

“Their **Blood** has
Flown and Mingled
with Ours”:



THE POLITICS OF SLAVERY IN
ILLINOIS AND MISSOURI
IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

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Slavery took on many images that highlighted its horrors or, as in this image, sought to suggest that in positive terms. (Image: New York Public Library)

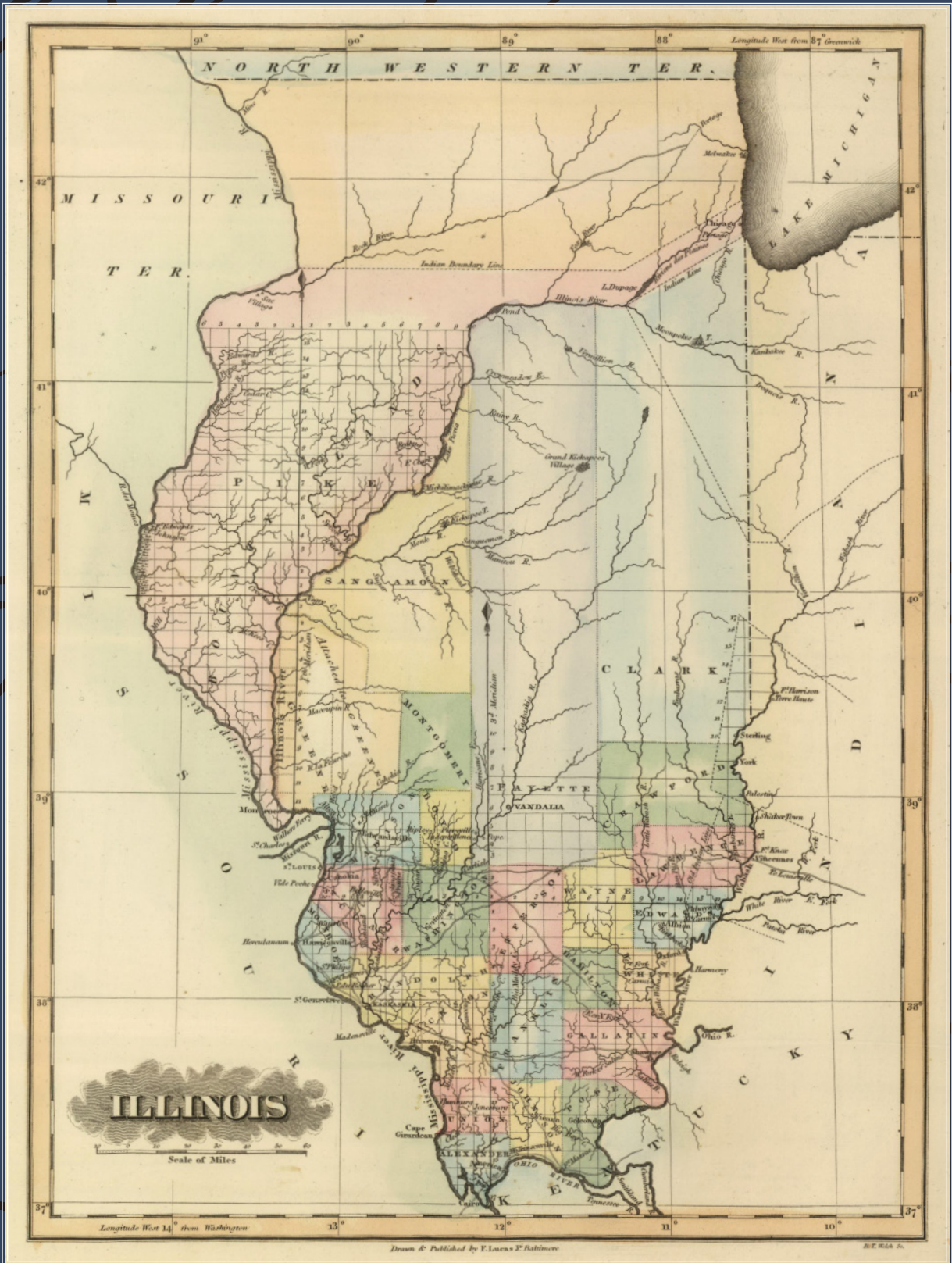
In an extract from a letter printed in the *Missouri Gazette* in 1819, a gentleman from St. Charles County, Missouri, wrote, “Notwithstanding the foolish apprehensions which have been entertained by certain *prophets*, that the measures advocated in Congress on the subject of Missouri slavery, would deter emigration from the slave-holding states, never, at this season of the year, has the influx of population . . . been so considerable.”¹ The author goes on to say that the “caravans of movers [from Kentucky and Tennessee], were flowing through our town” towards the “lands of promise” in the Boons Lick on the Missouri River or near the Salt River in the northeastern part of the territory. Indeed, the period immediately following the War of 1812 had seen a massive influx of migrants into Missouri, mostly from the states of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, causing the population to increase from just under 20,000 in 1810 to more than 60,000 on the eve of statehood in 1820.² For slaveholders or middling farmers in the Upper South, Missouri was somewhat of a beacon with seemingly unlimited potential for one to start a new life or to grow cash crops, and slavery was the

