growth and stability of the Provident Association of Clerks in Washington was thwarted by a political culture in Washington that had by 1828 become increasingly partisan. Whereas the British civil service developed meritorious systems of reform early and throughout the middle half of the nineteenth century, the development of merit-based policies and procedures was at the same time in the United States stymied by partisan-based patronage appointments in the antebellum period.⁸ It is possible to conclude that

⁶ *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 1, 1858; *The Congressional Globe*, 35th Cong., 1st sess., March 18, 1858, 73: 1153.

⁷ Susan Marie Sterett, *Public Pensions: Gender and Civil Service in the States, 1850-1937* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003).

⁸ The development of the association predated a similar association begun by government clerks in London, England, titled The Provident Clerks’ Benefit-Association and Benevolent Fund, and referred to in 1848 as a “meritorious and most useful association,” particularly as a

if public employment had remained stable throughout the nineteenth century, the Provident Association of Clerks might be recognized as an early precursor to social security.⁹ But that was not to be the case.

This chapter attempts to illuminate the professional and personal consequences of rotation in office by tracing the political, social, and domestic experiences of the men who worked as government clerks in Washington prior to the Civil War. Rotation in office, whether it was fully carried out or not, threatened clerks' sense of independence on a variety of levels, including independence of character, political independence and, importantly, the opportunity to achieve domestic independence and respectability. Objections to rotation in office steadily emerged alongside patronage appointments and removals in the years leading up to the Civil War. Although challenges to the policy crossed a variety of ideological terrains, they most often emerged internally, that is, from those most immediately and adversely impacted by the policy. Government clerks, as well as some sympathetic politicians, argued that rotation in office violated the clerk's right to live independently, outside of the control of another person or political party. In addition to political and economic independence, government clerks engaged in a battle over the government's role in protecting families and in particular the male's obligation to provide for the family. Ideals of manly independence and domesticity thus

"mutual life insurance." In addition to distributing aid to families of deceased members, the organization had evolved into giving "annuities to distressed members of three years' standing," and, if warranted, "loans, gratuities, and allowances to members." Medical advice was also offered to those in need. And for members who found themselves out of employment, "situational" advice was offered. What is more, membership into the organization was extended to any "denomination of clerk," including those in banking or mercantile settings. See "The Provident Clerks' Benefit-Association and Benevolent Fund," *The Mirror*, 1, no. 24 (June 1846): 382-383. After 1865, American reformers looked toward the British model for merit-based ideas of reform; see Richard Titlow, *Americans Import Merit: Origins of the United States Civil Service and the Influence of the British Model* (Washington: University Press of America, 1979).

⁹ White, *The Jeffersonians*, 384.

permeated a critique on rotation and patronage practices from within Washington.

I

In 1860, historian James Parton compared the removals of clerks that took place in the city of Washington shortly after Jackson arrived to “being driven from the solitary spring in a wide expanse of desert.” A critic of Jackson, Parton sympathized with clerks by drawing attention to the psychological and economic effects of partisan dismissal. “The public treasury was almost the sole source of emolument” for the clerks who were already in office at the time Jackson’s policy on rotation took effect. “If removed,” insisted Parton, “they were beggared and helpless.”¹⁰ While Parton may well have exaggerated or perhaps overly sympathized with the middling public servants he spoke of, the personal consequences of rotation in office were potentially far-reaching. “The unlimited power to grant office, and to take it away, gives a command over the hopes and fears of a vast multitude of men,” proclaimed an 1844 Senate report on the evils of executive proscription. “It is generally true, that he who controls another man’s means of living controls his will.” The 448 page “Morehead Report,” as it popularly came to be known by the senator who spearheaded it, Kentucky’s James T. Morehead (Whig), claimed, among many things, that Jackson’s proscriptive policies left officeholders “destitute of that independence of character, that manly feeling, which should characterize every public office.”¹¹ “Experience convinces us that when a man, who is dependent on his own exertions for a living,

¹⁰ James Parton, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, ed. Robert V. Remini (New York: Harper and Row 1967), 45; Leonard D. White, *The Jacksonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1829-1861* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1954), 324.

¹¹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report to Accompany Joint Resolution S. S. Rep., no. 399*, 28th Cong., 1st sess., June 15, 1844, 114, 101.

obtains one of these offices, he and his family... become dependent on the quarter's salary for food and clothing," asserted the Morehead Report. "To be deprived of the office is to be deprived of the only means of obtaining a living by honest means."¹² An early effort to reform rotation in office, the Morehead Report clarified the ideological tone of the debate and the impetus toward merit-based reform.

Take for example, Samuel S. Whiting, of Virginia, who was employed as a clerk in Third Auditor's office of the Treasury Department throughout a significant portion of the antebellum period. A capable, career-minded government clerk, Whiting's name was included among a long list of undersigned clerks endorsing an 1838 memorial to Congress that asked the nation's senators and representatives to repeal a law passed in 1818 that established the current fixed salaries of clerks and pass a new law that more adequately equated clerks' salaries to duties performed.¹³ Like the other co-signers of the memorial, Whiting identified himself as a career "public servant," someone who took a personal investment in the laws that shaped the salaries and classifications of clerks. On one occasion, roughly a decade later, he even declared that he had "been raised" in the "legitimate line of business" of a clerk, and was consequently "narrowed down to but *one* calling by which he can hope to obtain a living." "[N]either a professional character, mechanic, or Day-laborer," Whiting's livelihood was dependent on the government

¹² Ibid., 128.

¹³ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Memorial of a Number of Clerks in the Executive Departments of the Government*, S. Doc., no. 71, 25th Cong., 2nd sess., Jan. 3, 1838.

and his knowledge of the clerking profession.¹⁴

To be sure, Whiting, like many other clerks, shared an interest in politics. In 1832, he served as secretary to the National Republican Young Men of Loudoun County, Virginia, and hoped that his organization's efforts would ensure the election of Whig Henry Clay to the presidency. Other than a brief 1832 newspaper article that connected Whiting to a political organization, the extent to which Whiting actively involved himself in politics is, however, difficult to gauge.¹⁵ Whiting identified himself as a Whig and probably took part in at least private political conversations with his friends and supported Whigs at each election. Yet in the sociopolitical climate of Washington, Whiting's involvement in national politics was a dangerous terrain. To his distress, Whiting was politically removed from his clerkship for a brief period of time under the Democratic administration of President Polk, only to be reinstated back into office in 1850 after the Whigs regained control of the presidency.

Whiting's professional and political course of life was emblematic for a vast number of government clerks dependent on government labor for their livelihoods. Although Whiting proclaimed to be "the first honored with a removal from office under the Polk administration," other clerks followed. And just as Whiting importuned Treasury Secretary Corwin to be restored to office, so did at least ten other clerks who worked alongside him in the Third Auditor's Office, all of whom were restored to office before Whiting. Due to this, Whiting visibly identified in the federal government a "perfect system of nepotism." He expressed to Secretary Corwin his frustration and astonishment over the "custom of late" to appoint wealthy and politically

¹⁴ Samuel S. Whiting to Thomas Corwin, Nov. 6, 1850, Container 2, Thomas Corwin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 22, 1832.

advantageous men “to the exclusion of men who never had any other calling in life” but to hold a clerkship in the “General Government.” Whiting also confronted Corwin with what he saw in his dismissal as a central contradiction to his right as a citizen, which allowed him to freely exercise his “political independence.”¹⁶ Whiting insisted that at no point did he align his clerkship with a particular political purpose or ideology.

In the political climate of rotation in office, clerks, especially those with a limited amount of social capital, always feared their expendability and interchangeability. As much as they tried to demonstrate a meritorious ground to their appointment, their justifications often ran against the logic of patronage distribution and interparty conflict. Clerks were accordingly forced to navigate the line between politics and competence carefully. With little justification to remove competent and meritorious clerks from office, the politics of clerks provided the strongest grounds for removal throughout the antebellum period, although other considerations were certainly invoked. For this reason, the President and his cabinet needed to be sure that a particular removal would not cause public injury to the administration and the political party in charge. As demonstrated by historian Michael Holt, “patronage allocation” by 1850 significantly influenced party voters and local activists. Removing a competent clerk and well-connected Washington resident, someone like Joseph Hand, could potentially become political ammunition for the oppositional political party, if not create a localized public outcry and apprehension. From the onset of rotation in office, legitimate justifications for removal posed a peculiar problem for administrators and politicians in that it could both work for and against Whigs and

¹⁶ Samuel S. Whiting to Thomas Corwin, Nov. 6, 1850, Container 2, Thomas Corwin Papers.

Democrats alike.¹⁷ But patronage was also a double-edged sword for officeseekers and government clerks. Although patronage helped bring men into office and improve their financial and social position, it also partly encouraged clerks to withdraw from active political engagement. While this may well have been an unspoken Faustian bargain of gaining office through the political system of spoils, how clerks responded to partisan-based removals raises important questions regarding the civic engagement and political independence of clerks.

Government clerks, whose political loyalties were publicly debased, were consequently forced to rebuff acts of character assassination and justify their political loyalties to those with power to control patronage. In 1844, under President John Tyler, George L. Gillchrest, of the District of Columbia, began working as a clerk in the Third Auditor's office of the Treasury Department. It is difficult to determine Gillchrest's politics at the time of his appointment, although it can be presumed that Gillchrest was a Whig who attempted to shift his political loyalties from one administration to the next. By 1844, John Tyler had been effectively driven out of the Whig Party and discarded by the Democratic Party as their candidate for the presidency. With a portion of Whigs and Democrats supporting his bid for the presidency, Tyler's hopes remained only as the third party candidate for President. In an attempt to rally his supporters, Tyler used his power of office to distribute patronage appointments to both sympathetic Whigs and national Democrats. The appointment of a local Whig or Democrat, like George Gillchrest, in order to appease local party officials certainly would have been within Tyler's political purview. But whatever the politics of Gillchrest, his appointment would

¹⁷ Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 418. On the corruptive practices of patronage distribution, see Mark W. Summers, *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union, 1849-1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

undeniably cause a great deal of public controversy by those who claimed to be politically loyal to Tyler.¹⁸

Shortly after Gillchrest was awarded his clerkship, charges of political disloyalty, presumably by Democrats, were made against him to President Tyler. A year later in 1845, under the presidency of Democrat James K. Polk, the “same charges” of political disloyalty resurfaced. This time, however, Gillchrest, was temporarily removed from office. Charges had been procured against Gillchrest for “speaking derogatory” of President Polk, a Democrat. As “the sole ground of [his] removal,” Gillchrest desired an “opportunity to disprove” the charges preferred against him. He wrote Polk directly and pleaded his innocence: “I most positively deny the charge and I appeal to you sir, to protect me, a much injured, slandered, and falsely represented individual from the vile attempt of my enemies to ruin myself and character forever, and would most respectfully beg that you will cause my Office to be kept open for a few days.” Gillchrest combined his plea to Polk with a letter from an entrusted friend to the Democratic Party, Washington resident and clerk in the Third Auditor’s Office, Charles S. Wallach. In a letter to Polk, Wallach testified that Gillchrest had never “utter[ed] sentiments” of “arrogation” toward Polk or the Democratic Party, and that he had shared many conversations with Gillchrest over the course of the recent presidential election and Gillchrest always “expressed himself friendly [to Polk].”

Gillchrest was restored to office; but four years later he again found himself caught in a political crossfire and needing to prove his political loyalty. This time, however, it was to the Whig administration of Zachary Taylor. Apparently, rumors escalated in 1849 that Gillchrest’s

¹⁸ On the election of 1844, see Charles Sellers, “The Election of 1844,” in *History of American Presidential Elections*, ed. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. (New York: Chelsea House, 1985), II, 747-798.

political loyalties rested with the Democratic Party. In a calculated effort to avoid being removed from office, Gillchrest solicited the help of a former editor of the *National Whig* to testify on his behalf. In a peculiar act to clear his name from partisan affiliation, Gillchrest even signed an unofficial oath of office to prove allegiance to the Constitution of the United States, rather than a particular political party.¹⁹ Clerks like Gillchrest could easily be disposed and replaced. Gillchrest, however, found a line of defense by downplaying or temporarily shifting his political loyalties in some measure from one administration to the next. The extent to which government clerks shifted their loyalties in or to avoid removal is difficult to measure. But government clerks certainly found ways to navigate the demands of political loyalty while in office. Of course, it was logical for constrained clerks to reconsider—if not withdraw entirely from—actively engaging politics beyond any immediate and necessary partisan obligations.

