

2020

Exploring Northern Identity Through Historical Analysis of Cincinnati's Antebellum Period

Avery Ozimek
University of Cincinnati College of Law

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.law.uc.edu/fcj>



Part of the [Civil Rights and Discrimination Commons](#), [Law and Race Commons](#), and the [Legal History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Ozimek, Avery (2020) "Exploring Northern Identity Through Historical Analysis of Cincinnati's Antebellum Period," *Freedom Center Journal*: Vol. 2019 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarship.law.uc.edu/fcj/vol2019/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by University of Cincinnati College of Law Scholarship and Publications. It has been accepted for inclusion in Freedom Center Journal by an authorized editor of University of Cincinnati College of Law Scholarship and Publications. For more information, please contact ronald.jones@uc.edu.

Exploring Northern Identity Through Historical Analysis of Cincinnati's Antebellum Period

AVERY OZIMEK*

*"[P]olitical maps paint the regions [north and south] in red and blue, signifying two worlds at war inside one national soul. To many northerners, the South still feels foreign — marked by its politics, culture, and race relations... comparisons inevitably begin with prominent touchstones: Union against Confederates, snow versus sun."*¹

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this essay arose from several conversations I had with my partner during my second year of law school. We were an interracial couple and at the time had been together for one year. It was 2018 and our relationship didn't seem like a "radical" thing to me, even though we often received "looks" from others when we were out together. Knowing what I know now, however, maybe we weren't as conventional a couple as I had thought.

When I was young, my family lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio. During that time, I was the only white child in all of my classrooms—school, dance, etc. As I got older, my family moved from the neighborhood where I was growing up to a predominately white suburb about forty-five minutes away. There, I attended the public school where nearly everyone looked like me. At the time I did not notice many differences in the places I grew up. However, looking back, my experiences in the two places were vastly different and have shaped many of my perspectives today. While I am white and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio and its suburbs, my partner is Black and grew up in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. This gave each of us very different perspectives and led to great conversations.

The conversation that sparked this essay began one evening while we were making dinner. As we cooked, we casually talked about places where we might move after I graduated. That conversation did not begin as one with great depth, but merely involved two young people imagining life

* J.D. Candidate 2019, University of Cincinnati College of Law.

¹ Jason Sokol, *The North Isn't Better Than the South: The Real History of Modern Racism and Segregation Above the Mason-Dixon Line*, SALON, (Dec. 14, 2014, 10:30 PM), https://www.salon.com/2014/12/14/the_north_isnt_better_than_the_south_the_real_history_of_modern_racism_and_segregation_above_the_mason_dixon_line/ (citing JASON SOKOL, ALL EYES ARE UPON US: RACE AND POLITICS FROM BOSTON TO BROOKLYN (1st ed. 2014)).

down the road. For him it was easy—he would move just about anywhere. However, I made it clear that I was not interested in moving to the South. Having grown up in the South, he was confused by my adamance against living there. I went on to explain everything that I had always been taught throughout my public education: “Ohio doesn’t have the same history that is such a deep part of the South” and “yes, of course Ohio (which to me signaled the North as a whole) has its fair share of issues surrounding race, but it never had Jim Crow. In fact, it had the underground railroad and anti-slavery organizations.” For me, this all signaled that the bigotry existing in the North was nothing compared to the South, and I absolutely did not want to live in the South.

Throughout our talk, he argued that Cincinnati was not racially integrated. I didn’t disagree. I saw it almost every time we left the house together. It was surprising the stares we received as an interracial couple in 2017/18 and how often one of us was the only Black or white person in the room. To my surprise, my partner also discussed a general lack of culture in Cincinnati, which I could not fully understand. Sure, Cincinnati may not be the most vibrant city in the country, but to say that it lacked culture left me slightly offended. I was a bit defensive of my northern home of Ohio. However, as is the case with casual conversations we soon moved on to other subjects until dinner was finished.

