Tennessee Politics, Economy, and Society During the 1850s[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Standard: 8.53*

*Essential Question: How did the debate over slavery affect politics, economy and society in 1850’s Tennessee?*

As the politics of slavery fueled heated debates throughout the nation during the 1850s, spreading talk of disunion among the South’s political leaders and other defenders of state sovereignty and slavery, perhaps no other state was more divided on the question of slavery than Tennessee. While Middle and West Tennessee’s economy was directly tied to plantation labor, East Tennesseans had less vested interest in whether the institution of slavery was abolished or not. Racism permeated throughout the state, but East Tennesseans, particularly those in the developing railroad towns such as Chattanooga and Knoxville, envisioned an economy based on manufacturing and industry. East Tennessee embraced the changes brought on by industrialization during the mid-19th century, but the state’s political leaders acted largely on behalf of pro-slavery Democrats bent on protecting a traditional agricultural society characterized by notions of honor and states’ rights.

Tennessee Whigs supported the Compromise of 1850 in the hope that the federal government would not interfere with the spread of slavery. But even in the midst of congressional negotiations on the compromise, two sessions of the Southern Convention were held in Nashville to boost the pro-slavery, states’-rights stance. In 1851, Tennesseans narrowly elected William B. Campbell for governor, a Whig who strongly supported the Compromise and its legal protection of slavery. Tennessee Democrats were reassured that Campbell would uphold the law that enabled whites to own slaves.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, which enabled voters to decide the issue of slavery in the federal territories sharply divided the General Assembly. Tennessee Democrats largely supported the measure but the Whigs were split. Ultimately this division led to the Whig party’s demise in Tennessee. Some former Whigs later gravitated to the Republican Party (although this new anti-slavery party attracted little support from Tennesseans during early 1850s). Democrats virtually controlled Tennessee politics after the demise of the Whigs in 1853: Andrew Johnson and Isham G. Harris, two of the most prominent Tennessee Democrats, won five consecutive gubernatorial elections against the remnants of the Whig party from 1853 to 1862.

The Presidential campaigns of 1852 and 1856 also sparked heated political debate throughout Tennessee. In the election of 1856, state Democrats strongly supported Buchanan because he, as well as the party as a whole, vowed to safeguard southern interests. Buchanan attacked his Know-Nothing opponent, Millard Fillmore, claiming he was a moderate on slavery and a staunch unionist. In Tennessee, Buchanan won 52.7 percent of the vote.

Not all Tennesseans were as directly involved in the politics of the day as Tennessee’s aristocracy. In fact, the majority of white Tennesseans were considered yeomen, or small property-owners who, unlike the large landholders above them, owned small farms with only a few slaves. These were usually farming families (although some were herdsmen or artisans) who lived in modest cabins and worked the land with their own hands alongside their few slaves. Most could not afford to educate their children in the expensive private academies, but rather in the common schools, and only when the farm work was completed. For the most part, yeomen were financially comfortable, but not considered prosperous by 19th-century standards.

Below the yeomen were the poor whites who owned no property. Poor whites usually worked as tenant farmers or as hired hands on farms or in artisan shops. Many were illiterate, desperately impoverished, and lived in broken shacks. Despite the obvious social distinctions, however, yeomen and poor whites were largely content with their social situations and went about their daily lives without too much unrest, and happily cast their votes for whatever aristocrat they saw fit to hold office. East Tennessee, however, was an exception to this rule. Since planters and aristocrats were very scarce in the eastern portion of the state, yeomen practically dominated the political and social scene. They preferred to elect men from their own social background to public office—men such as Andrew Johnson of Greeneville who rose to political prominence on the platform of protecting the yeomanry from the “damnable” aristocrats.

Of course poor whites and yeomen were not at the bottom of the social hierarchy in antebellum Tennessee. Blacks, both enslaved and free, were considered an inferior and potentially dangerous underclass who needed strict subjugation and control. Racial tensions mounted during the 1850s as the institution of slavery became threatened by anti-slavery northern leaders. Slaveholders realized the centrality of slavery to their prosperous agricultural economy and the fact that it became threatened caused many planters to tighten the screws on the management of their chattel. Even the merest rumor of a slave rebellion sparked violent reactions by vigilant planters who would rather see their human investments lynched from a nearby tree than worry about an insurrection.