Government clerks were forced time and again to dispel accusations regarding their political loyalty. George Gillis, of Maryland, began working as a clerk in the Fourth Auditor's Office of the Treasury Department in the early 1820s, where he remained until August 2, 1845. At that time, Gillis was removed from office because it was rumored that he was a sympathetic Whig. Prior to his dismissal, Gillis, an active member of Washington's Second Presbyterian Church, had effectively established himself as a civically engaged Washington resident. In 1826, Gillis volunteered to solicit funds for Washington's Howard Society, which was established by Washington residents for the purpose of contributing relief to the city's poor. Gillis, along with a

¹⁹ George L. Gillchrest to James K. Polk, Charles Wallach to James K. Polk, May 17, 1845, Charles W. Lenton to William Meredith, July 17, 1849, "Oath," George L. Gillchrest to William Meredith, July 26, 1849, file of George L. Gillchrest, Applications and Recommendations, 210, Applications and Recommendations for Positions in the Washington, DC, Offices, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 210, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP).

handful of other Washington citizens, would continue to play an active role in the solicitation of relief for Washington's poor up until his removal from office.²⁰

Prior to 1828, Gillis had no reason to suspect that he would be removed from office on political grounds. In 1832, however, Gillis, who received a salary of \$1,150 per year, was identified by *The Globe* as someone unfriendly to Jackson. In a published statement that listed the names of all the executive officers employed in Washington and their respective title, "the political friends of General Jackson" were identified with an asterisk.²¹ Void of an asterisk, Gillis's name was publicly censured. Deeply damaging to Gillis's tenure as clerk was the notion that he no longer could claim a right to government office nor could he easily rely upon entrenched Washington social connections. Vulnerable to removal, Gillis was forced to carefully navigate the boundaries of political partisanship if he wanted to keep his clerkship. Specifically, Gillis would be forced to either prove his loyalty to the Democratic Party or downplay any personal partisan inclinations.

In 1845, Gillis, who was reported to have been "one of the oldest and most faithful of the clerks in the office," was charged with being a "meddlesome Whig" and aptly removed from office under the Presidency of James K. Polk, a Democrat. Gillis immediately called on his close personal and professional friends and allies to testify that he was neither a Whig or actively engaged in politics. John L. River knew Gillis "intimately" over the course of sixteen years, and for three of those years he worked alongside Gillis as a clerk in the Treasury Department. While River had always "*supposed*" Gillis to be Whig, he aptly testified to Gillis's apolitical nature.

²⁰ *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 18, 23, 1826, January 5, 1835, Oct. 5, 1838, Oct. 10, 1842.

²¹ *The Globe*, May 05, 1832. For Gillis's salary, see U.S. Congress, House, *Clerks—Treasury*, 1831, H. Doc., no. 47, 22nd Cong., 1st sess., Jan 12, 1832, 5.

Not only did Gillis rarely ever utter a word about politics, attested River, he certainly never attended a political meeting of any kind. Had Gillis been a Democrat, insisted River, he probably would have even resisted speaking about “democracy.” Gillis also called upon his former Presbyterian minister, Dan Baker, who “positively affirm[ed] that so far from being a political partisan, he [Gillis] never in all his life was at a political meeting, or gathering of any kind, nor a visitor of tavern or other places to talk politics, nor did he ever write a line for newspapers or otherwise, on the subject.” Baker held a “deep interest” in Gillis’s dismissal. Gillis was elected elder of Washington’s Second Presbyterian Church when Baker served as its pastor prior to 1828. Baker accordingly pleaded to Polk on terms that vacated matters of political loyalty, asking Polk to respond to the situation with an “act of kindness” by reinstating Gillis to office. Gillis, said Baker, was a “man of family in very straitened circumstance,” and the “injustice” done to him “threaten[s] to crush himself and family.”²²

Despite the pleas made by John River and Pastor Baker, George Gillis was never reinstated to office and forced to pursue work elsewhere. After spending nearly 30 years as a government clerk in Washington, Gillis found this to be no easy or rewarding task. In 1846, Gillis reluctantly left Washington and relocated to Louisville, KY, where he was forced to “seek a living amongst strangers.” In 1852, upon word that funds had been appropriated by Congress to build a Custom House and Post Office in Louisville, Gillis applied for a “small

²² John L. River to James K. Polk, Aug. 11, 1845, Dan Baker to James K. Polk, Aug. 26, 1845, file of George Gillis, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP; Ebon Walton to Nathaniel Hawthorne, 30 June 1849, file of Nathaniel Hawthorne, General Records of the Department of the Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 213, Personnel Folders of Notable Treasury Employees, 1822-1940, National Archives at College Park, MD

appointment.”²³ Career-minded clerks like Gillis found it difficult to escape the labor that they had become dependent upon. Not only was clerking for the federal government economically important, government work and living in Washington was also important to Gillis’s sense of manhood. This point is expounded through the most famous of all antebellum clerks, Herman Melville’s fictional tale “Bartleby the Scrivener.” After enjoying a relatively lucrative and noteworthy official position as a government clerk in the Dead Letter Bureau of the General Post Office in Washington, Bartleby was dismissed from office due to a “change in the administration.” Bartleby was left psychologically unhinged, and consequently forced to undertake a monotonous and lifeless office-job as a scrivener in a New York law firm. No longer able to claim an official and personal attachment to Washington society, Bartleby reluctantly spent his life undertaking even the most mundane of tasks.²⁴

While the political loyalties of clerks emerged as the primary grounds for dismissal by 1840, many clerks were also dismissed with little explanation. This was particularly problematic for clerks hoping to maintain their character and reputation throughout Washington. Richard Ely was dismissed from his clerkship during the Tyler administration in 1843 for reasons that were not “officially communicated” to him. The political identification of Ely is not clearly known, although one can suspect that he may well have identified himself as a Democrat. Ely mentioned in his letter to Treasury Secretary John C. Spencer that his friends who shared similar politics were removed when wholesale dismissals took place in 1841, by then Treasury Secretary Thomas Ewing, a Whig. Had he been dismissed at that time, Ely confessed, “the grounds would

²³ George Gillis to Thomas Corwin, January 28, 1852, *ibid*.

²⁴ Richard R. John, “The Lost World of Bartleby, The Ex-Officeholder: Variation on a Venerable Literary Form,” *The New England Quarterly* 70 (December, 1997).

have been too apparent to have required explanation,” for his politics were “no secret, in this community.” Since Tyler was hoping to secure a Democratic base and yet maintain the loyalty of Whigs, it is plausible that Ely’s dismissal was kept quiet in order to repel an intense Democratic or Whig reaction. Whatever the reason, Ely believed that the “official act” of removal deserved an explanation. Dismissed with “no apparent cause,” Ely believed that he was “punished before the world, as unfit for his station.”²⁵

Richard Ely and other clerks who were indefensibly removed from office faced a potential social death. Publicly censured clerks confronted slanderous attacks directed toward their character, which, in the face of rotation, was their most reliable quality. For clerks of all class and industry, character was an important measure of personal worth.²⁶ Similarly, the public removal of clerks posed an additional threat to their sense of honor, which was partly connected to their standing and ability to participate in Washington’s political and social community. Clerks who were removed from office on political grounds could at least blame their removal on a power greater than themselves. In other words, they could faithfully claim that they were wrongly or unfairly removed from office for a reason of no fault of their own. Clerks charged with political disloyalty could at least claim a suppression of political independence or civility. Without an official explanation for their removal, dismissed clerks found it difficult to have their honor fully restored.

Likewise, character, political loyalty, and occupational competence were conflicting

²⁵ Richard Ely to John C. Spencer, March 30, 1843, file of Richard Ely, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP.

²⁶ For the importance of character in the formation of clerk identities in the first half of the nineteenth century, see Thomas Augst, *The Clerk’s Tale: Young Men and Moral life in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).

points of tension for antebellum government clerks. The dismissal and testimony of Charles Vinson, of Maryland, is telling of a clerk's attempt to reconcile devotion to public services with standards of political loyalty within the federal departments. Vinson began clerking in the Treasury Department as early as 1816. A career-minded clerk, Vinson's name was understandably one of over 220 names (including that of George Gillis's) attached to an 1834 clerk's memorial to Congress asking for compensation reform that took "into view the nature of the services rendered" by competent clerks.²⁷ Also like George Gillis, Charles Vinson was publicly called out in 1832 as someone unfriendly to the Democratic Party, and consequently labeled a Whig on multiple occasions.²⁸ After 35 years of service, Vinson was finally dismissed from his clerkship in 1846 under the presidential administration of Democrat James K. Polk, for what he believed to be "political considerations."

In 1849, after the Whigs gained control of the presidency through the election of Zachary Taylor, Vinson saw an opportunity to be restored to office. To be sure, Vinson, like many long-term clerks, "sustained a high reputation as a gentleman" in Washington. Since his dismissal was not due to any lack of character or "efficiency in the discharge of the duties pertaining to [his] vocation," his restoration would easily be endorsed by sympathetic and connected Washington residents. To that end, it was important for Vinson to clear his name of any professional incompetence. Vinson invoked his "thorough knowledge of the Treasury System" and his ability to attend to public duties. For Vinson, these qualities were more important than any personal preference for politics. In a letter to Treasury Secretary William M. Meredith,

²⁷ U.S. Congress, House, *Clerks—Executive Departments*, H. Doc., no. 32, 23rd Cong., 1st sess., Jan 7, 1834.

²⁸ *The Globe*, May 05, 1832.

Vinson expressed regret that one's ability to capably attend to public service simply did not "accord" with the "furtherance of political objects." Vinson forthrightly suggested that public service and politics should exist separate from one another. That is not to say, however, that the clerks could not maintain a political identity of any sorts. While Vinson declared that he had always stood politically upon "neutral grounds," he could not avoid "express[ing] & maintain[ing] preferences for men & measures" in his "social relations of life." Vinson believed that this was a personal "right", "inherent in every citizen." Moreover, Vinson testified that the majority of clerks who worked in the federal departments carried a political disposition similar to his own, and therefore had "no political franchise to exercise." According to Vinson, a clerk's loyalties and identities were centered on public service. The "political concerns of the states" were outside of their "proper sphere."²⁹

Despite whatever meritorious claims to public service clerks held, national political parties scrambled to hold together various factions within their coalition by allocating patronage appointments. Indeed, by 1849, the national Whig party determined that their future rested on the calculated distribution of offices. A way to infuse energy and allegiance at the local level, Whigs hoped that patronage would bring together emerging factions within the party and combat the emerging free-soil, Republican party. High-ranking government officials were accordingly advised to bestow public office with diligence and calculated forethought in order to gain the

²⁹ H. Addison to Secretary Meredith, March 7, 1849, p. 497; Vinson to Meredith, March 19, 1849, p. 498, June, 15, 1849, p. 499, Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP. While the spoils system seemingly and at least rhetorically opened federal office doors to a wider-range of citizens, clerks, once in office, sought preservation from rotation by publicly withdrawing from partisan politics. Consequently, it is conceivable that rotation in office erroneously discouraged civic engagement among federal employees. See Richard John, "Affairs of Office: The Executive Departments, The Election of 1828, and the Making of the Democratic Party," in *The Democratic Experiment: New Directions in American Political History*, eds. Meg Jacobs, William J. Novak, and Julian E. Zelizer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 73.

trust and undivided praise of potential voters. Importantly, much of what shaped rotation practices in Washington was based on local political interests. The reputations and popularity of party leaders were enhanced when they won patronage appointments for friends and local party activists. Alternatively, Whigs feared that the failure to win appointments might drive potential supporters to rival parties.³⁰

Party leaders who hoped to secure a position for an officeseeking friend understood that they had to justify the appointment based on national party interests. President James K. Polk's 1845 nomination to the Supreme Court, George Washington Woodward, wrote to Polk on behalf of an officeseeker from Pennsylvania, Andrew Beaumont. Woodward, a ranking member of Pennsylvania's Democratic Party, no doubt thought highly of Beaumont's potential appointment and benefit for the Democratic Party. Unlike other patronage appointments that did not hold the "confidence" of Democrats and "endangered the integrity & supremacy" of the party, Woodward assured Polk that Beaumont's "standing with the democracy" of Pennsylvania was "unquestionably high." Woodward also felt inclined to warn Polk that unless patronage "appointments are of a character to strengthen and encourage the Party at large, the most disastrous consequences may be anticipated in the future." For career politicians like Woodward, securing appointments for those who aspired to office improved their reputation and could potentially elevate their position within the party. This was of course especially true for Woodward, whose nomination to the Supreme Court was to be voted by the Senate a few months later, on January 22, 1846. Securing an appointment for a respected citizen who had "expended