I thought about this conversation often, and realized it was not necessarily as casual as I had originally thought. I felt guilty for disagreeing and becoming so defensive, but I was unsure why I couldn’t get that conversation out of my mind. Soon after, I attended my first *Freedom Center Journal* meeting to discuss the upcoming volume’s theme. After deciding on “Identity Crisis,” I realized that this theme helped to explain why I was having trouble with this specific interaction with my partner. Our discussion was causing me to question my identity, specifically my identity as a Northerner. Prior to this conversation, I had not given my Northern identity any thought. The idea that the North might not be the place of freedom and abolition that I had always been taught was jarring. Before this interaction, I did not realize how much I identified my Cleveland roots as northern nor how strongly I valued what I thought my Northern heritage meant.

This essay is my exploration to find a truer Northern identity, different from the one I was taught in school. Specifically, this essay will look at Cincinnati during America’s Antebellum period, a historical period generally seen as one marked by “a nation polarized by specific regional identities. The South held a pro-slavery identity . . . while the North largely held abolitionist sentiments and opposed the institution’s westward expansion.”² During this period, Ohio’s constitution may have been anti-slavery, however, the state’s Black Codes, race riots, and anti-abolitionist sentiments told a different story

² *A Nation Divided: The Political Climate of 1850s America*, CIVIL WAR ERA N.C., <https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/exhibits/show/benjamin-hedrick/politicalclimate> (last visited Feb. 22, 2018).

than Ohio's constitution. The darker history of Antebellum Cincinnati often goes untold, even in the region, but an understanding of this historical context helps to explain many aspects of Cincinnati's present.

I. HISTORY'S MYTH AND ITS MORE COMPLEX REALITY

History is not as simple as the North was free and the South was slaveholding. The past is complex and affects our current realities. The complexities, coupled with the almost exclusive concentration on white communities' perspectives, allow myths to flourish. Without learning the complexities, it was easy for me to hold a "false" identity and connection to a purely abolitionist North. This North claims to acknowledge Black communities' history while allowing the "Cincinnati Negro community... [to] remain basically a faceless community."³

Cincinnati, like many Northern cities,⁴ was thought of as a beacon of hope for those escaping slavery, racial discrimination, and persecution in the South. Even classic novels like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* have central story lines of runaway slaves crossing the Ohio River into Cincinnati for a chance at freedom.⁵ In primary school, my classmates and I were only taught historical perspectives that portrayed the North as the "good guy." For example, my teacher would proclaim, "the North fought the Civil War to free the slaves" or "Ohio was the home to abolitionists assisting with the Underground Railroad." These were the stories that constructed my view of Ohio and the North in a singular light as the racially enlightened heroes. We were taught that the North had formally outlawed slavery in both the Northwest Ordinance and in state constitutions.⁶ And while my primary education did not necessarily teach me falsehoods, these stories did not paint the entire picture. History and societies are too complex to simply be split into the "good guys" and the "bad guys" or the free states and the slaveholding states. Jason Sokol explains that "the North as a land of liberty has become a straw man,"⁷ one which has distorted actual history to better fit the collective narrative of the North, and in turn, has made it more difficult to address race in the North.

No better historical figure personifies the region's historically complex dualities than Abraham Lincoln. Often called the Great Emancipator, there is no denying Lincoln was one of the country's greatest presidents. He saved

³ David L. Calkins, *19th Century Black History: A Bibliographic Essay*, 28 CIN. HIST. SOC'Y BULL., 336, 336 (1970).

⁴ While some scholars classify Cincinnati as the West and refer to it by its moniker "Queen City of the West," I am choosing to classify it as North based on lived experience, other scholarship, and characteristics it possesses. CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS, *THE RIVER RAN BACKWARDS* 1 (2016).

⁵ See generally HARRIET BEECHER STOWE, *UNCLE TOM'S CABIN* (1852).

⁶ David L. Calkins, *Chronologic Highlights of Cincinnati's Black Community*, 28 CIN. HIST. SOC'Y BULL. 344, 344 (1970).