Article the Sixth. There shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in the said territory, otherwise than in punishment of crimes whereof the party shall have been duly convicted: *Provided always*, that any person escaping into the same, for whom labor or service is lawfully claimed in any one of the original states, such fugitive may be lawfully reclaimed and conveyed to the person claiming his or her labor or service as aforesaid.

Be it ordained by the authority aforesaid, That the resolutions of the 23rd of April, 1784 relative to the subject of this ordinance, be, and the same are hereby repealed and declared null and void.

DONE by the **UNITED STATES** in **CONGRESS**
assembled, the 13th day of July, in the year of our Lord
1787, and of their sovereignty and independence the 12th.

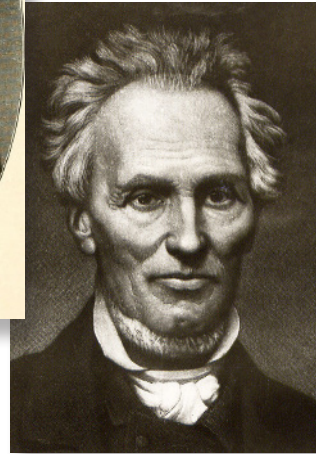
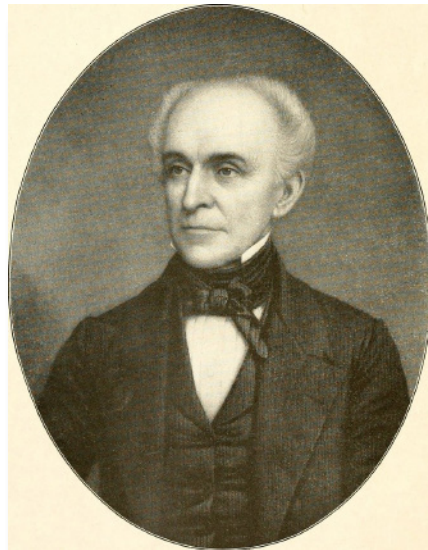
Article 6 of the Northwest Ordinance (above) kept some slaveowners from passing through Illinois when migrating to Missouri, thinking that the Ordinance banned slavery in the territory (present-day Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and part of northeastern Minnesota). However, the Ordinance also protected them in retaining or capturing enslaved people. (Image: Library of Congress)



Illinois at the time of statehood.
(Image: David Ramsay Map Collection)

and Missouri in

Although opposed to slavery his entire life, Virginia-born Edward Coles (1786-1868) knew Thomas Jefferson and James Madison before moving to the Illinois Territory and becoming the state's second governor in 1822. When he moved, he manumitted his slaves he owned in Virginia in 1819 and acquired land for them to farm. (Image: Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library, archive.com)