³⁰ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 418-458. According to Mark W. Summers these political practices "were inseparable from the whole principle that office was a reward rather than a sacred trust, a political plum rather than a public service." See *The Plundering Generation*, 28. On the popularity of third-parties and their challenged to spoils, see Mark Voss-Hubbard, "The 'Third Party Tradition' Reconsidered: Third Parties and American Public Life," *The Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 121-150.

his fortune” and shared a wide base of “friends” would be politically advantageous.³¹

With this approach at the forefront of patronage politics, Washington had become a very frustrating place to work by 1850. Merit-based claims to public service were pushed aside in order to make room for patronage appointments that might hold together the prosperity of a national political party, forcing clerks and other officeholders to be continually on guard. In 1853, Washington resident and businessman, William Kerry, wrote on behalf of his father-in-law J.J.C. Cantine, a \$1,300 clerk in the office of the Third Auditor of the Treasury, a letter to Assistant Treasury Secretary, Peter G. Washington. A former clerk, career-minded public official, and well-connected Washington resident, Peter G. Washington was the object of scorn at the time for his disregard for patronage politics. The *New York Times* noted that Washington had demonstrated an “overbearing and unkind” approach toward “applications for office,” and thus grown unpopular among “prominent” Whigs and Democrats hoping to secure patronage appointments.³² Cantine began working as a clerk in the Treasury Department a year earlier and evidently hoped to avoid the wholesale dismissals that were about to take place as the Democratic President, Franklin Pierce, took office.³³ Kerry accordingly testified that Cantine

³¹ George Woodward to James K. Polk, 17 April 1845, S.S. Cummings to James K. Polk, 21 June 1845, file of Andrew Beaumont, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP. The politics behind Woodward’s nomination to the Supreme Court are addressed in, Daniel J. Curran, “Polk, Politics, and Patronage: The Rejection of George W. Woodward’s Nomination to the Supreme Court,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 121, no. 3 (July 1997), 163-199.

³² *The New York Times*, April 22, 1853. Charles Lanman, *Biographical Annals of the Civil Government of the United States* (Washington, D.C.: James Anglim, 1876), 452.

³³ U.S. Congress, House, *Clerks—Treasury Department*, Ex. Doc., no. 67, 32nd Cong., 2nd sess., Mar. 3, 1853, 19; *ibid.*, Ex. Doc., no. 38, 33rd Cong., 1st sess., Jan. 30, 1854, 19.

was a former editor of a Democratic newspaper in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, for a number of years. During that time, Cantine styled himself a “Taylor Democrat,” until “through losses by fire and other misfortunes was compelled to close up his business which left him almost penniless.” Cantine relocated to Washington during the Whig President Zachary Taylor’s administration and could safely attest in 1853 that he was still, like Pierce, “a true consistent *national* [my emphasis] Democrat.” If Cantine were dismissed, Kerry insinuated that he would return to his “old business” and edit a “Democratic Journal of some kind”; therefore, “it would not look well for [Cantine] to be removed by an incoming democratic administration and then go on to editing a paper.”³⁴ Although it is unclear if Cantine was dismissed from his clerkship as a result of his politics, Cantine did not return to his clerkship in 1854.³⁵

To be sure, many clerks felt the pressure of patronage allocation in the 1850s. Hoping to reshape the Whig party into a new Taylor Republican party, the Taylor administration disclosed a pre-election promise to award patronage appointments to members from all political parties willing to come in under his fold. Of course, Taylor’s attempt to please all only ended up pleasing some and disappointing most. Not only did it anger inner and rival party members, “specific appointments inevitably produced discontent and factional squabbling.”³⁶

³⁴ William Kerry to Peter Washington, 24 April 1853, file of J.J.C. Cantine, Applications and Recommendations, 210, NACP. It is likely that Cantine got into office as a Democrat at a time when the Whigs were hoping to build a nation consensus by catering to intraparty factions through patronage appointments. See Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 435.

³⁵ Apparently Cantine went on to work as a Washington land claims agent for individuals hoping to purchase land and move westward. See his personal advertisement in South Carolina’s *The Charleston Mercury*, September 17, 1856.

³⁶ Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 418, 422.

Officeseekers, as well as Whig and Democrat party leaders, watched patronage appointments with an ever more critical eye, thereby inciting voters to retaliate against rival political parties. As suggested by J.J.C. Cantine, the removal of a national Democrat might deter unforgiving Democrats from voting against Whig candidates.

Aware of this political climate and fearful of potentially being rotated out of office, most officeholders went out of their way to establish their political loyalty in written form. Other officeseekers and clerks downplayed their own political identities and instead invoked their connections, alliances, and friendship to the political base from which they heralded. In 1850, for instance, L.L. Loving, who began working as a clerk during President Polk's administration in 1845, solicited the testimonial of John P. Gallagher, a fellow clerk in the Third Auditor's Office of the Treasury Department, in order to reduce his chances of finding his name in a recent "List of Removals." According to Gallagher, Loving's political connections in Virginia were "mostly Whigs, and influential men." It is likely, however, that Loving was dismissed from office, for he did not return to his clerkship in 1850.³⁷

In their attempt to court voters and bring local factions under the fold of the national party, political leaders foresaw their party's defeat unless wholesale removals or specific clerks were purged from offices. In this political environment, indiscriminate and nepotistic appointments were commonplace as party leaders made desperate attempts to fulfill promises made to their supporters. Treasury Secretary Thomas Corwin was advised by a leading Whig in 1850 to turn out a number of established and career-minded clerks from Virginia and "a few

³⁷ John P. Gallagher to Thomas Corwin, 4 Oct. 1850, Container 3, Thomas Corwin Papers. The final year of L.L. Loving's clerkship is documented in U.S. Congress, House, *Clerks and Other Persons*, Ex. Doc., no. 18, 31st Cong., 1st sess., Jan 257, 1850, 18.

from the District of Columbia.” He tendered Corwin the names of clerks who already “had a pretty long race” in office. Some, he reasoned, had been in office for nearly 20 years and could likely make a living “independent” of their salaries. One of the clerks on the list, Nicholas Fastit, was identified as a “Spaniard by birth,” lived in “a fine house,” and also made a living as an auctioneer in the District. Another censured clerk, M.C. Lipscomb, was reported to have had “a good farm in Virginia, and is a radical Methodist Preacher.” Occupations and wealth aside, the names of the individuals on the list were additionally admonished when it was called to Corwin’s attention that many of the men on the list had been “rank Locofocos,” whereas “many a poor meritorious Whig” from other parts of the country had been “too long excluded” from office.³⁸

Around the same time, Secretary Corwin received a private letter from Whig New York Governor, Washington Hunt, who instructed how to solidify the Whig party by warding off factionalism and “locofocoism” in particular. Hunt advised Corwin to avoid pursuing a “liberal policy” of removals and specifically not to remove any Whigs without “good tangible cause.” If done so properly, Hunt insisted, “we can have peace, and consolidate the Whig party in this state [New York] on just and durable grounds.” While Hunt was using all his “power to strengthen and sustain the administration,” he insisted to Corwin that “desperate” removals of Whigs in office, including those with “past extravagances of feeling or opinion about the Wilmot Proviso” and those who were not favored by party leaders or who held unfavorable “friends,” would only damage the Whig party long term.³⁹ In these desperate times, high-ranking public officials were left with little room to effectively negotiate and implement administrative policy, despite any

³⁸ T.P. Hereford to Thomas Corwin, 8 Nov. 1850, Container 4, Thomas Corwin Papers.

³⁹ Governor Hunt to Thomas Corwin, *ibid.*

pretension they may have had.

Prominent members of the Whig Party frequently advised Corwin on how to go about bestowing public office. To be sure, the “*political views*” of officeseekers and officeholders needed to be carefully ascertained. Without appropriate forms of admonishment, insisted one political advisor, removals would “inevitably prove prejudicial to the Whig cause.” Corwin was reminded that “every appointment, from a laborer to the head of a bureau” had a significant public “effect” and was “duly noted & canvassed” by editors, voters, and rank party members of all types. In the intensely scrutinized political environment of the post-1849 era, Thomas Corwin was advised to confer office to “*active*” political partisans over those claiming financial failure or who had been “incompetent to manage [their] own affairs.” The applicant’s “*personal* political pretension” and “*whig* jewels” should take first priority. In short, “*working* whigs, whether it be by pan, purse, or active personal action, should be cared for before any mere hangers on to party, so that in case of a reaction such working Whigs may be ready to ‘fight their battles o’er again’.” It was further suggested to Corwin that the signatures attached to the letters of an officeseeker should never be considered as confirmation of a political “party’s *preference* for the individual recommended.” This was for the reason, “a dozen or more persons could, possibly, obtain the same signature on a petition for the same office.” In this scenario, it was deemed best to “refer to the leading & reliable Whigs of the locality as to the pretensions of the applicants.”⁴⁰

The President and his secretaries frequently received requests from high-ranking members of their affiliated political party to remove “malignant enemies of the administration” in order to make room for politically loyal officeseekers. Increasingly so, the locality and regional influence of a clerk or officeseeker influenced patronage appointments and

⁴⁰ J. Muir to Corwin, 11 Dec. 1850, Container 4, J. Muir to Thomas Corwin, 27 Sept. 1850, Container 2, Thomas Corwin Papers.

overshadowed meritorious qualifications. For example, it was suggested in 1849 to Whig Treasury Secretary, William M. Meredith, that he should consider removing a clerk from his office for returning to Lancaster City, PA, in order to use his “influence” to defeat the Whig Party vote in the last election. On another occasion, an effort to have a clerk working in a “temporary capacity” promoted to a permanent clerkship in the Treasury Department was put forward to Secretary Corwin. At the same time, it was craftily suggested to Corwin that another man in the same office, Sharets, was working as “a kind of spy.” According to the accuser, Sharets played the role of “a roaring Democrat when the Democrats are in power and a thundering Whig when the Whigs are in power, but always a mischief-maker,” if not a “sorry oaf.” With few opportunities to defend themselves, name-calling and unsubstantiated claims regarding clerks’ political loyalties commonly left clerks at the mercy of those in power to bestow public office.⁴¹

The personal and official correspondence of public officials reveals a desperate attempt on behalf of political parties to use patronage to bolster political parties and secure intraparty factions. Advice was given, prejudices were formed, and accusations were made in the name of rotation, most of which took place behind closed doors and under the guise of beneficial political appointments. Very seldom were ideals of competency, professionalism, and merit taken into consideration. Accordingly, government clerks living and working in Washington were left vulnerable to local and divisive battles over patronage. Take for example New Hampshire native and career public servant in the Treasury Department, John M. Brodhead. The son of John

⁴¹ Henry Schreiner to William M. Meredith, 27 July 1849, p. 308, p. 497, Letters Received Relating to Appointments of Clerks, 1844-51, General Records of the Department of Treasury, Record Group 56, Entry 211, Vol. 2, National Archives at College Park, MD (hereafter referred to as Letters Received, 211, Vol. 2, NACP); James Cooper to Corwin, 9 Aug. 1850, Container 1, Thomas Corwin Papers.

Brodhead, a Jacksonian United States Congressman from New Hampshire from 1829 to 1833, John M. Brodhead began working as a subordinate clerk in the Treasury Department on October 1, 1829. In 1834, Brodhead assigned his name to a clerk's memorial that demanded, among other provisions, a "just and fair compensation." Afterward, Brodhead attained the position of Chief Clerk and later Second Comptroller in the Treasury, which he held until resignation in 1876. An Alderman of Washington City from 1861-1862, Brodhead was one of the city's leading citizens and capable public servants.⁴² Despite his credentials, Brodhead was censured for removal in 1850. New Hampshire Whig leader, D.S. Palmer, wrote Secretary Corwin in confidence, advising him to remove Brodhead, suggesting that his removal would be very pleasing to the Whigs in New Hampshire. Palmer conveyed to Corwin: "I do not know the man of any party in this state, who speaks well of him." Palmer called attention to the misguided removal of Democrat Judge Cartland, who Palmer maintained was not even on "good terms with the leaders of the Loco Foco party" and therefore much more "respected" by the Whigs in New Hampshire.

Whether or not Brodhead actively participated as a Democrat in politics, his name was forever attached to the party among influential New Hampshire Whigs. Palmer mentioned that New Hampshire's leading Whigs were about to put forward a petition requesting signatures for his removal, and to replace him with John C. Wilson, someone wholly endorsed by New Hampshire Whigs and thus more entitled to office. Palmer also put forward a host of other names of clerks that ought to be removed due to "terms of personal friendship" with leading

⁴² U.S. Congress, House, *Clerks in the Treasury Department*, H. Doc., no. 28, 21st Cong., 1st sess., Jan 19, 1830, 4; idem, *Memorial of Clerks in the Executive Departments of the Government of the United States*, H. Doc., no. 32, 23rd Cong., 1st sess., Jan, 7, 1834, 1; Lanman, *Biographical Annals of the Civil Government of the United States*, 49.