⁷ Sokol *supra* note 1.

the Union, signed the Emancipation Proclamation, gave countless speeches on equality, and has influenced great civil rights leaders. Lincoln once said, “I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can.”⁸ Even W.E.B. Du Bois stated, “Abraham Lincoln began the emancipation of the Negro American. The [NAACP] proposes to complete it.”⁹

However, while the aforementioned is true, the full history of President Lincoln is much more complex than this single-sided narrative. Lincoln also held many of the racist convictions of his time.¹⁰ For example, during a debate in 1858 Lincoln stated:

I am not, nor have I ever been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and [B]lack races . . . there is a physical difference between the white and [B]lack races which I believe will forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality. And inasmuch as they cannot so live, while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior, and I as much as any other man am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.¹¹

It is often dichotomies, such as those that characterize Lincoln, that allow the false narrative of the North as a place of pure racial enlightenment to flourish. When both sides of the same coin are not told in tandem, people cannot understand history’s complexities. Both histories can be told, without one negating the other. W.E.B. Du Bois explained the “mythic” figure of Lincoln well when he said, “I love him not because he was perfect but because he was not and yet triumphed.”¹²

President Lincoln’s beliefs and values reflected those of the North in many ways. It was not just the land of the abolitionists. In reality, throughout the Antebellum period, “northern opinion shifted . . . keeping pace with the South . . . so that at no time were the sections very far apart on race policy.”¹³ Through the mid-1800s and into the end of that century (and far beyond), both regions used each other as templates to suppress whole populations of

⁸ *Lincoln’s Legacy*, NAT’L PARK SERV., <https://www.nps.gov/liho/learn/historyculture/legacy.htm> (last updated Apr. 10, 2015).

⁹ Philip B. Kunhardt III, *Assassination of Abraham: Lincoln Lincoln’s Contested Legacy*, SMITHSONIAN (Feb. 2009), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/lincolns-contested-legacy-44978351/>.

¹⁰ Robert Morgan, *The ‘Great Emancipator’ and the Issue of Race: Abraham Lincoln’s Program of Black Resettlement*, INST. FOR HIST. REV., http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v13/v13n5p-4_Morgan.html (last visited Mar. 4, 2018).

¹¹ C. VANN WOODWARD, *THE STRANGE CAREER OF JIM CROW: A COMMEMORATIVE EDITION* 21 (2002).

¹² Kunhardt, *supra* note 9.

¹³ WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 70.

Black and Brown communities through Black Codes, federal law, and common practices. When one could not create a new system of oppression, they modeled their social system off that of the other.¹⁴

In 1804, the free state of Ohio became the first state to enact Black Codes with the purpose of creating a state of white supremacy in the North and denying civil rights to Black residents.¹⁵ Black Codes forced people of color to register with the state, pay registration fees to the state, and prove their freedom before settling in the state. The Codes also prohibited Black employment, punished those who assisted fugitive slaves, and created many other restrictions and regulations on the state's Black community.¹⁶

The Ohio legislature denied both Black and white abolitionists' requests to abolish the state's Black Codes, allowing the Codes to persist until the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment.¹⁷ Not only did Ohio's legislature deny these requests, but also continued to work with Kentucky politicians to create additional racist legislation, including the Fugitive Slave Act.¹⁸ The Codes and legislation would later become the template for Jim Crow in the South¹⁹ because they were easily "borrowed by their southern counterparts when slavery collapsed."²⁰

II. THE ANTEBELLUM PERIOD THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

The North has defined itself to be what the South is not. "Southern history is filled with extraordinary images of racism" which have allowed the North to identify with imagery portraying the exact opposite, such as images of the Northern abolitionist and the Underground Railroad.²¹ This juxtaposition has allowed two poles to be formed in the consciousness of the country between the North and the South, instead of the complex reality in which neither region is void of the traits of the other.