Like Coles, John Mason Peck (1789-1858) was a prominent opponent of slavery in Illinois as well as Missouri. Peck arrived in St. Louis in 1817 and co-founded the First Baptist Church of St. Louis. (Image: Forty Years of Pioneer Life: A Memoir, archive.org)

slavery
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constituencies around this issue to defeat the measure. The emergence of an antislavery nationalism during the convention movement, most clearly expressed by Governor Coles, would become the foundation of the Republican Party three decades later.⁴ Others have emphasized the economic aspects of the struggle, recognizing that the campaign was an attempt by poor whites who sought to destroy the political influence of the bourgeois Yankees and the Southern-born slaveholders who dominated politics in early Illinois. These interpretations recognize either implicitly or explicitly that the event was fundamentally a battle over the future of the state, and whether freedom or slavery would dominate.⁵

Very few studies account for Missouri's role in these

developments and their relationship to Illinois, and the ones that do generally highlight the similarities between the two states and the artificiality of the border dividing them. In turn, these accounts tend to collapse all meaningful distinctions that actually did differentiate Illinois from Missouri.⁶ While great work on that topic has been written, my larger research goals, only narrowly covered in this essay, stress that Missouri and Illinois *were* different, and that the border between them, while arbitrary, had a large impact on how the states developed from the late-eighteenth century through to the antebellum period. The colonial and territorial institutions put in place in Illinois, most importantly the Northwest Ordinance, laid out the legal and political structures of that territory, and the Ordinance was a key factor, perhaps the most

important factor, in Illinois becoming a free state. The same holds true for Missouri, whose lack of these structures or of anything resembling the Northwest Ordinance allowed slavery to grow in the years before statehood—so much so, in fact, that most Missourians could not imagine their state without it.

As historians such as David Waldstreicher and others have argued, politics in the early republic was simultaneously local and national, and how people understood and defined themselves in relationship to the nation was filtered through political practices and ceremonies at the local level.⁷ Therefore, I seek to understand the local and national debates that surrounded the Missouri Crisis and the Illinois convention movement, which I argue had the opposite effect. Consequently, this

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essay attempts to understand how and why Missourians came to see themselves differently from their counterparts in Illinois.

By the Civil War, both Illinois and Missouri looked vastly different culturally, economically, and politically, but those differences had not always been as pronounced as they would come to be by 1860. Both were once part of French Louisiana, occupying what some have termed a borderland, and the connections forged there did not vanish when the French lost their colonies to the British and Spanish in the Seven Years' War, nor did that relationship completely break when the region began to become heavily populated and overrun by Americans in the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As stated above, however, we must be careful not to take that too far, and it is in moments like the Missouri Crisis and the Illinois convention movement that the ruptures between these two states, and eventually between the North and South, became manifest.

For nearly a century, Illinois and Missouri occupied a space that has been termed the “American Confluence,” a vast region in the North American interior where the Missouri, Mississippi, and Ohio rivers converge.⁸ Despite having a long tradition of slavery, the system had occupied a unique, if imprecise, place within the American Confluence for much

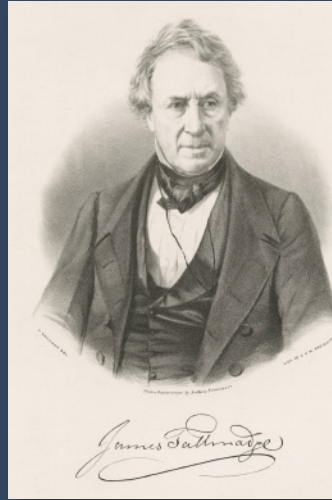
of the colonial period and beyond. The French brought slaves to the Illinois Country in the early eighteenth century to work in the lead mines of present-day southeastern Missouri and southern Illinois. Slavery even existed in some form for centuries before European contact, and it functioned as a way for indigenous groups to organize power and to fashion diplomatic ties.⁹ A hybrid slave system of Indian and African slavery emerged and would have broad implications into the nineteenth century, when laws began to be passed defining slavery in strictly racial terms. Though plantation slavery on the scale of contemporary colonies in British North America never really took hold in the region, a successful export economy surrounding the trade in cereal grain emerged in the eighteenth century, and the Illinois Country would prove to be a valuable colony in France's Atlantic Empire, providing the provisions for slave colonies in the Caribbean. By the 1750s, around 40 percent of French settlers in the Illinois Country owned slaves, and in Missouri the slave population accounted for around 13 percent of the population by the turn of the nineteenth century.¹⁰