Locofocos and other rivals of the Whig party, as well as names of potential replacements. Under these capricious circumstances, many clerks hoping to avoid removal could only fall back on personal connections. This was the case of career-clerk Edmund F. French of Massachusetts, brother to Benjamin Brown French. Although Edmund F. French, who worked alongside Brodhead as a clerk in the Treasury Department, was also censured for removal, it was inferred by Palmer that his removal might not be pursued on account of his brother's "terms of personal friendship" with a noted Whig leader.⁴³

The extent to which clerks actively withdrew or abstained from partisan politics is difficult to gauge. Nevertheless, patronage rationality went a long way to deter government clerks from freely and actively pursuing a particular political course. But at least some career-minded government officials found it difficult to renounce party feelings when major elections were in sight. Shortly after Pierce was elected President in 1852, Benjamin Brown French was appointed to the moderately lucrative position of Commissioner of Public Buildings, although French felt he deserved a more prominent post which was denied to him due to implausible and insidious patronage practices. In fact, the political turmoil and divisive national issues of the 1850s had provoked French to take a more pronounced interest in the political affairs of the nation, to which he donated a significant amount of space in his journal. While French spent his formative years a Jacksonian Democrat, by 1854 he had become increasingly skeptical of the "political dogma" and espoused by the "professed politicians" of the major political parties, including the Democratic Party. French ruminated and shared his views and opinions on issues ranging from the Kansas-Nebraska Act, President Pierce's capability as president, and, importantly, patronage practices and appointments. Although not a believer in "anything

⁴³ D.S. Palmer to Thomas Corwin, 6 Nov. 1850, Container 4, Thomas Corwin Papers.

spiritual,” French even shared a conversation with the spirit of Andrew Jackson through a spiritualist living and working in Washington. One of the questions asked was whether Pierce would carry out the same principles Jackson did when he was president, to which the spiritualist responded with a less than assuring answer. Most damaging and troubling was President Pierce’s patronage practices. According to French, Pierce had “whistled his best friends down the wind” and instead “embrace[d] a set of scoundrels who were sure to mislead him and then betray him.” Ever more critical of his boyhood friend and New Hampshire Democrat, French privately lambasted Pierce for having “*broken down the Democratic Party*” in less than two years. Of course, much of French’s criticism of Pierce could be attributed to Pierce’s unwillingness to appoint French to a notable public office—one that French believed he was rightly entitled to. French wrote of Pierce: “I sacrificed my time and my business to make him President & gloried in his election, and he has treated me as if he deemed me of about as much importance as his bootblack or his coachman. He has hardly extended to me the common courtesies of life, and has laced me in the poorest office within his gift....” Of course, French’s criticisms of Pierce were not entirely motivated by unselfish reasons. French’s honor as well as his professional career was damaged by Pierce’s reluctance to appoint him to a higher station.⁴⁴

French’s dissatisfaction with Pierce’s patronage appointments was, of course, shared by a multitude of office-seekers and political leaders throughout the nation. By 1854, both the Whig and Democratic parties were in desperate shape. The anti-Nebraska and Free Soil movements effectively splintered the constituency of national political parties. Additionally, the explosion of the new Know-Nothing party on the political scene provided a populist retreat for those

⁴⁴ Benjamin Brown French, *Witness to the Young Republic: A Yankee’s Journal, 1828-1870*, ed. Donald B. Cole and John J. McDonough (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1989), Feb. 26, 1854, pp. 246-248, Mar. 13, 1855, pp. 254-255.

unsatisfied with, among other issues, partisan politics and unchecked patronage practices by party leaders. While the Whig party was quickly falling apart due to the outgrowth of political factions, Whigs especially embraced Know-Nothingism as a hope to bridge sectional differences. In any case, the Know-Nothing Party, alongside the Whigs and Republicans, emerged as a major opponent of the Democratic Party.⁴⁵

It was within this political context that Pierce, a national Democrat, hoped to stabilize the party through patronage. But at least in the case of French, Pierce's actions had troubling consequences for the Democratic Party and on French's political disposition. By not giving French the appointment he felt he was entitled to, President Pierce in effect "*squeezed*" him out of New Hampshire's Democratic Party. In 1855, French, perhaps in response to Pierce's patronage appointments, began to dabble in Know-Nothing politics. He even submitted articles to a Know-Nothing newspaper in Massachusetts for the purposes of helping his brother-in-law get elected lieutenant governor. Yet despite his brief shifting of political loyalties, he had by 1855 returned—at least in outward appearance—to the Democratic Party. He recorded in his journal that he left the Know-Nothing movement as soon as he "ascertained its real principles and ends." After further reflection, French went on to note that "[n]o honest democratic republican can belong to it." French, however, likely thought it opportune to stay in the Democratic fold in order to keep his job.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ On the growth of the Know Nothing party after 1853, see Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1983), 154-81.

⁴⁶ French, *Witness to the Young Republic*, March 1855, June 3, 1855, p. 256. At this time, French was a supporter of popular sovereignty. He wrote on July 1, 1855: "I am for letting every State in this Union enjoy its rights fully under the Constitution." He later admitted: "I

Whatever French's intentions, on May 29, 1855, President Pierce received word of French's political straying and hastily invited him to his home to discuss the matter of his involvement with a rival political party. French hesitantly assured him that he was not a Know-Nothing. French acknowledged that he had wanted to "tell him *all* the truth about it—that [he] had been initiated and withdrew," but Pierce immediately proceeded to decry the Know-Nothings and vowed to "remove everyone from the party who took office as soon as he ascertained the fact." The day after, French discussed the situation with a friend and fellow clerk. French decided to fully inform President Pierce of his position—a disclosure that left French "feeling cheerful & happy." Nevertheless, French admitted that Washington was "rife with rumors of [his] removal, & with all sorts of lies to [his] prejudice." On the following day, French was once again requested by the President to "call up & see him." At that moment, French was handed by Pierce a secretive note affirming that French "'belonged to a Know-Nothing Lodge'." French, however, challenged his claim and explained to Pierce that he had already told him all that there was to tell. French spent the rest of the day trying to muster together enough political contacts to support his claim. By Monday, June 4th, to French's demise, Washington newspapers had caught on to the situation and promptly published two letters that French had written. Later that evening, French went into Pierce's office, wherein the President said to him, "Well, Major they have got you now!" After a brief dialogue, French immediately offered his resignation.⁴⁷

stand as firmly by the principle of *popular sovereignty* now as I did then, and think that the people everywhere should rule the political division (whether State, Territory, Empire or Principality) that they occupy." See July 1, 1855, pp. 260, 262. French later made the transition to the Republican Party.

⁴⁷ Ibid., June 10, 1855, pp. 256-259.

Benjamin French had always considered himself an active and politically engaged citizen. Of course, rotation in office necessitated a shifting, if not manufactured, degree of partisan loyalty from those affected. In the case of French, his political proclivities and identity were best left to the pages of his journal—that is, of course, if he hoped to maintain a government job in Washington’s intensely partisan political environment. To that end, French bitterly criticized Pierce’s administration immediately after his dismissal. The “present *Administration* Democrat, that has established the principle of taking into the Democratic ranks every Whig who was not a Know-Nothing, or, being one, left their ranks to *get into those* of the Democratic Party!” he wrote disparagingly. “Poor Pierce, I actually pity him, when driven to such shifts to sustain his weak & unprincipled Administration.”⁴⁸

II

In 1836, a pamphlet, titled “Dialogue between a One Thousand Dollar Clerk and a Member of Congress,” was distributed throughout Washington. Its goal was to give credence to the “arguments employed” by clerks and members of Congress regarding their salaries. Although perhaps fictitious in its form, the pamphlet successfully underscored many of the same arguments that would appear in congressional debates twenty years later. At the heart of the dialogue was the conception that clerks found it increasingly difficult to maintain middle-class norms of respectability and proper living. The diminishing status of clerks in the years leading up to the Civil War pushed them into claiming a cultural and professional authority that distinguished themselves from the nation’s working classes and more closely aligned them with Washington’s official society. At one point in the dialogue, it was suggested by the nameless

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 259-260.

member of Congress that a clerk's salary ought to allow clerks to live "plentifully...but not extravagantly." The clerk responded by suggesting: "Our style of living...is regulated by those around us—our associates. The nature of our employment causes some degree of intimacy with the highest officers, and other citizens of the first standing. You would not have us appear before them, or even at home—in the costume of outdoor day laborers?" According to the clerk, the costs and expenses of maintaining an idealized middle-class life in Washington only guaranteed a life "loaded with debt." In response, the congressman asked: "Is there not a way to curtail your expenses, and to come down to a more humble style of living, and yet maintain your standing in society?"⁴⁹ This question, of course, would be a source of anxiety for clerks living in Washington and working in one of its federal departments throughout the antebellum period. The clerk sardonically replied that the "style of living" for some clerks was not even equal "to that of many mechanics" in Washington, and most were certainly "far behind them [the mechanics] in independence."⁵⁰

Demands for an increased salary reflected a desire on behalf of clerks to maintain an elevated social and professional status in Washington. But this was never an easy task. Without an adequate salary, clerks found it increasingly difficult to adopt aristocratic ways and align themselves with Washington's official society by separating themselves from Washington's and the nation's working classes. The domestic experience for clerks was alien to their vision of what constituted a respectable and honorable way of living. The widespread, although uneven, decline of merit as a promotional policy within the departments, only to be replaced by partisan

⁴⁹ *Dialogue between a One Thousand Dollar Clerk and a Member of Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Jacob Gideon, Jr., 1836), 25, 10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

patronage practices, combined with the expensive standard of living to create for clerks a crisis in domesticity. Clerks, however, sought to resolve this problem by pushing on Congress a need for merit-based reform and a modern system of salary classifications. Demands for a refined standard of living on behalf of clerks were systematically interwoven into the bureaucratization of the federal government as they intersected with, and gave meaning to, pleas for the professionalization and modernization of government labor.⁵¹

The living arrangements in Washington were not like other nineteenth-century American cities. In 1866, *Fraser's Magazine* compared the city to a “large and not very convenient hotel.” Washington antiquarian, Helen Nicolay, recalled that boardinghouses were merely small hotels. Unlike other American cities, Nicolay recognized, it was unusual for families to own their own home and work out domestic matters in “decent privacy.” Only the wealthiest could afford the high-costs and social luxuries of a hotel; others were content to reside in boardinghouses. But this too proved to be costly for clerks with families to support. Prior to the beginning of the 1836 Congressional session, one Washington resident described in a personal letter that “every boarding house is crowded, and charges enormous.” Due to the high price of board—as high as

⁵¹ See *Clerkships in Washington*, 12-15. Washington presents a bit of an anomaly for accepted versions of middle-class formation in the nineteenth-century United States. According to the Richard L. Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1992), refinement represented the modality of social class in the United States, most of which was realized and imagined through domestic arrangements. To be sure, clerks worked to achieve respectability and refinement, but due to the political and economic circumstances of living and working in Washington, found it difficult to achieve. Career-minded clerks, united by a shared aspiration of professionalizing their labor, thus looked toward the federal government with a reformative eye to partially help achieve this goal. On antebellum middle-class domesticity as ideological and culturally binding despite widespread economic stratification, instability, and structural differences, see Debby Applegate, “Henry Ward Beecher and the ‘Great Middle Class:’ Mass-Market Intimacy and Middle-Class Identity,” in *The Middle Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class*, eds. Burton J. Bledstein and Robert D. Johnston (New York: Routledge, 2001), 107-124.