The South has a unique history about which historian C. Vann Woodward, probably best known for his book *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, writes, "slavery and secession, independence and defeat, emancipation

¹⁴ See generally *id.*

¹⁵ See NIKKI M. TAYLOR, FRONTIERS OF FREEDOM: CINCINNATI'S BLACK COMMUNITY 1802-1868, 32 (2005); see also *Ohio Enacts "Black Laws"*, AFR. AM. REGISTRY, http://www.aaregistry.org/historic_events/view/ohio-enacts-black-laws (last visited Feb. 22, 2018).

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ See STEPHEN MIDDLETON, THE BLACK LAWS: RACE AND THE LEGAL PROCESS IN EARLY OHIO 3 (2005); see also Calkins *supra* note 3, at 344.

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ Silas Niobeh Crowfoot, *Community Development for a White City: Race Making, Improvementism, and the Cincinnati Race Riots of 1829, 1836, and 1841*, PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY PDXSCHOLAR, (Jan. 1, 2010), https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1002&context=open_access_etds.

²⁰ Aldon Morris, *Centuries of Black Protest: Its Significance for America and the World*, in RACE IN AM.: THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUALITY 19, 41 (Herbert Hill & James E. Jones eds., 1993).

²¹ Sokol, *supra* note 1.

and reconstruction, redemption and reunion.”²² Woodward explains that this continuous fluctuation between an old and new South has created shifting histories and indefinite social institutions for Southerners.²³ However, one constant which Southerners have held onto is their “common resolve” to keep the South a “white man’s country.”²⁴

The Ohio River is often considered the boundary line—demographically and politically—between the North and South.²⁵ As a historically important trade city bordering the Ohio River to the north—Kentucky bordering the River to the south—Cincinnati’s history as a Northern city is different from those that did not border the South. Comparative touchstones which are often the shallow markers of the North and South (warm versus cold, southern draws versus “course cadences”)²⁶ are often blurred in Cincinnati, Ohio, which sits directly on the border of Kentucky. “Cincinnati was a Northern city” geographically above the Mason-Dixon Line and “the majority of its early settlers hailed from the Northeast.” However, it also “assumed a southern character” being separated from the South by only a river.²⁷ Thus, the Ohio River represented—and still represents in many ways today—the boundary between freedom and slavery. Books like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Freedom River* by Doreen Rappaport, and even Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* tell stories of slaves crossing the Ohio River to escape slavery and live freely. In these stories life may not have been perfect once the characters entered Ohio, but each was free. However, the same river that continues to symbolize freedom, flows both ways; as a central economic gateway to the South, it allowed distinctions between the two regions to blur.

During the Antebellum period, Cincinnati was the United States’ border town. It was a main place of passage from one region to the other since the days of slaves escaping to freedom and has continued to be a passage point for those migrating between the North and the South.²⁸ According to historian Henry Louis Taylor Jr. “nineteenth-century Cincinnati had a ‘dual personality, a schizophrenic northern and southern personality occupying the same urban body.’”²⁹ And yet, because it sits on the northern side of the Ohio River, we are supposed to believe that Cincinnati is only a place marked by its obvious Northern differences with the South.

As a growing city along the southern border with a booming economy throughout the nineteenth century, Cincinnati had the largest African American population in the state.³⁰ Cincinnati stood for freedom,

²² WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 3-4.

²³ *Id.* at 5.

²⁴ *Id.* at 8.

²⁵ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 4, at 5.

²⁶ Sokol, *supra* note 1.

²⁷ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 4.

²⁸ *Id.* at 1-2.

²⁹ *Id.* at 3.