Slavery in the American Confluence developed into its own discrete and heterogenous system; as a result, it never established the institutional backing that other forms of slavery took in the

American South or in the wider Atlantic World. This situation would carry over into the Early Republic. By the 1810s, both Illinois and Missouri were beginning to come to terms with slavery in their respective territories. Despite the Northwest Ordinance's ban on “slavery and involuntary servitude,” unfree labor dominated the social and political system of Illinois in the period immediately preceding statehood. Illinois had the largest slave population in the Northwest Territory, with most enslaved people either working in the rich alluvial plain of the American Bottom or in the salt mines near Shawneetown. Aside from this, a system of quasi-slavery existed in the Illinois Territory, where thousands of former slaves were converted to indentured servants with contracts lasting up to 99 years.¹¹ However, indentured servitude was not slavery, and the fact that slaveholders had to either create or find a way around this loophole suggests that the Northwest Ordinance was a powerful barrier with which slaveholders were forced to contend.

Unfree labor was well integrated in the Illinois economy by the 1810s and had continued to be a political issue for much of the period that immediately preceded statehood in 1818. Proslavery Illinoisans had to carefully navigate a changing regional and national terrain surrounding slavery when

James Tallmadge (1778-1853) is perhaps best known as an antislavery member of the House of Representatives who proposed the “Tallmadge Amendment” to the bill allowing Missouri to become a state by restricting slavery and phasing it out, requiring that “the further introduction of slavery or involuntary servitude be prohibited, except for the punishment of crimes, whereof the party shall have been fully convicted; and that all children born within the said State [Missouri] after the admission thereof into the Union, shall be free at the age of twenty-five years.” The House passed the Amendment but the Senate did not. (Image: New York Public Library)



Thomas Hart Benton (1782-1858) ranks among Missouri’s most noted senators. When he first moved to the Missouri Territory he became one of the region’s most influential opinion-makers as editor of the *Missouri Enquirer*. He was the architect of ideas about Manifest Destiny in the West, and a defender of Jacksonian Democracy and Andrew Jackson, despite his having wounded Jackson earlier in a brawl. (Image: Library of Congress)

they submitted their application for statehood in 1818. They faced a challenging dilemma. If the majority proslavery constitutional convention passed a state constitution that was seen as too proslavery, it would likely be rejected by Congress and possibly draw unwanted attention to the system in Illinois. If they passed a constitution similar to Indiana’s, with explicit provisions that prevented the further introduction of the practice, then proslavery Illinoisans would not get what they wanted, and they would be forced to either sell their slaves, convert them to indentures, or move.¹² The constitution that was passed ultimately did draw the ire of antislavery congressmen such as James Tallmadge, James Taylor, and Arthur Livermore, but the constitution passed by a wide margin, and slavery was protected in Illinois.

Missourians looked with curiosity on Illinois during this process.¹³ That the territory would submit a proslavery constitution was all but a foregone conclusion, as slavery was well-established in

Missouri by that time. Petitions for statehood had begun circulating among residents of the territory in 1817, and the first petitions were submitted to Congress in early 1818. For various reasons, they would have to wait nearly a year before a statehood bill would finally be heard.¹⁴ By early 1819, Congress was finally ready to debate the topic of Missouri statehood when an enabling act was submitted that would allow Missourians to form a constitutional convention. The antislavery representative James Tallmadge “tossed a bombshell into the Era of Good Feelings” by proposing that gradual emancipation and the further importation of slaves be prohibited as a condition of Missouri statehood.¹⁵ This single event would set-off a national and regional debate about the future of slavery in the West.