\$15 per week—boarders were forced to “change their quarters” and move to a location further from the Capitol and federal departments. In addition to the cost of boarding, “everything [was] extravagantly high,” even the price of flour.⁵²

Washington’s large transient population, particularly when congress was in session, added to the popularity of boardinghouses. Consequently, keeping a boardinghouse was one of the more profitable business ventures in Washington outside of working for the government. The women who owned and operated boardinghouses were often widows of men who died while in office, including clerks. As part of the local folklore, it was assumed that widows took in boarders out of desperation. This trope was especially popular in reference to clerks. According to popular imagination, the genteel widows, as well as the wives and daughters of dismissed clerks, were forced to relinquish their respectable lifestyle and take up boarders in order to survive. As explained by J.F.H. Claiborne, “When a poor unfriended official dies at Washington, the only resource of his widow is—a boarding-house.” But this venture, Claiborne elaborated, was also a “hard struggle” if not a “fatal dowry.”⁵³

In his brief visit to Washington, Francis J. Grund noticed that there was a “good deal of aristocratic classification, owing to the different sets of senators and representatives” that took up space in them. Moreover, each boardinghouse took on a “particular coterie” that was defined by

⁵² *Fraser’s Magazine*, September 1866; Helen Nicolay, *Our Capital on the Potomac* (New York: The Century Co., 1924), 288, 292; Maria Steiger to Mother, Dec. 4, 1836, Shriver Family Papers, Special Collections Department, Maryland Historical Society.

⁵³ Gamber, 50; *Daily National Intelligencer*, December 13, 1843; J.F.H. Claiborne, *Life and Times of Gen. Sam Dale the Mississippi Partisan* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1860), 204-05; “A Boardinghouse Scene in Washington,” *Spirit of the Times*, Nov. 28, 1846.

its boarders.⁵⁴ The public nature of domestic life in Washington, however, led at least one observer to believe that “the comfort of home” was an “unheard-of-thing.” Boardinghouses were often antithetical to the ideal of domestic privacy. While they may have provided for both officeseekers and clerks a potential doorway into Washington’s important political and social networks, they were not always conducive to clerks hoping to raise their family in Washington. Moreover, fearful of being dismissed out of office or in falling victim to an act of character assassination, clerks could not safely participate in Washington’s partisan political networks, which were, in part, sustained through Washington’s boardinghouse culture. As clerks felt their social position diminish in Washington throughout the antebellum period, a shared sense of displacement and loss of personal autonomy emerged. Boardinghouses had become a source of criticism by those in favor of the intimacy and privacy of a middle-class home. By 1850, the desire for a permanent and private home had become a key component to middle-class family life. A private home could safely separate clerks from the cruel and debased public world of partisan politics that was more specific to boardinghouse life.⁵⁵

Boardinghouse life, low salaries, the impermanence of holding a clerkship, and

⁵⁴ Francis J. Grund, *Aristocracy in America, from the Sketch-book of a German Nobleman* (New York: Harper, 1959 [1839]), 230; Wilhelmus Bogart Bryan, *A History of the National Capital from its Foundation Through the Period of the Adoption of the Organic Act*, vol. 2 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 62-63, quote on 63.

⁵⁵ On boardinghouses and middle-domesticity, see Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On the cultural ideal of home, see Clifford Edward Clark Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 238-279; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

Washington's social and political setting, to be certain, placed strains on an idealized domestic life. Depending on their family's wealth and previous occupation, some clerks could afford to either purchase or rent a home, many were forced to reside in boardinghouses. William Steiger, of Maryland, began working as a draughtsman in the Patent Office in 1833 at a salary of roughly \$1,000. Steiger, however, was able to privately supplement his income by copying work out of office. At times, Steiger earned as much as \$27 per week in addition to his salary. His desire to earn an additional income, however, required him to neglect "exercise" and, at times, work until midnight. Steiger was "so anxious to get out of debt & begin to lay a little money aside" that his wife, Maria, feared he would "injure his health." Maria thus offered up her pen to assist in the household economy. It was not uncommon for Steiger to give his wife a share of the copying duties. Maria believed she could copy "as good as he could" and bring upwards of \$5 for just half a day's work. William Steiger and his wife's labor allowed them to move from their previously rented home to a "more comfortable" and "conspicuous" rental home at \$250 per year. A high price to be sure, but William thought it would be better to pay an extra \$100 in rent "than in Doctor's bills exclusive of the risk of sickness" that would have resulted had he stayed in his previous home.⁵⁶

Unlike Steiger, David Heaton resided at a boardinghouse in Washington while his wife frequently remained at their home in Portsmouth, Ohio, along with their children. An attorney who specialized in land claims, Heaton began clerking in the General Land Office in 1836, only to be dismissed from office after the election of President Polk in 1844 on a rumor that he was "a warm friend of Gen. Harrison." To be certain, Heaton's time as a clerk in Washington also

⁵⁶ John Craig to William Steiger, Nov. 23, 1833, Maria Steiger to Elizabeth Steiger, March 10, 1834, William Steiger to Father, January 4, 1834, Shriver Family Papers, Special Collections Department, Maryland Historical Society.

placed a great amount of pressure on their marriage. When the two resided in Washington together, they yearned for a more domestic lifestyle. In 1840, the two finally moved out of their boardinghouse and purchased a house of their own. A personal letter from their son, Leonidas, expressed a sincere happiness for them on their move. “I knew you could not stand it long in a boardinghouse,” he wrote. Yet David Heaton’s wife, Mira, found it difficult to accommodate herself to Washington society, residing with her husband for less than three of the eight years he worked as a ranking clerk in the Land Office. “I dislike the noise, the negroes, the disagreeable sights that offend the eye,” Mira disclosed to David from her home in Portsmouth. Additionally, she did not want her two sons to be “destroyed & contaminated by the vices” of Washington, to which she easily related to one big “Babel.” Accustomed to a middle-class ideal of domestic privacy and refinement, Mira continually pleaded for her husband to leave his office in Washington and resume work as a property lawyer in Ohio. Throughout his stay in Washington, Mira continually professed that she would not move there with him and have her “peace of mind disturbed.” Nor was she willing to leave her “quiet happy home” for a residence in that “polluted loathsome city.”⁵⁷

The reasons why David Heaton refused to leave his position in Washington and return home to his wife in Ohio are difficult to determine. It may have been that clerking in the General Land Office provided a better income than what he could muster by working in Ohio. The salary he received from his clerkship at least partly provided for his family the proper furnishings for a middle-class home. On at least one occasion, his wife requested that he send to Ohio furniture

⁵⁷ Rough Draft, No Date, Box 1, Folder 10, Leonidas to Parents, June 18, 1841, Box 1, Folder 13, Mira to David, March 3, 1844, Box 1, Folder 18, March 26, 1841, Box 1, Folder 14, June 12, Dec. 12, 1841, Box 1, Folder 15, April 23, 1842, Box 1, Folder 16, David F. Heaton Papers, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

for their parlor. “There is only looking glasses and chairs in it,” his wife justified. “I am ashamed of it.” Another reason could have been because Heaton enjoyed the social atmosphere and frequent fraternization of Washington. On more than one occasion, Heaton’s wife admitted her jealousy and frustration over “the ladies in Washington.” Evidently, Mira’s feelings had been “wound” and “made to feel bad” by women in Portsmouth who boasted of their personal connections in Washington and felt inclined to remind Mira of her husband’s scandalous “gallantries,” specifically the possibility of him “running off with some one there.” Mira responded by reminding her husband “to be more careful and have less to say to the flirts of the place” and to not make a “dunce” of himself while “flirting with women.” Clerking in Washington may also have allowed for Heaton an opportunity to avoid being part of an unhappy and uncompromising marriage. Or, perhaps, he simply could not afford to maintain a home that was properly fitting for his entire family. Evidence presents only one view in this regard. But whatever the reason, his absence away from home created a great deal of unhappiness for his wife and their marriage.⁵⁸

The main source of unhappiness for Mira was her unwillingness to accept her current domestic situation and David’s refusal to leave Washington and return “*home*.” In one sentimental and emotionally engaged letter, Mira begged David to return to his “Home” where all is “sweet” and “quiet” in its “purity” and “chastity.” “But,” she reminded him, “you don’t see things as I do.” Mira’s marital situation had also become the “laugh of scorn” by local residents who “sneered” over the prospect of David “keeping house” in Washington while his wife lived in Ohio. Mira also worried over the rearing of their children, for she feared that without a “good Husband & kind Father” their boys would grow up without proper “counsel and support.” If that

⁵⁸ Mira to David, April 23, Oct. 23, 1842, January 4, April 5, 1843, Box 1, Folder 16, *ibid*.

was not enough, Mira's husband's absence created in her a strong feeling of loneliness. Continuous correspondence through mail was not enough. After one visit to the local post office in 1843, Mira returned feeling "disappointed" in him for not responding to her "first rate letter." Frustrated and spite-ridden, she immediately wrote to him: "I am entirely in the dark about you or how you are coming on but I suppose as usual, attending to business in the morning and the fair sex in the evening."⁵⁹ For Mira, the public character of living in Washington was antithetical to living at home. Only in the privacy of home could domestic happiness be achieved.

In the political climate of rotation in office, clerks became extremely risk averse and cautious to make any long-term and permanent investments. The prospect of being rotated out of office was not only an ominous fear; it was a reality for some. A dismissed clerk who was once dependent on a clerk's salary for support was more vulnerable to debt. With that in mind, Joseph Hand reminded his wife, Catharine, on numerous occasions that "under the present state of party discipline" she must not be too "sanguine" in planning for the future.⁶⁰ For Hand, this inability to plan for the future left him especially distressed, for his tenuous position in Washington prevented him from attaining what he desired most: a home.

For nearly two decades, Mrs. Hand lived with her and husband's children outside of Washington in her family's farm in Madison, Connecticut, while her husband lived in and out of

⁵⁹ Mira to David, March 26, 1841, Box 1, Folder 14, April 23, 1842, May 30, 1843, Box 1, Folder 16, *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, July 20, 1835.

various boardinghouses and rental houses throughout Washington.⁶¹ Periodically, his wife and children would live with him in Washington, usually in a boardinghouse or rented home. But this was usually for only brief periods of time and ended with a great deal of disappointment and frustration. It was always less expensive to “take up boarding,” but Joseph Hand felt “unfit for such a life and disliked the idea altogether.” It was not uncommon for Catharine to visit her husband in unexpected intervals. Catharine always had to let Joseph know ahead of time so he could make arrangements at the boardinghouse in which he resided at the time. This experiment in marriage and domestic living was, however, a significant source of unhappiness for Joseph Hand and his wife. While separated from his family, Hand began to feel that his “mode of life” had become “essentially absurd and unhappy.” In a manner that would be expressed over and over again, Hand noticed in himself a “feeling turning very strongly home-ward” and expressed to his wife his unhappiness and despair: “I look on every man, cottages and citizen, who has a quiet settled home, as happiness for them I am—and it is now the height of my earthly situation

⁶¹ Government clerks living and working in antebellum Washington were thus entangled between the political transformations that were taking place within Washington and an emerging and an increasingly popular idealized middle-class ethos of domesticity. In the first half of the nineteenth century, boarding was a common practice by residents of all social and economic classes in America’s burgeoning cities. Yet due to their public nature, boardinghouses had become a source of criticism by those in favor of the intimacy and privacy of a middle-class home. Thusly so, by 1850 the desire for a permanent and private home had become a key component to middle-class family life. On boardinghouses and middle-domesticity, see Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On the cultural ideal of home, see Clifford Edward Clark Jr., *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); Bushman, *The Refinement of America*, 238-279; Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catharine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973).

to have a *home*.”⁶²

Joseph Hand's living situation and longing for a home not only shaped his experience as a government clerk in Washington, it also placed a great deal of strain on his marriage. He was accordingly forced to make difficult compromises and decisions regarding his work, marriage, and family. When his wife chose to live with him in Washington, Hand usually rented a house. In order to be able to afford rent, Hand sometimes rented out one room within the home to an additional boarder. But this too failed to live up to Hand's expectation of what constituted an ideal home. His wife, Catharine, usually only lived with him for a few months and sometimes up to a year. The rest of the time, the two attempted to “live partly in the country, and partly in the city,” all of which amounted to “much discomfort and enormous expense.” Middle-class domestic happiness did not come easily in Washington, where family life exposed contradictions not only about idealized conceptions of class and gender but also between rural and urban living. Clerks like Hand found it difficult to reconcile their experiences of living and working in Washington and still uphold their idealized conceptions of domesticity and respectability.⁶³

Separated from one another for periods of close to a year, the Hands experimented with a domestic arrangement that ran against the emerging cultural logic of respectable family life. Nonetheless, the attempt to live with one foot in the “country” and another in the “city” simply could not be made into a “practical and comfortable mode of life.” “I have often thought about life in the country,” Hand confessed to his wife in the midst of an 1834 epistolary exchange

⁶² Joseph to Catharine, May 24, June 14, May 11, 1831, July 19, 1831, August 16, 1831, Container 3, March 22, 1834, Container 4, John Aldrich Stephenson Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (cited hereafter as JASC).