³⁰ *Id.* at 28.

opportunity, and abolition.³¹ However, these perceptions hid a more complex reality. Ohio's original state constitution explicitly denied Black citizenship. Although this provision was later removed, the amended constitution remained silent on the issue of its Black resident's citizenship status.³² Nikki M. Taylor explains how this "failure to address the issue paved the way for the future denial of civil rights for African Americans at state and local levels."³³ While Cincinnati was home to a critical mass of residents with staunchly held abolitionist beliefs, strong anti-abolitionist "southern m[e]n" soon found crossing the Ohio River into "the 'Land of Abolitionists'" did not mean they would be met with hate or disdain.³⁴ "Instead," according to scholar Christopher Phillips, "[they] found nearly universal welcome from Ohioans."³⁵

The elimination from the Ohio Constitution of its explicit denial of state citizenship to Black Ohioans created a "narrative of [a] no-slavery...Ohio."³⁶ However, its resulting silence on Black citizenship (and its failure to affirmatively confer state citizenship on Black Ohioans) in addition to the state's regular practice of hunting, capturing, and selling Black residents to neighbors in the South under, for example, the federal Fugitive Slave Act of 1793, gave truth to the lie of Ohio's "no-slavery," abolitionist narrative.³⁷ The ever-present North/South dichotomy, has cemented this historical myth and facilitated the "forgetting" that had to occur to create a "Northern" identity distinct from its Southern counterpart. We have been taught in school and elsewhere in society that there are good guys and bad guys, and these contrasting character archetypes perpetuate a narrative of Northern Exceptionalism.³⁸ Because Ohio was a free state and was north of the Mason Dixon line, Cincinnati sat in a geographically convenient spot to be considered the North in the Antebellum United States. And the North is where it has stayed in the country's collective consciousness. Cincinnati now possesses a historical narrative of a Northern city, a place where liberty could be found, a place of opportunity, and freedom for runaway slaves.

³¹ *Id.* at 29.

³² *Id.* at 31.

³³ *Id.* at 32; Calkins, *supra* note 6.

³⁴ PHILLIPS, *supra* note 4, at 3.

³⁵ *Id.*

³⁶ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 114.

³⁷ *Id.*; Greg Hand, *Ohio Was Not Home-Free for Runaway Slaves*, CINCINNATI MAGAZINE (Feb. 18, 2016), <https://www.cincinnati-magazine.com/citywiseblog/cincinnati-curiosities-runaway-slave/>.

³⁸ The term "exceptionalism," and specifically American Exceptionalism, came from scholars' and historians' study of groups who view the United States as uniquely superior because it upholds the greatest democracy and most liberty for its people. In more recent years the idea of American Exceptionalism has become a part of the U.S.'s political landscape. Exceptionalism carries with it a sense of superiority to, and separation from, outside groups. The idea of Northern Exceptionalism expresses the ideology that the North is superior to the South because of the ways it has dealt (and continues to deal) with race. See James W. Ceaser, *The Origins and Character of American Exceptionalism*, 1 AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT, 3 (2012).

III. ANTEBELLUM CINCINNATI AND ITS RIOTS

Cincinnati thrived on the Ohio River. It quickly became the connector from east to west and north (New York) to south (Louisiana).³⁹ Within the first forty years of its founding, the city was dubbed “The Queen City” by its proud residents because of its exceptional growth and the name it made for itself on a national level in a few short decades.⁴⁰ By its very geography, the city was a connector from its beginnings and served both the needs and wants of the North and the slaveholding South. Because of the city’s important economic relationships with southern slave holders, both across the river and further south, it “went to great lengths to ensure that southern economic interests were protected in the city . . . even encouraging anti-abolitionist mobs.”⁴¹ The city’s economic need to mollify both regions contributed to the need for Black Codes and the Fugitive Slave Laws to appease the city’s southern interests. From its outset, Cincinnati could not be North or South. Rather, it had to be both.

In the Antebellum period, the city and its leaders had a strong desire to continue the rapid growth that had begun in prior years; this growth brought with it an influx of Black residents. However, enabled by the city’s officials and elites, the Black Codes were used as a strategy for placemaking in Antebellum Cincinnati to ensure it continued to “preserve the privileges of being white” throughout the city.⁴² The same ideologies being used by southern slave owners to rationalize chattel slavery were being used in Cincinnati to rationalize violence, discrimination, and racist community development.⁴³ While these ideologies were at odds with the Ohio Constitution and the broader narrative of the state at the time, leaders’ and citizens’ ideologies were more influential and pervasive than the state’s formalized values.⁴⁴

The Black Codes created a legal construction of race and codified racial categories, making it easier to ‘other’ Black residents and created white spaces within a dominant white society in Cincinnati. Because of Cincinnati’s geographic location, free Black residents lived with the constant threat of being sold back into slavery despite it being outlawed by the city. Cincinnati’s Black residents risked being shipped to New Orleans on Cincinnati’s greatest resource for development, the Ohio River: free Black Cincinnatians were often kidnapped and sold into slavery. Residents often “witnessed slaves being driven to market like cattle,” and it was well known

³⁹ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15.