Missourians themselves were deeply committed to the cause of statehood and felt betrayed by the Tallmadge Amendment, which would restrict their freedom to own slaves and potentially not

allow them to enter the Union on “equal footing” with the other states. The “anti-restrictionist” crusade in Missouri reached a head in 1820, when the debates in Congress were at their apotheosis. Public meetings were held throughout the territory, the newspapers printed news from Congress on their proceedings, and tensions were known to get quite heated. On the one hand, Joseph Charless, the editor of the *Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser*, argued that the people of the territory should decide the issue of slavery, which three decades later would come to be known as popular sovereignty. That slavery was even a question was proving to be a controversial position. On the other hand, John Scott and Thomas Hart Benton emerged as the territory’s strongest advocates for the admittance of Missouri with slavery intact.¹⁶ The latter’s newspaper, the *St. Louis Enquirer*, helped launch Benton’s political career, and it was known to publish editorials pushing for statehood and anti-restriction.¹⁷

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Residents of Missouri and Illinois closely followed the debates in Congress, and they were deeply concerned with the future of their states. Toasts published in the local newspapers indicate not only a striking awareness of the implications of the Missouri Crisis, but also the knowledge of the constitutional questions that the process provoked. Missourians gave tribute to their political leaders, urging them to gain sense and allow their territories to become a state. A number of Irishmen met on St. Patrick's Day 1820 in St. Louis and toasted the Missouri Territory, that it may enter its "entitled rank among the states of the union" and may have "a constitution of her own choice."¹⁸ The meeting of the St. Louis Mechanics Benevolent Society went so far as to toast not only Missouri but Illinois, which at the time was approaching statehood, and whose "blood has flowed and mingled with ours."¹⁹ A Mr. Daniel Smith of Edwardsville toasted, quite humorously, that "if slavery must there be tolerated [in Missouri], let it be on these terms, that master and slave change conditions every seven years!" Many in Missouri and Illinois saw that entering the union on each state's own terms was crucial, and that a sense of kinship was felt by those on either side of the Mississippi. It seems that for at least some inhabitants of Illinois, the Missouri Crisis was theirs as well.

While residents of Missouri were some of the strongest advocates for unconditional statehood, residents of Illinois were somewhat divided over the issue, both at the state constitutional convention and beyond. Admitting slavery in Missouri could make the push for slavery by proslavery advocates in Illinois easier. The contingent at the Illinois state constitutional convention had hoped to revisit the issue of slavery at some point in the future, and the admittance of a proslavery Missouri might make that possible. Conversely, allowing slavery in Missouri could also antagonize the growing antislavery contingent in Illinois, led by the likes of Governor Coles, Daniel P. Cook, and John Mason Peck, among others.²⁰ In his *History of Illinois*, future governor Thomas Ford reveals a different view, writing that at the time of the Missouri Crisis, "every great road [in Illinois] was crowded and full" of immigrants bound for Missouri, and that the "short-sighted policy of Illinois" prevented slaveholders coming from the east from settling and purchasing lands in Illinois.²¹ The fact that slavery was illegal in Illinois caused great anxiety in the early years of statehood for some, and it was clear to many at the time that its illegality was holding the state back and preventing its residents from taking part in the wealth and prosperity that new migrants with slaves could offer.²² Slaveholders and people on the

ground, of course, recognized this, which is why those who migrated with slaves from the Upper South, or those who sought to own slaves, clearly preferred Missouri to Illinois.