⁶³ See Applegate, “Henry Ward Beecher and the ‘Great Middle Class’,” 111.

regarding the potential of moving to a home outside of Washington in Georgetown. But living in the country was simply not feasible for his occupational and their familial demands. “Life on the heights of Georgetown...finds inconvenience and unimportance, and would end in coming back to the city.” This, Hand assured his wife, would be the inevitable result of any “mixed” plan that they might pursue. Nonetheless, while Hand may have acknowledged the city to be their certain destination, he also hoped to avoid raising his family in the city and educating his children to the debased “city habits & life.” In regard to raising their son, Chauncey, Hand said to his wife. “You want Chauncey to be a man of God? What more effectual mode to prevent it than to bring him up in Washington? What more effectual mode to make him physically and morally feeble? The moral & mental power that governs the world is reared in the country.”⁶⁴

Country-living represented a moral and physical safe-haven. Washington, on the other hand, was seemingly its antithesis. Not only was Washington an improper place to raise a child, it also negatively impacted the “constitution” and “health” of Joseph Hand. “I have stayed here too long for myself, if not for my family,” contended Hand. “I have stayed here until, under the sure but gradual influence of climate & occupation, my naturally good constitution is greatly injured.” The humidity, cramped living and office spaces, and crowded and dirty streets of Washington, combined with an occupation that inhibited an active outdoor life, all exposed Hand to disease and moral deprivations. Hand thus frequently contemplated leaving Washington, but had little means of obtaining an independent living elsewhere. Mrs. Hand also pleaded for her husband to leave Washington and start anew in their anticipated “*home*.” To her regret, Joseph thought it best to stay in Washington and continue on with their experiment in living. Despite

⁶⁴ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, Nov. 24, 1832, Feb. 24, March 14, 1834, Container 4, JASC. On the theoretical implications and historical development of imagined country life versus imagined city life and their relationship to industrial capitalist society, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Hand's fondness for farming, Catherine failed to persuade her husband to leave Washington and "locate permanently" to his family's home in Madison, CT, where Hand owned some land that he attempted to make money off of by renting to local farmers. On one occasion, Catherine pleaded to Hand to leave Washington and devote his time to the "success" of their "farming experiment." Hand responded, "You argue as if I was going to embark my all in a new sea." Hand explained, "Farming is not a principle, but an incident in my plan," which was to improve the land and then sell it for profit. Independence, for Hand, was the ultimate goal, and he figured that with the economic transformations taking place, farming was a risky rather than viable alternative to achieving independence. He thus suggested to his wife to continue to "force the experiment" and "try" to live in Washington where he at least had a job, a salary.⁶⁵

Year after year, Joseph and his wife negotiated the terms of their domestic arrangement. Despite an obvious unease over city-living and an apparent dislike of Washington's weather and society, the prospect of owning a home in Washington had become by 1834 an accepted ideal, at least on behalf of Joseph Hand. But Hand's inclination to purchase a home and relocate his family to Washington was continually put on hold by fears that he might be turned out of office. At one point in 1834, in the midst of rumor and speculation, Hand recommend to his wife, "It is my settled opinion that we should form no plan, indulge no idea of home-keeping here." Reluctantly, Hand proposed that he and his wife should once again "break-up" and continue to live separately until he could surely provide a "permanent home" for his family. Joseph Hand clearly felt these anxieties and personal dilemmas from election to election. Two years later, Hand revealed to his wife that he felt a personal duty and "high conviction...to learn publishing,"

⁶⁵ Joseph Hand to Catherine Hand, March 14, 22, 1834, Container 4, JASC. Hand's uncertain "path" was, to be sure, shared by many middling men in the antebellum period. See Blumin, *Emergence of the Middle Class*, 68-78.

a career change that he thought might provide a better opportunity for his family to settle down in a permanent home. By the presidential election of 1840, Hand's reluctance to purchase a home once again emerged. Speaking for many government officials living and working in Washington, Hand repeated to his wife: "[T]here is no safety here. We are the helpless victims offered up in sacrifice to the madness and cruelty of party action." "No one can calculate what is to come." A year later, due to the failure of the United States Bank, which forced some property in Georgetown into the market at a reduced price, and with the Whigs fully restored to the presidency, Joseph Hand safely committed himself to purchasing a new home. Although further from his workplace than he would like, he believed, he was convinced that the home, including a handsomely furnished drawing room and parlor, would elevate his family to a "position of much respectability & comfort." Ever cautious, Hand reasoned that if he were to be dismissed from office his place would make a "good house to rent," for rental homes were in great demand in Georgetown.⁶⁶ After clerking in Washington for over 20 years, Joseph Hand had just begun to secure himself financially as a respectable, middle-class Washington resident by 1841. Unfortunately, Hand died in office three years later due to an unexpected illness.

III

Government clerks attempted to remedy their domestic crisis by petitioning to Congress for a salary increase on different occasions. Most commonly, clerks called attention to the expenses of raising a family in Washington and how a change in salary and system of

⁶⁶ Ibid., March 27, 1834, July 22, 1836, July 8, 1840, Oct. 2, 8, 27, 1841. Joseph Hand's longing for a permanent home was expressed on frequent occasions, see Joseph to Catherine., Aug. 4, Nov. 24, 1832, Feb. 28, March 14, 22, April 6, July 9, Nov. 7, 14, 1834, March 21, Dec. 15, 1835, Jan. 19, April 9, Oct. 17, Nov. 1, 1836, Sept. 30, Oct. 19, 21, 1837, May 24, Nov. 12, 1838, Feb. 13, March 12, 1839, Catherine to Joseph, June 28, 1840.

classification was necessary for clerks to maintain a “decent support and a moderate competency.” According to an 1836 memorial, “no salaries below fourteen hundred dollars...in the absence of other resources” was sufficient for raising a family. Importantly, clerks pressed on Congress the relationship between “habits of industry” in public service and a shared faith that their labor would at last lead to personal and familial independence. Too often, the memorialists insisted, clerks left their families in “destitute,” even after “years of honorable labor” and in practicing “prudence and economy” in their daily affairs. The solution, clerks insisted, was to provide “a proportionally increased reward” based on experience and merit, “thereby establishing reasonable differences of compensation for services more or less important to the public, and by holding out the prospects of advancement to a moderate extent, providing the strongest incentive to exertion.” Unquestionably, the memorialists claimed, the existing classification system pointed to an “obvious discrimination” against the duties performed by clerks and their salaries.⁶⁷

The plea for an improved standard of living on behalf of clerks was carefully interwoven into the measures of reform suggested and passed by Congress prior to the Civil War. Over the course of the first substantial debate to improve the standards of compensation for clerks in 1836, it was admitted by politicians that the memorials and requests on behalf of department clerks undoubtedly “deserve consideration.” The congressmen who pushed for compensation reform carefully investigated and categorized the duties of clerks and their respective remunerations; but they also set out to reform the salaries of clerks “commensurate with the present expenses of

⁶⁷ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Petition of Clerks in the Departments of Government for Increase of Compensation*, Ex. Doc., no. 196, 24th Cong., 1st sess., April 1, 1836, 1-3.

maintaining a family” in Washington. At least a substantial portion of congressmen acknowledged that there were “few parts of the country where the articles of leading expense in housekeeping are higher.” A desire was also expressed to increase the salaries of clerks so that their families could be “relieved from immediate want” upon their passing. Congressmen were also careful to explore whether or not the salaries of clerks had been a source of “distress” merely to “improvidence and mismanagement.” In fact, it was this latter indictment that propelled the heads of office to increase surveillance on clerks “in their private walks of life.”⁶⁸

The popular view that clerks carelessly and extravagantly spent their money was, however, challenged in a report from the Secretary of Treasury, Levi Woodbury, who evidently asked one of his clerks to submit in evidence his detailed account book of household and supplementary expenses for 1835. The clerk’s family, which “generally consisted of three grown persons, five children and two servants,” had accumulated roughly \$1,400 in expenses, which did not even include “house-rent or pew-rent.” The clerk was also careful to note that neither “wine or spirituous liquor” was used in the family nor did he on occasion hold social dinners.⁶⁹ The close connection between compensation reform, salary rank, and the cost of living in Washington enforced upon clerks a proper moral decorum in and out of the office. To be sure, the fidelity of clerks was closely tied to their spending habits. Clerks who threw lavish dinner parties, for example, were likely more open to attacks of character assassination and thus more susceptible to being removed out of office.

⁶⁸ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks in Public Offices—Increase Pay Of*, H. Rep., no. 641, 24th Cong., 1st sess., May 10, 1836, 3-4.

⁶⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report from the Secretary of the Treasury*, Sen. Doc., no. 355, 24th Cong., 1st sess., May 4, 1836, 3-12.

Alongside the moral character and spending habits of clerks, the marital status of clerks was also invoked in the push to enact compensation reform. Rather than increase the salaries of clerks, some thought that it might be worthwhile to extend the “emoluments of office” only to unmarried men. The reasoning for this was to “discourage or preclude the employment of those with families.” To be certain, the salary of a government clerkship more thoroughly filled the pockets of single men than family men. Amos Kendall, for example, reported in 1836 that a salary of \$900 could comfortably support a single man living in Washington. But if a clerk were to have a family with children dependent upon his salary for support, he could “lay up less out of \$1,500 than the single man can out of \$900.”⁷⁰ Although perhaps fiscally pertinent, debates regarding the marital status of clerks were also extensions of the crisis in domesticity that government clerks faced while in office. One supporter of increasing the compensation of clerks compared their salaries to a “sovereign antidote against all matrimonial inclinations.” “Instead of employing all single men, as some Members of Congress would do,” it was recommended to “encourage marriage, as a great means of promoting the morals and happiness of society, and the strength and prosperity of the nation.”⁷¹

Beginning in the 1850s, the push for merit-based reform in the federal offices was highlighted by the passing of the Classification and Pay Act of 1853. In addition to creating an increase in compensation, the act made inroads toward standardizing and more carefully classifying the duties of clerks in relation to rank and salary. Although it did not establish in policy a move toward a merit-based system of promotion, it did partially strengthen an ill-

⁷⁰ U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, *Clerks in Public Offices*, 4; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Postmaster General*, Sen. Doc., no. 362, 24th Cong., 1st sess., May 9, 1836, 3.

⁷¹ *Dialogue*, 9.

established system of classification. Similar to the reforms initiated in 1836, the 1853 Act was heavily influenced by demands made by clerks. The cost of supporting a family in Washington commonly took center stage in this debate. It was even suggested in one influential 1851 report that the \$1,000 salary of a fourth class clerk be “occupied by young unmarried men.” While this salary was not sufficient for a clerk with a family dependent upon him for support, it was “considered sufficient to ensure the service of properly educated and properly qualified single or unmarried men.”⁷² The consideration of family status in determining clerk salaries was also underscored in an 1851 published letter to a member of Congress, which declared that “the estimate for compensation for services should be made, first, according to the capacity and usefulness of the person employed, and secondly with reference to the cost of maintaining the average numbers of persons depending upon the labor of each efficient man.”⁷³

Congressional debates regarding patronage practices and merit-based reform increased in frequency throughout the antebellum period. Government officials and congressmen responded to clerks and their push for reform in a variety of ways. Consequently, Washington became a meeting ground for ideas and ideals regarding public service to take shape. Those opposed to reform commonly favored patronage rationality, and maintained that no one held a vested right to public office. In 1849, Ohio Representative and Democrat, William Sawyer, downplayed clerks’ demands, and likened them to the “productions” of “sycophantic drone[s]” who had spent their life working in one of the federal departments and “was frightened at the possibility of

⁷² See White, *The Jacksonians*, 363-418, esp. 391-393; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report of the Secretaries of the Treasury, of the Interior, of War, of the Navy, and of the Postmaster General*, Ex. Doc., no. 69, 32th Cong., 1st sess., May 3, 1852, 9.

