


Chapter 196 – Divisions In Both Major Parties Appear As The 1852 Election Approaches

 <p style="font-size: small;">Hon. Alex. H. Stevens Small man weighed less than 100 lbs. no use of his legs.</p>	<p>Dates: Summer 1852</p>	<p>Sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several Key Whigs Defect To The New Free Soil And Unionist Parties • Unity Among The Democrats Is Also Being Tested
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Date: Summer 1852

Several Key Whigs Defect To The New Free Soil And Unionist Parties



Alexander Stevens (1812-1883)

As Millard Fillmore’s term nears an end, the Whigs are again left frustrated by the performance of an “accidental” successor to their real choice as President. First it was the “turn-coat,” John Tyler, succeeding General Harrison after one month, in 1841; then the “dough-face,” Fillmore, serving the final 32 months of General Taylor’s presidency, as of 1850.

On top of this, the Whigs suffer major set-backs in the House elections of 1850-51, and are about to lose the two leading pillars of their party. One is their founder, Henry Clay, who has left Washington for his plantation in Ashland, about to die from tuberculosis in June 1852; the other, Daniel Webster, leader of the New England faction, who will pass four months later, in October.

It has been Clay’s “American System” that has held the party together since it first coalesced in 1836. Its tenets have included a strong federal government to be funded by higher tariffs – with revenue spent largely on infrastructure projects, to build the economy and to link the new western states into the east.

Whig cohesion has also rested on dedication to preserving the Union through compromises on often divisive issues like tariff rates and the future of slavery. In the 1840’s most Whig leaders initially oppose the Texas annexation and the Mexican War for fear that the addition of new land will re-open sectional

conflicts – with the South demanding an expansion of slavery and the North intent on preserving the territory for whites only. That fear proves to be the case.

Zachary Taylor tries to end this threat once and for all by embracing a Wilmot-like ban on slavery across the entire Mexican Cession. While Fillmore abandons that course following Taylor’s death, the Whig coalition continues to come apart at the seams over the issue..

The initial schism materializes in 1848 in Massachusetts, where three younger Whigs – Charles Francis Adams, Henry Wilson and Charles Sumner – abandon Daniel Webster, Edward Everett and “the state establishment” to declare their “conscientious objection” to slavery. These three, along with the Ohio jurist, John McLean, Salmon Chase and John Hale find their new home in the Free Soil Party, a catch-all for dissident Whigs and Democrats who oppose the spread of slavery, either on moral or purely racist grounds.

In 1852, it is the Southern Whigs turn to flee the base.

The central defectors here are the two influential Georgians, Robert Toombs and Alexander Stephens, and Reverdy Johnson of Maryland, who has served as Taylor’s Attorney General. Together they form the “Unionist Party” to signal their support for the final 1850 Compromise, which the Whigs opposed.

Fracturing Of The Whig Party (1848-52)

1844	1848	1852
Whigs	Core Whigs Conscience Whigs Cotton Whigs	Whigs Free Soilers Unionists

Together with these departures and the imminent deaths of the two party “giants,” Clay and Webster, the Whigs head into the 1852 race searching for new leaders and with great in trepidation about the likely outcome.

Whig Party Stalwarts And Defectors As Of 1852

Core Whigs	Age	State	1844	1848	1852
Henry Clay	75	Ky	Whig	Whig	Whig
Daniel Webster	70	Mass	Whig	Whig	Whig
Winfield Scott	66	Va	Whig	Whig	Whig
John Crittenden	65	Ky	Whig	Whig	Whig
Edward Everett	58	Mass	Whig	Whig	Whig
John Bell	56	Tenn	Whig	Whig	Whig
Edward Bates	55	MO	Whig	Whig	Whig
Rufus Choate	53	Mass	Whig	Whig	Whig
Millard Fillmore	52	NY	Whig	Whig	Whig
Henry Seward	51	NY	Whig	Whig	Whig
William Graham	48	NC	Whig	Whig	Whig
William Dayton	45	NJ	Whig	Whig	Whig
James Pearce	47	Md	Whig	Whig	Whig
Orville Browning	46	IL	Whig	Whig	Whig
Robert Winthrop	43	Mass	Whig	Whig	Whig
Abraham Lincoln	43	IL	Whig	Whig	Whig
Zachariah Chandler	39	Mich	Whig	Whig	Whig