After a bitter and protracted struggle that lasted nearly three years, the Missouri Crisis was finally settled with the help of Henry Clay and Jesse Burgess Thomas, the latter a senator from Illinois. Still, it was the antislavery speeches by Cook, himself Illinois' lone representative in the House of Representatives and the only member of the state's delegation to vote against the admission of Missouri that angered Missouri's slaveholders. In an interesting episode of interstate conflict that would further inflame antislavery advocates, the editor of the *Edwardsville Spectator* revealed that he had uncovered a conspiracy by Missourians who were plotting to make Illinois a slave state. Apparently, proslavery Missourians were attempting to purchase the *Illinois Gazette* in Shawneetown and establish another newspaper in Edwardsville, which would serve as a base of their operations.²³ In his memoirs, Peck dedicated several pages to the Illinois convention movement, concluding that "there can be no doubt that a deep-laid plan was formed for securing the consummation of this scheme [to admit slavery in Illinois]." ²⁴ Though there is little evidence of an actual conspiracy by proslavery Missourians and

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Illinoisans working together to legalize slavery, many at the time began to lament the closeness of the two states, and the differences were becoming more pronounced. The borderland was becoming a site of conflict and division, which would become much more evident as the years went on.

The Missouri Crisis and the convention movement in Illinois were crucial events in the politics of slavery that would develop in the antebellum period. Some historians have argued that the Missouri Crisis was in many ways a rehearsal for the conflicts that would arise in the era of the Civil War.²⁵ While that may be true, it is clear that in the Missouri Crisis, a free labor discourse did emerge, while at the same time Southerners began to articulate a vision of a West with slavery intact.²⁶ Missourians became convinced that slavery was central to their progress and prosperity as a state, and therefore were the strongest advocates for the admission of their state without restrictions

on slavery. Illinoisans were more conflicted over the issue of slavery in Missouri, as well as the future of slavery in their own state. While a large antislavery contingent existed in the former during the early years of statehood, the legislature was dominated by Southern interests, which meant that legalizing slavery was a major concern.

These episodes tell us much about the politics of slavery in the Mississippi River borderland in the years before the Civil War. Connections or kinship between Illinois and Missouri obviously never went away, giving slavery a central role in the politics and culture in the West. Eventually, those connections would come to play a divisive role in the years before the Civil War. As the expansion of slavery became more fraught and contested, the structures and institutions put in place on either side of the border would play a large role in how each place came to understand slavery's role in its future. For Illinois, the Northwest Ordinance, while regularly circumvented, proved too difficult a thing to evade entirely.

Morrow Prize

This article received the 2017 Lynn and Kristen Morrow Missouri History Student Prize, awarded for the best student paper on an aspect of Missouri history presented at the Missouri Conference on History. The annual Missouri Conference on History brings together teachers of history and other professional historians to share in the presentation of the results of research, to exchange information on teaching and curriculum, to consider ways to promote interest in history and the welfare of the profession, and to discuss other concerns common to all historians.

ENDNOTES

¹ *Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser*, June 3, 1819.

² George Dangerfield, *The Awakening of American Nationalism, 1815-1828* (Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1994), 109; Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2005), 223.

³ Rep. James Tallmadge of New York was suspicious of Illinois' territorial population, and he requested a document be submitted to Congress "showing that the Territory had the population required" to apply for statehood. See *Annals of Cong.*, 2nd Sess., 306.

⁴ Suzanne Cooper Guasco, *Confronting Slavery: Edward Coles and the Rise of Antislavery Politics in Nineteenth-Century America* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2013), 105-33; Suzanne Cooper Guasco, "The Deadly Influence of Negro Capitalists: Southern Yeomen and Resistance to the Expansion of Slavery in Illinois," *Civil War History* 47, no. 1 (2001): 7-29. See also Daniel Peart, *Era of Experimentation: American Political Practices in the Early Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014), 47-72, for a different perspective.

⁵ James Simeone, *Democracy and Slavery in Frontier Illinois: The Bottomland Republic* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

⁶ Historians who are especially guilty of this are Stephen Aron, Christopher Phillips, Matthew Salafia, and Anne Twitty. Stephen Aron, *American Confluence: The Missouri Frontier from Borderland to Border State* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Anne Twitty, *Before Dred Scott: Slavery and Legal Culture in the American Confluence, 1787-1857* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016). For a delineation of the problems with borderlands as a framework, see Johann N. Neem, "From Polity to Exchange: The Fate of Democracy in the Changing Fields of Early American Historiography," *Modern Intellectual History* 15, no. 3 (2018): 1-22.