⁷³ *Clerkships in Washington*, 12. On the active efforts of clerks to persuaded Congress to initiate reform through the 1850s, see *Memorial of the Clerks in the Executive Departments at Washington City* (1857).

having his fodder taken away.” Sawyer would have just as soon seen clerks rotated out of office in order to have his “hardy, manly, patriotic constituency,” which consisted almost entirely of “farmers and mechanics,” put to work in one of the departments. While many debates served the purpose of political agitation, congressional debates also helped create within Washington a discursive framework that served as a basis for those for and against civil service reform and in separating public service further from partisan politics.⁷⁴

While the topic of compensation reform was debated in Congress at various times throughout the antebellum period, by 1850 it had also become a frequent topic of conversation throughout Washington, if not the nation. The push for reform and its accompanying arguments reverberated throughout Washington and national newspapers. In 1851, New York’s *Weekly Herald* revealed itself to be unsympathetic toward Washington’s clerking class and their demands for increased compensation. Compared to the clerks in “public employ,” who only had to work seven hours a day, similarly employed mechanics not only had to work nine to ten hours, they also received less pay. “The truth is, reform is needed in the departments, from the head to the tail,” scoffed the *Herald*.⁷⁵ Alternatively, Indiana’s *Evansville Journal*, presented a more sympathetic stance toward reform after it caught wind of the attempt by Democratic Senator Robert Hunter of Virginia to curb rotation in office by proclaiming that merit-based reform would “benefit the country by checking the rush” of officeseekers to Washington in addition to

⁷⁴ *Cong. Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st sess., 1846, appendix, 729; *idem.*, 31st Cong., 1st sess., 1850, appendix, 48. See also “Removals and Appointments to Office,” *Cong. Globe*, 31st Cong. 1st sess., 1850, appendix, 481-543.

⁷⁵ *The Weekly Herald*, August 02, 1851.

“improving the efficiency of the service in the Departments.”⁷⁶

Debates surrounding attempts to reform public service disseminated from within Washington in the 1850s. Here, clerks actively used newspapers, especially the Whig-friendly *Daily National Intelligencer*, to inform politicians and anyone with an interest in their cause. As ubiquitous members of Washington society, clerks and their claims on public service were contested issues that garnered public attention within Washington. They were not, to be sure, inconsequential spectacles that merely gave Americans living outside of Washington an opportunity to debate political economy. In 1853, the promotion of long-term Washington resident John M. Brodhead, from Chief Clerk to Second Comptroller in the Treasury Department, was heralded by its example of “*promoting* clerks from a lower to a higher grade.” Examples of meritorious promotions with the department were commonly coupled with statistics from congressional reports and documents that were intended to thoroughly introduce “the principle of graduated salaries.”⁷⁷

Clerks also used newspapers to reshape public discourse that effectively viewed clerks as morally debauched, even “rude and insolent lazaroni [sic].” An 1853 editorial by a clerk challenged this popular view by asserting that the mass of clerks were “gentlemen” who “discharge their duties faithfully, not from fear of removal, but from personal integrity...and that feeling of laudable ambition from which few are exempt.” Another letter to the editor, “Clerks,” made an attempt to elevate the labor of government clerks by equating it to the labor of a

⁷⁶ Beginning in 1851, Hunter, along with the support with the Secretaries of the Treasury, Interior, War, Navy, and the Postmaster General, helped establish a foundation for the Classification and Pay Act of 1853. Hunter actively sought to reform public service throughout the 1850s. See White, 365-371. *Evansville Journal* article reprinted in *Daily National Intelligencer*, July 7, 1858.

⁷⁷ *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 28, August 12, 1853.

merchant's clerk. "Can the Government progress in its various details without men of such knowledge?" the letter asked. "Ought not Government to make as fair exhibits of work in neatness, cleanliness, and perfectness as the merchants, or ought it not to surpass it if possible?" Clerks also used newspapers to give shape to congressional debates. At the height of congressional debates regarding compensation and classification in 1853, one clerk used his editorial to "make some suggestions on the topic." A calculated attempt to garner public sympathy, an editorial by the wife of a \$1,000 clerk claimed that the mere subsistence level of a clerk's salary produces in the families of clerks a "burning anxiety," and hoped that the current appeal of clerks for an increase of compensation would be granted so to "lessen those anxieties."⁷⁸

The unnerving threat of removal and the high cost of living in Washington increasingly pushed clerks further from the center of Washington's official and social life, relegating them to a distinct social position that paralleled their rank within the federal bureaucracy. But clerks hoped to elevate their social position by suggesting a symbolic base to their profession. Career-minded government clerks and their followers hoped to rationalize and professionalize nonmanual government labor, an endeavor that carried with it a specific class aspiration and basis of legitimacy, all of which found their way into a discourse that centered on merit-based reform. Time and again, clerks claimed that their labor was important, highly skilled, and involved a great deal of intellectual rigor, as well necessary for the growth and operation of the federal government.

Washington's clerking class was, to be sure, uniquely tied to the expansion and development of the American state. Clerks were among the first to read government and

⁷⁸ *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 28, August 12, November 4, June 14, 1853, June 8, (see also Aug. 12, 16, 1852), 1853, Aug. 11, 1852 (see also Aug. 9, 1852).

legislative documents and listen to hearings on the floors of Congress—official reportage that facilitated the development of the modern state.⁷⁹ Clerks, in turn, examined this material, and presented it back to Congress (and the public) in ways that pushed toward merit-based reform and challenged patronage rationality. Take, for example, the short-lived periodical, *The United States Postal Guide and Official Advertiser*. First published in Washington in 1850 by former clerks with long-ties to the federal departments, the paper’s purpose was clear: “to impart instruction, in the general and detail, to the Officers and Agents of the American public....and to make them and the people at large acquainted with the organization, decisions and action of the Executive departments of their government.” According to the publication’s founders, there had never before been in the nation’s history a “vehicle for the regular and proper communication of information of this kind.” In addition to clarifying the different ranks, duties, compensations, administrative procedures, and divisions within each executive department, the publication noted changes in national policy on particulars ranging from land warrants to the price of postal stamps, and offered synopses, abridgements, and analyses—more reader-friendly versions—of congressional documents and reports. Its editors reasoned, “If we succeed in rendering the function of the primary office more uniform, methodical and exact, we shall make the administrative duties of the departments more easy and effective, and thereby promote the real and substantial interests of the country.” They hoped to do so, moreover, “apart from and independently of any party or personal interest.”⁸⁰

The United States Postal Guide provided a forum for clerks and other informed citizens

⁷⁹ See Frankel Oz, *States of Inquiry: Social Investigations and Print Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain and the United States* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

⁸⁰ *The United States Postal Guide and Official Advertiser*, 1, no. 7 (January 1851), 1.

to comment on changes in national administrative policy, as well as suggest alternative lines of action. Indeed, it appeared to emerge at the right time, in the midst of the Compromise of 1850 and ten years before the beginnings of the Civil War. Its senior editor, Peter G. Washington, had been a long-term clerk in multiple federal departments in Washington, and could thus boast of his understanding, experience, and connection to the business of government. A prominent member of the city's clerking class, Peter Washington hoped to elevate in the minds of Americans knowledge of the actions and workings of the government. In such, he hoped to put forward a new, state-centered nationalism—one that could perhaps potentially ease some of the bitterness and disputes between the North and South. Not only was this information crucial to the “officer,” it was also important to the collective citizenship of the nation. As stated by the paper's editors, the “great mass of the community know nothing” of the inner-workings of the government and the reports, documents, and bills that pass through both Houses of Congress. By disseminating important public knowledge and information to all parts of the country, clerks hoped to bring the operations of the federal government closer to the reading public. Undeniably, the chief readership of the periodical was fellow clerks and government officials. In this case, clerks also used the *Postal Guide* as a medium to discuss the intricacies of a developing bureaucracy. Current methods of record-keeping and the filing of endless numbers of government documents, for instance, were often debated and critiqued, and alternative methods were proposed in order to make current systems more productive and efficient, more beneficial to the public.

A resourceful device and expression of Washington's clerking class, *The United States Postal Guide* sought to instill in government office, and the national state indirectly, a sense of legitimacy. At the same time, the *Postal Guide* also presented government office to be an

efficient instrument of political economy. Its writers underscored the ideal that public offices were products of the Constitution and were thus intended to serve the public in a purposeful and efficient manner. It furthermore noted that the “public advantage” of an efficient and transparent government authority had been severed due to “party strife” and the “eagerness of personal competition.” So as long as appointments were made out of “party service or party interest,” the national government would be left ineffective to serve its people, its editors imparted. “The people are apt to forget the benefits and convenience they derive from the faithful discharge of official duty.”⁸¹

Above all, the *Postal Guide* emerged out of a merit-based reform agenda that had developed from within Washington after 1850. Washington’s clerking class was a product of the contemporary political order but was also endangered by it. The paper thus aspired to make the “fatal machinations” of partisan politics public knowledge and instill in Americans the view that an efficient state authority was a public asset, rather than an oppressive and intrusive force. A national and rationalized administrative authority, suggested the *Postal Guide*, was not adverse to personal freedom. The vision of meritocracy that Washington’s clerking class held in the federal government, if realized, could be extended throughout the nation.⁸²

The *Postal Guide* continually pressed the issue of merit-based compensation reform, all the while offering reasons and justifications for a rationalized system of salary classifications.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 10-11.

⁸² The universal intentionality of *The United States Postal Guide* and its objective to produce government knowledge for a disengaged public suggests Hegel’s theory of the “universal class.” For Hegel, the interests of the state reflected the interests of civil bureaucrats (the universal class). See Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 107-108; G.H.W. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, tr. T.M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), sec. 260A-268A.

Similarly, it called attention to the evils of rotation in office and promoted the benefits of employing and promoting competent, knowledgeable clerks. In doing so, the periodical at times retold the history of government clerks in Washington, deliberately and nostalgically comparing the present to the past. On one occasion, the paper deliberately recalled the names of early members of Washington clerking class prior to 1818. “The clerks of that day, for clerical ability and personal worth, have never been passed,” it recalled. “The men accomplished a vast deal of work; but their minds were not disturbed by external annoyances.” At that time, “the rule of promotion prevailed,” and “clerks enjoyed the respect and favor of the community.” By 1850, salaries had “come to be regarded as the fit rewards of political or personal partisans or adherents,” attested the *Postal Guide*.⁸³ Only through efficiency and organizational competence, its editors praised, would the federal government be able to once again render its services effectively.

⁸³ *The United States Postal Guide*, January, 1851, 186-187, July 1851, 2, 3-5.

Epilogue: Somebody, Nobodies

“What the devils does Hamilton or Jefferson, in their graves, care about us, or our opinions?”
—Henry Clay Preuss, *Fashions and Follies of Washington Life* (1857), 1.2.128

The intersection between politics and society in antebellum Washington City was depicted in an 1857 play by Henry Clay Preuss, titled *Fashions and Follies of Washington Life*. An effort to invoke social awareness on stage, Clay’s play satirically explored the social and political contours of Washington. The purpose in writing the play, Preuss confided, was to “exhibit a panoramic view of characters and events, illustrative of Metropolitan life and society.” The “moral points” of the play, the author suggested, were not “aimed so much at men as at those *principles* and *practices* in our social and political body, which serve, more or less, to mould, and to *vitiate*, individual character.” According to one reviewer, the “literary merits” of the play were “first-rate,” especially “as a picture of society.” To that end, the play placed at center stage the lives and motivations of Washington’s consigned but demographically significant populous—its clerks and officeseekers. The plot unfolds around the actions of two government clerks, Delaney (“Colonel by curtesy”), an old Virginian aristocrat, distinguished clerk, and prominent Washington citizen. Also on stage was his arch enemy, John Sharker, a patronage clerk and “unmitigated compound of rascality” who wished to acquire the affection of Delaney’s daughter, Emma. In Sharker’s attempt to so, Preuss exposed the political issues of the day and purposely the influence of partisan politics and patronage rationality on Washington life.¹

¹ Henry Clay Preuss, *Fashions and Follies of Washington: A Play in Five Acts* (Washington, D.C.: Published by the Author, 1857), 3, 4; *Daily National Intelligencer*, June 11, 1857. The play’s significance as a form of social awareness is briefly discussed in Walter J. Meserve, “Social Awareness on Stage: 1850-1859,” in *The American Stage: Social and*

The first scene of the play fittingly begins in a department office, where Sharker revealed his desire to have his higher-up, Delaney, removed from office. Sharker justified his intention by revealing that Delaney demonstrated little respectability toward him when he first entered office. Sharker also insisted that Delaney refused to invite him into his home, which limited Sharker the “opportunity of winning his [Delaney’s] daughter’s affection.” What is more, Sharker insisted that Delaney went to great lengths to “poison” his daughter’s mind against him. But if that was not enough, Delaney had on one occasion attacked Sharker’s character before the whole office by labeling him a political “spy,” an undignified designation he received by influencing the dismissal of another clerk. For these reasons, Sharker professed that he would “*crush*” Delaney, “oust him out of his office...and leave him to starve on the cold charity of the world!” Sharker thereafter solicited the help of Sly, a department messenger, Sharker’s “tool,” and someone who was always “agreeable” for fear of being turned out of office. Together, the two sought out ways to turn public attention against Delaney. Sharker reasoned that if Delaney were out of work, he would be more likely to pass his daughter onto him, and “be disposed to look more favorably on a \$1,000 dollar clerk.”²

Sharker instructed Sly to “prove himself a true friend to the administration” and handover any information that might be used against Delaney. Sly responded by informing Sharker that Delaney commonly violated office rules by leaving work around noon “to git his bitters” in order to “ease his rumatiz or some kind of mizry in his stomach.” Sly also confided to Sharker that Delaney possessed “a great ambishin to keep up his old Virginny style” by throwing dinner parties for his “old chums and a sprinkling of members.” This, according to Sharker, amply

Economic Issues from the Colonial Period to the Present, eds. Ron Eagle and Tice L. Miller (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 87-88.