Whig Party Defectors					
John McLean	67	Ohio	Whig	Free Soil	Free Soil
Reverdy Johnson	56	Md	Whig	Whig	Unionist
CF Adams	45	Mass	Whig	Free Soil	Free Soil
Robert Toombs	42	Georgia	Whig	Whig	Unionist
Cassius Marcellus Clay	42	Ky	Whig	Whig	Anti-Slavery
Charles Sumner	41	Mass	Whig	Free Soil	Free Soil
Henry Wilson	40	Mass	Whig	Free Soil	Free Soil
Alexander Stephens	40	Georgia	Whig	Whig	Unionist
George Julian	35	Indiana	Whig	Free Soil	Free Soil

Sidebar: The Fate Of Henry Clay's Slaves

Henry Clay's death on June 29, 1852 comes after four decades of public service spent on navigating America through one crisis after another, from the War of 1812 to the 1820 Missouri Compromise, the Nullification crisis of 1832 to the Bank Panic of 1837, the Texas Annexation of 1845 and the subsequent Mexican War, to his 1850 Omnibus Bill aimed at resolving sectional strife over admission of the western territories to the Union.

As a young man, he is "Prince Hal," a touch on the wild side, including two duels. But he settles down, studies law, enters politics and founds the Whig Party to combat his bete noir, Andrew Jackson. In turn, he creates the American System to build the infrastructure needed for economic growth; fails in election bids for the Presidency in 1824, 1832 and 1844; and suffers the loss of a son and namesake at the Battle of Buena Vista in a war he had hoped to avoid. All along he is admired by his fellow Whigs, including a young Abraham Lincoln, thirty years his junior.

The issue of slavery haunts his entire time on the national stage. He owns 60 slaves on his Ashland plantation, but is forever guilty about it. He is convinced that the Africans are innately inferior to white men and doubts they could ever be assimilated. Instead they need to be returned home, a goal he sets as co-founder of the American Colonization Society in 1816.

But in 1852, his time has come, and closure is needed on his remaining slaves. His last will sorts them into two groups, those owned before and after 1850. He transfers the former to his wife and sons, with one condition:

In the sale of any, I direct that the members of families shall not be separated without their consent.

His directions for the others are more elaborate and telling.

The issue of all my female slaves, which may be born after the first day of January 1850, shall be free at the respective ages of the males at twenty eight, and of the females at twenty five.

I further...direct that the issue of any of the females, who are so to be entitled to their freedom at the age of twenty five, shall be deemed free from their birth... that they be bound out as apprentices, to learn farming or some useful trade, upon the condition of also being taught to read, to write and to cipher... that the age of twenty one having been

attained, they shall be sent to one of the African Colonies. To raise the necessary funds, if they shall not have previously earned them, they must be hired out a sufficient length of time.

I...enjoin my executors and descendants to pay particular attention to the execution of this provision of my will. And if they should sell any of the females who, or whose issue are to be free, I especially desire them to guard carefully the rights of such issue by all suitable stipulations and sanctions in the contract of sale. But I hope that it may not be necessary to sell any such persons who are to be entitled to their freedom, (except) that they may be retained in the possession of some of my descendants.

Clay’s will lays out a path to emancipation and a return to Africa after learning the life skills he thinks they will need to thrive once they are back home. While that much sounds admirable, the terms are hedged in places. Some of his slaves will be retained for his descendants in perpetuity, while the others will have to wait for more than two decades for their freedom. Thus it is a gesture in the right direction, but still far short of the higher order example set by George Washington in his 1799 testament.

Date: Summer 1852

Unity Among The Democrats Is Also Being Tested

In 1852, the hope among Democrats is that the passage of the 1850 Compromise Bill, cleverly engineered and sold by Stephen Douglas, will be sufficient to hold Southern members in line and cure the internal breeches caused by David Wilmot’s Proviso of 1846.

Party unity has been aided by the return of many Northern “Barburners” who became Free Soilers in 1848 not to oppose slavery, but to seek political revenge for Van Buren’s loss to Polk at the 1844 convention. The “returnees” include both the ex-President and his son.