⁷ David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1997), 10.

⁸ Aron, *American Confluence*.

⁹ Brett Rushforth, *Bonds of Alliance: Indigenous and Atlantic Slavery in New France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 29.

¹⁰ Margaret Cross Norton, *Illinois Census Returns*, Collections of the Illinois State Historical Library (Springfield: Trustees of the Illinois State Historical Library, 1934), xxi, xxvi; Carl J. Ekberg, *French Roots in the Illinois Country: The Mississippi Frontier in Colonial Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 152; Lorenzo J. Greene, Gary R. Kremer, and Antonio Frederick Holland, *Missouri's Black Heritage* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 14; J. Viles, "Population and Extent of Settlement in Missouri before 1804," *Missouri Historical Review* V, no. 4 (n.d.): 189-213.

¹¹ M. Scott Heerman, "In a State of Slavery: Black Servitude in Illinois, 1800-1830," *Early American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 14, no. 1 (2016): 114-39, <https://doi.org/10.1353/eam.2016.0003>; Paul Finkelman, "Evading the Ordinance: The Persistence of Bondage in Indiana and Illinois," *Journal of the Early Republic* 9, no. 1 (1989): 21-51; James Edward Davis, *Frontier Illinois* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 165-66.

¹² Davis, *Frontier Illinois*, 166; M. Scott Heerman, *The Alchemy of Slavery: Human Bondage and Emancipation in the Illinois Country, 1730-1865* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 98-99.

¹³ See issues of the *Missouri Gazette*, *Missouri Intelligencer*, and *St. Louis Enquirer* in 1823-24.

¹⁴ "Memorial of the Citizens of the Missouri Territory", <http://digital.shsmo.org/cdm/ref/collection/GovColl/id/20762>

¹⁵ Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 147.

¹⁶ Perry McCandless, "The Rise of Thomas H. Benton in Missouri Politics," *Missouri Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (1955): 18-20.

¹⁷ Harrison Anthony Trexler, *Slavery in Missouri, 1804-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1914), 100-8; F. C. Shoemaker, *Missouri's Struggle for Statehood, 1804-1821* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1969), 109-33; Ken Mueller, *Senator Benton and the People: Master Race Democracy on the Early American Frontiers* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Press, 2014). See *St. Louis Enquirer*, March 17, 1819, and *St. Louis Enquirer*, June 16, 1819, for the clearest expression of Benton's political ideology, where he articulates his vision of westward expansion, and issues in January 1819 to March 1820, where he expresses his proslavery position for Missouri.

¹⁸ *Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser*, March 22, 1820.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1818.

²⁰ *Memoir of John Mason Peck*, ed. Rufus Babcock (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1864).

²¹ Thomas Ford, *A History of Illinois, From Its Commencement as a State in 1818 to 1847* (New York: Ivison & Phinney, 1854), 51.

²² Matthew W. Hall, *Dividing the Union: Jesse Burgess Thomas and the Making of the Missouri Compromise* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 116-17.

²³ Glover Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), 284-87; Norman Dwight Harris, *The History of Negro Servitude in Illinois and of the Slavery Agitation in That State, 1719-1864* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 27-29. See also *Edwardsville Spectator*, August 1, 1820.

²⁴ *Memoir of John Mason Peck*, 195.

²⁵ Moore, *The Missouri Controversy, 1819-1821*.

²⁶ Joshua Michael Zeitz, "The Missouri Compromise Reconsidered: Antislavery Rhetoric and the Emergence of the Free Labor Synthesis," *Journal of the Early Republic* 20, no. 3 (2000): 447-85, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3125065>; Guasco, *Confronting Slavery*.