² Preuss, 5, 10.

justified Delaney's removal. Since Delaney threw fancy parties, he must have accumulated a "fortune independent of salary;" a "loss of office would thus be no inconvenience to family." Sly later revealed the most crucial bit of information: Delaney was "a rotten-hearted old fed'ralist." Sharker replied with unparalleled enthusiasm, and proceeded to remind Sly that his efforts and "service to his country" would guarantee him a "high place with a big salary."³

The opening scene of *Fashions and Follies of Washington Life* skillfully draws out the social scenarios and partisan intrigue that government clerks in Washington found themselves in the years leading up to the Civil War. Sharker referred to himself as a "1,000 dollar clerk," a widely used phrase that denoted the commonality and rank of a particular government clerk, as well as his vulnerability. Put simply, spoils clerks, like Sharker, maintained very little social capital in Washington and could be rotated out of office without difficulty, particularly because they had once acutely claimed a partisan loyalty and political connectivity in order to receive their appointment. It can be assumed that Sharker was able to garner a clerkship through the political system of spoils, a theme that Preuss utilizes in order to make a political and social argument against rotation. Sharker thusly represented all that was wrong with rotation in office. To be sure, his calculated use of deceit and character assassination to move up official and social ranks is reflected in the private papers of ranking government officials and party leaders throughout the antebellum period. Preuss's political argument against rotation within the play is echoed at one point in the words of Delaney's personal friend and Jeffersonian Democrat, Captain Jack Smith:

....this continual "change-about" the Government suffers as well as the clerk—why, sir, the most menial occupation in life requires some kind of apprenticeship—but any man who has party influence to back him can assume the most responsible public trusts, altho'

³ Ibid., 8-9.

he hasn't an ounce of brains in his head.⁴

Delaney, on the other hand, symbolized the aged, federalist commitment to public service. The second scene underscores this juxtaposition in an impassioned political debate over a glass of brandy between two principled but politically opposed friends, Delaney and Smith, regarding nineteenth-century political economy. Delaney revealed his belief in federal authority and even claimed that “it was through Hamilton and the old Federal party that the General Government was made strong enough to ‘walk alone’.” Delaney continued to elaborate on the Federalist foundations of the government, tracing his faith in the power of central government to that of Henry Clay. Soon thereafter, the discussion took on a sourer, partisan tinge. A Democrat and politician, Smith believed in limited central government, “the power of the masses,” and the great Jacksonian persuasion “that a man was a man.” Delaney, however, proceeded to challenge Smith’s commitment to mass politics and his belief in dominant individualism. Delaney likened Henry Clay to “one of nature’s noblemen.” In a line that underscored the political division of the day—slavery—and Andrew Jackson’s heroic lore at the Battle of New Orleans, Delaney claimed that Henry Clay’s “reputation,” unlike Jackson’s, was not “made up of *cotton padding*?” nor did Clay ever “dodge his foe behind *cotton bales*.” In a moment of rage, Smith lashed out and immediately asked Smith to leave his House. Delaney responded in surprise, and in a way that underscored the sectional politics of the day. He wondered why two aged childhood friends were suddenly “quarreling about politics.” The two eventually let “bygones be bygones.” But not before Delaney was pressed to surrender to the mythical claim that Jackson was “the bravest of the brave, and the American nation will ever be proud of his name!” To which Smith

⁴ Ibid., 35.

responded in a rather sardonic tone, “That’s talking like a man—an American man!”⁵

In setting up the conversation between Delaney and Smith, Preuss skillfully draws out the political tensions that shaped Washington City’s political culture and its impact on the status of clerks. While it can be assumed that Delaney and Smith have social ties dating back to the beginnings of the federal government, Smith, unlike Delaney, emerged as a politician and held little sympathy toward government labor. Delaney, on the other hand, had been a Washington clerk his whole life and thus depended upon government labor for his and his family’s livelihood. But he also had accumulated a significant degree of social capital over the years. Delaney, unlike Sharker, was culturally refined, well-educated, and connected throughout Washington society.⁶

Sharker’s attempt to undermine Delaney should thus be understood as a political and social argument against rotation in office. Sharker, the embodiment of spoils, effectively ran the federalist commitment to public service—symbolized through Delaney—out of office. Due to Sharker’s deceitful tactics, Delaney was eventually dismissed from office. Delaney then confided the news to Captain Smith, who responded to Delaney in a manner that suggested an essential need to dispose of spoils. “[A] *damned shame!*, he said, “A man who has grown gray in the service of government—who has every detail of his office at his fingers’ end—whose position and associations are such—excuse me, Ned, for doubting your word, but the thing is impossible.” In addition to unloading his contempt toward Washington’s partisan political

⁵ Ibid., 11-14.

⁶ According to Leonard White, the federalists believed that government “could only be well conducted if it was in the hands of the superior part of mankind—superior in education, in economic standing, and in native ability.” See *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1951), 508.

culture, Preuss was careful to illustrate the dependency of clerks on the government for support. Delaney confessed to Captain Smith that he was driven to Washington out of economic necessity, and was only able to live in Washington by “strict economy.” Of course, Delaney had his network of political and social allies. Dismayed by Delaney’s dismissal, Captain Smith vowed to help restore Delaney to office by calling on his “old friends in Congress.”⁷

Sharker, a \$1,000 clerk, lacked the social prestige and capital that Delaney had attained during his years in Washington. At one point, he despairingly said to himself, “I’m a poor government clerk, and nobody.” As a result, his only chance to garner any social capital was through deceit and acts of character assassination. In a brief, albeit telling soliloquy, he described his place in Washington:

Society is divided into two great classes, the somebodies and the nobodies—the nobodies always trying to catch hold of the somebodies, and the somebodies always trying to kick down the nobodies—John Sharker—government clerk—nobody: John Sharker, newspaper letter writer—somebody. This is my *carte blanche* to levees, dinner-parties, champagne suppers, *et cetera*.

Shaker’s goal was thus to elevate his social status by essentially exchanging places with Delaney, a measure that required a public act of character assassination. Due to his dismissal, Delaney’s wife was forced into becoming a boarding house keeper, a popular economic safety net and deprecating local trope for the wives of dismissed Washington clerks. By losing his position as chief clerk, Delaney also lost the social prestige that he had accumulated through his connection to government. His daughter, too, was reduced to “a *poor boarding-house keeper’s* daughter.” Shamed and relegated to a diminished social status, Delaney desperately sought to restore his honor by engaging Sharker in a duel—an action symbolic of Delaney’s southern and

⁷ Preuss, “Fashions and Follies of Washington Life,” 27.

republican origins.⁸

Fashions and Follies of Washington Life skillfully invoked the social and political tensions that plagued government clerks throughout the antebellum period. In its political argument against rotation, the play also drew attention to class and rank within Washington society. While clerks living and working in Washington during the federal government's first few decades of development were partly bound together by a common association to official society, antebellum clerks found it difficult to maintain a particular class identity within Washington. While some clerks—mainly chief clerks and long-term Washington residents—used social and political connections in order to maintain their status within Washington, the majority of clerks, particularly the identifiable \$1,000 clerk, could only maintain a mitigated rank within Washington society.

After 1829, patronage rationality sharpened the line between Washington's residential and official elite and subordinate administrative officeholders. As explained by historian Kathryn Jacob, a rigid line emerged between those who thought of the federal capital as home—the “we’s”—and those who were drawn to Washington—often temporarily to work in one of the federal departments. John Ellis's 1869 guidebook supports Jacob's claim that Washington's second-tier official residents were increasingly withdrawn from society throughout the antebellum period. By 1869, Ellis perceived that nearly all government clerks were “stranger's to the city.” “They are in Washington, but not of it,” claimed Ellis. “They form a ‘colony’ distinct in themselves from the Washingtonians proper, with whom they rarely deign to associate unless they are invited to partake of their hospitality.” Washington, observed Ellis, was noticeably divided into four classes. At the top were the residential and official elites. Below

⁸ Ibid., 28-30, 55. On dueling and honor in the early republic, see *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 167.

them ranked department and bureau heads. Just above “the usual lower class” existed the “clerks and their families.” Similarly, *Fraser’s Magazine*, remarked in 1866 that there was no place else in the United States where “the lines between classes are so strongly drawn and defended.”⁹

The Civil War marked the beginnings of a sweeping transformation in government clerical work. Without a doubt, the reasons why members of the nation’s middle class chose to pursue jobs in the federal government would remain, and antebellum issues of patronage politics would plague the social and professional lives of clerks for ensuing decades—at least until the passage in 1883 of the Pendleton Act, which legalized merit-based reform.¹⁰ The major transformation that took place, nonetheless, would occur along gendered lines. In 1862, Treasury Secretary Francis Spinner began hiring women to replace the shortage of male clerks that had occurred as a result of the War. The social history of the federal government throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century would thus receive its uniqueness not through patronage politics but through a gendered division of labor. The growth of federal government during and after the Civil War would demand a new army of clerks. Middle-class ladies would increasingly join their male counterparts in this role. This not only changed the nature of clerical labor, it also changed the nature of the federal bureaucracy, which became the first large-scale sexually integrated workplace.

But post-bellum men (and women) also dealt with many of the same ideological

⁹ Kathryn Allamong Jacob, *Capital Elites: High Society in Washington, D.C., after the Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1995), 36; Ellis, *The Sight and Secrets of the National Capital*, 370, 416; *Fraser’s Magazine*, September 1866, 332.

¹⁰ The Pendleton Act of 1883 established the United States Civil Service Commission, which was designed to end patronage practices and replace it with merit-based procedures.

problems as their antebellum counterparts. For men, government clerical labor still violated the manly individualistic ethos of self-employment; for women, government clerical labor violated the essence of nineteenth-century true womanhood, wherein women sought the care and protection of men. While white male antebellum clerks hoped to maintain their middle-class aspirations by pushing for the professionalization of their labor and merit-based reform, post-bellum clerks—men and women—would also continue to define the definitions of middle-class work, and, as argued by historian Cindy Aron, “what it meant to be middle-class in America.”¹¹

For the federal government, it was a long nineteenth century. In 1818, the duties of government clerks were just beginning to be clarified and categorized.¹² By 1890, government clerical labor had become increasingly mechanized, routinized, categorized, rationalized, and even feminized. Much as it did during the antebellum period, the development of clerical labor would transpire alongside the information and communications revolution. The tasks of transcribing, transmitting, and archiving correspondence would be replaced by the mechanically advanced typewriter. Women and men worked alongside one another, all the while developing new standards of male-female friendships in the workplace and breaking down old values of male culture and patronage practices that had been built into the federal bureaucratic structure.¹³

While the Civil War marked the beginnings of an exponential growth in the size and scope of the federal government, it is important to keep in mind its linkages to previous decades.

¹¹ Cindy Sondik Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service: Middle Class Workers in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 9.

¹² U.S. Congress, “Communications to a Committee of the House of Representatives in relation to the Duties of the Government Clerks,” H. Doc. 194, April 13, 1818.

¹³ Aron, *Ladies and Gentlemen of the Civil Service*, 86-90, 187-190.

The growth of the federal government would continue to be facilitated by northern values and workers. As female officeseekers made their way into Washington City hoping to secure a job, they too often came from states, with the exception of Virginia and Maryland, from the North.¹⁴ As my dissertation suggests, this linkage has always been an important component to the development of the federal bureaucratic state. Despite rotation in office, their remained within the federal government career-minded clerks hoping to transpose middle-class values onto a developing bureaucratic structure. By the beginning of the Civil War, the federal government had developed some measures of bureaucratic autonomy and a discursive framework for merit-based reform. The Civil War was the most expensive and vast project undertaken by the United States government up to that time. And for the federal government to do so on such an enormous and unanticipated scale, demanded a considerable degree of bureaucratic organization that had already been set in place.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 42, 203 (fn. 7).

¹⁵ See Mark R. Wilson, "The Politics of Procurement: Military Origins of Bureaucratic Autonomy," *Journal of Policy History* 18, no. 1 (2006): 44-73.

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