It stands to reason that Tennessee’s economy was driven by agriculture. Cotton, tobacco, grain, and livestock production all had substantial increases by the 1850s. Tennessee boasted nearly 3000 plantations by 1860 (with 20 or more slaves). Indeed, slavery was essential to Tennessee’s economy. By the 1850s West Tennessee had developed into a thriving plantation economy powered by commercial agriculture: cotton. The convenience of the Mississippi River allowed West Tennessee planters access to Deep South markets as well as Louisiana’s seaports from where cotton was shipped to foreign countries. Middle Tennessee had fewer large plantations but still produced a significant amount of crops for commercial export. Slavery was prevalent in Middle Tennessee where medium-sized farms produced tobacco and grain. East Tennessee was the exception, where the soil and geography of land would not permit large plantations and hence, small farms producing corn, wheat, cattle, and hogs for family use and local bartering were common. East Tennesseans comprised a significant portion of the state’s population, but not enough to prevent the state’s political majority from largely backing pro-slavery candidates and eventually seceding from the Union.

Access to long and navigable rivers in the western and middle portions of the state allowed a thriving steamboat economy to emerge in the antebellum period. Since the advent of the steamboat in the early part of the century, Tennessee’s economy greatly benefited, and by the 1850s, on any given day as many as ten vessels could be seen docked along the Cumberland River in Nashville. The steamboat industry in Memphis became even more vibrant than in Nashville, with its easy accessibility to the Mississippi River.

In the late 1840s the Tennessee legislature solicited railroad companies with state and private funds to help keep the state’s economy on an upward path and to supplement the steam boat trade (East Tennesseans were unable to take advantage steam boats because the Tennessee River was largely un-navigable above Mussel Shoals, Alabama, thus affecting Chattanooga and Knoxville). Tennessee’s railroad boom began in 1850, and by 1860 twelve hundred and fifty miles of track had been laid across the state. The first line to become operational was the Nashville & Chattanooga Railroad in 1851. Now Tennesseans across the state could reach the markets of the lower south faster by rail. The Nashville & Louisville also increased business and trade with middle Kentucky by the end of the 1850s. The Memphis & Charleston (SC) line, finished in 1857, connected West Tennessee’s booming cotton economy directly to the eastern seaboard; and new lines in the eastern portion of the state gave East Tennesseans a direct route to Dalton, GA, and Bristol, VA, in the late-1850s. The railroads fostered an increase in Tennessee’s agricultural production and boosted urbanization in East Tennessee. Knoxville and Chattanooga particularly benefited in this regard.

Despite the railroad boom of the 1850s, Tennessee had very limited industry during the years leading up to the Civil War. Some sizeable coal and iron smelting industries sprang up in the western highlands, but on the whole Tennessee lacked industry. The increase in railroad lines led to an increase in commercial agriculture and hence fostered the development additional plantations and slaves: by 1860, 25 percent of Tennessee’s population were slaves.

Clearly, the question of slavery was on the minds of Tennesseans throughout the 1850s. On the political front, Tennesseans by and large advocated a pro-slavery stance because first, they needed slave labor to continue their prosperous agricultural economy, and second, they thought of themselves as part of the pro-state sovereignty South that eventually supported secession. Southern honor was as important to most Tennesseans as it was to South Carolinians—especially to the Democratic majority of the late 1850s—and many followed the zealotry of the fire-eaters and staunch pro-slavery advocates who promoted secession. The booming economy and development of railroads and steam boats also had an effect on slavery: since planters sought to maximize the potential for crop exportation more slaves were needed to increase production. Not unexpectedly, there was a sharp increase in the number of slaves in Tennessee over the course of the decade. State political leaders and private investors sensed the high potential for abundant profit and hence the question of slavery became an important political and economic issue in Tennessee during the 1850s.

“By 1860, Tennessee in many respects had changed dramatically in the past forty-five years. Expansion, development, and reform had transfigured the state’s social, economic, political, and cultural landscape. Increasingly, however, Tennesseans now found themselves distracted by another matter. Soon they would be forced to put aside all else to focus upon the great crisis of the Union.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

2 Bergeron’s conclusion paragraph in Tennesseans and Their History (Knoxville, 1999), 130.

1. This essay is largely a summation of chapter 5 in, Paul H. Bergeron, Stephen V. Ash, and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History* (Knoxville, 1999), pp. 105-130. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bergeron’s conclusion paragraph in *Tennesseans and Their History* (Knoxville, 1999), 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)