However the admission of California as a Free State still rankles many Southern Democrats, as does the failure to secure support for extending the 36’30” Missouri demarcation line from the Mississippi River to the west coast.

Two prominent southerners -- Georgia Governor Howell Cobb and Mississippi Senator Henry Foote – signal their displeasure by joining the Unionist movement, which calls for enforcing constitutional sanctions of slavery, while rejecting secession.

Divisions Within The Democratic Party (1848-52)

1844	1848	1852
Democrats	Democrats Free Soilers	Northern Democrats Southern Democrats Free Soilers Unionists

The challenge at the convention will be to avoid more slippage among the Southern contingent.

Northerners, led by the aging Cass and the youthful Douglas, continue to hold out their “popular sovereignty” as the last best hope to extend slavery to the west. But more and more Southerners fear that the outcome in Congress will go against them in the end. Within this latter group, two factions emerge by 1852.

The radical, minority group comprises the political progeny of John C. Calhoun, Fire-Eaters like Robert Rhett, James Hammond, William Yancey, James Mason and David Atchison, who begin to openly call for secession.

They are off-set by moderates who favor holding both their party and the country together on the hope of electing a new Democrat President – albeit likely a Northerner -- who will give in to Southern demands. Included here are two younger leaders in particular, the 44 year old Mexican War hero and ex-Senator from Mississippi, Jefferson Davis, and John C. Breckinridge, son of a famous Kentucky family, at 31 years old, already the head of the Democrat caucus in the U.S. House.

The immediate challenge for these moderate Southerners will be to identify the “right” candidate for the White House in the coming election.

Democrat Party Stalwarts And Defectors As Of 1852

Core Democrats	Age	State	1844	1848	1852
John Calhoun	70	SC	Democrat	Democrat	Dead
Thomas H Benton	70	MO	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Lewis Cass	70	Mich	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
William Marcy	66	NY	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
William King	66	Ala	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
James Buchanan	61	Pa	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
James Guthrie	60	Ky	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Sam Houston	59	Texas	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
John Slidell	59	La	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Andrew Butler	56	SC	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
James Mason	54	Va	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Andrew Donelson	53	Tenn	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Daniel Dickinson	52	NY	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Robert B. Rhett	52	SC	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Lin Boyd	52	Ky	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Joseph Lane	51	Oregon	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Benj Fitzpatrick	50	Ala	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Franklin Pierce	48	NH	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
James Shields	46	IL	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
David Atchinson	45	MO	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
James Hammond	45	SC	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Andrew Johnson	44	Tenn	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Jefferson Davis	44	Miss	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
RTM Hunter	43	Va	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Horatio Seymour	42	NY	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Herschel Johnson	40	Georgia	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Jesse Bright	40	Indiana	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
John McClermand	40	Illinois	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat

Stephen Douglas	39	IL	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Albert Brown	39	Miss	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Montgomery Blair	39	MO	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
John C. Fremont	39	Cal	-----	-----	Democrat
Louis Wigfall	36	Texas	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Ben Butler	34	Mass	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
William Yancey	34	Ala	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
John Breckinridge	31	Ky	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
William P. Miles	30	Ala	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
Defectors					
Martin Van Buren	70	NY	Democrat	Free Soil	Democrat
Francis Blair Sr	61	MO	Democrat	Free Soil	Free Soil
John Dix	54	NY	Democrat	Free Soil	Democrat
Simon Cameron	53	Pa	Democrat	Democrat	Know Noth
Gideon Welles	50	Conn	Democrat	Free Soil	Free Soil
Henry Foote	48	Miss	Democrat	Democrat	Unionist
Preston King	46	NY	Democrat	Free Soil	Free Soil
John Hale	46	NH	Democrat	Independent	Free Soil
Hannibal Hamlin	43	Maine	Democrat	Democrat	Democrat
John Van Buren	42	NY	Democrat	Free Soil	Democrat
David Wilmot	38	Pa	Democrat	Free Soil	Free Soil
Howell Cobb	37	Georgia	Democrat	Democrat	Unionist
Nathaniel Banks	36	Mass	Democrat	Democrat	Free Soil