⁴⁰ *Cincinnati Frequently Asked Questions*, CINCINNATI MUSEUM CENTER, <http://library.cincymuseum.org/cincifaq.htm> (last visited Mar. 4, 2018).

⁴¹ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 4.

⁴² See Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at I, 142-143.

⁴³ See *id.*

⁴⁴ See generally *id.*

that slave owners brought and kept their slaves in the city.⁴⁵ Residents and officials regularly turned blind eyes to slavery in their city, which allowed for good relations with their southern associates.

Just as modern media does today, Antebellum media contributed to the city's ideology. There were several news outlets in Antebellum Cincinnati reporting stories often laden with racist and anti-abolitionist rhetoric. For example, reflecting the white community's racial sentiments of the time, Calkins described *The Daily Cincinnati Enquirer* of the time "as anti-abolitionist, as being openly anti-Negro, and as seeking to kindle the spirit of Negrophobia."⁴⁶ However, it regularly reported on racial tensions and saw Cincinnati's Black community as a source of news not to be ignored.⁴⁷

Often news editors, like the *Cincinnati Gazette*'s Charles Hammon, were part of anti-abolitionist and pro-Black Codes groups⁴⁸ which held significant power in the city.⁴⁹ Not only did these mainstream newspapers show bias in their writing, they blatantly attacked abolitionists, with papers such as *The Whig* reporting the abolitionists as the troublemakers and the white mob as "peaceable" after an attack on an abolitionist space.⁵⁰ Groups such as Cincinnati's chapter of the American Colonization Society also produced rhetoric which incited fear-based racism in Cincinnati. For example, "in the fearful event of a servile war, it would not be in the slave holding states . . . but here, where they enjoy enough freedom to feel their chain . . . and not under the watchful restraints of a master."⁵¹

However, free Black residents of Cincinnati were not without allies. Groups of abolitionists, often comprising young white Ohioans, began spending time and forming relationships with Black community members and residents. These young white abolitionists attacked the prejudice and violence faced by their Black peers through self-examination, the generation of abolitionist discourse to counter negative racial stereotyping through small news outlets, and through working with free Black Cincinnatians to advocate

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 114.

⁴⁶ Calkins, *supra* note 6, at 339.

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ There are sources which explain the *Gazette* as "exponent of moderate antislavery activity" and "[s]ympathetic toward the Negro." *Id.*

⁴⁹ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 256.

⁵⁰ *Id.* at 304.

⁵¹ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 56.

for equality and equity between races (for example, in education).⁵² In 1834, in what is known as the Lane Seminary Rebellion, seminary students working with the Black community staged eighteen nights of antislavery debates which converted several Cincinnatians to abolitionism,⁵³ and “staged a walkout when they were ordered [by Seminary faculty] to suspend such blatant activities [with Black residents].”⁵⁴ Following the Rebellion, the students enrolled in Oberlin College and created a “stronghold of abolitionist activity” and a school for all races.⁵⁵

As in previous times, the city continued to see rapid population growth. From 1819 to 1840, populations quadrupled (with the Black population growing faster than the average population) placing a strain on the city’s resources, including housing, physical space, and food.⁵⁶ Poor residential areas, occupied by poor Black and white citizens, became rundown. Strained resources and close proximity caused more outbursts of violence as animosity increased between those in the residential areas.⁵⁷ By the 1830s, however, Cincinnati’s Black residents’ standard of living began to improve, their education became better, they began to buy homes, and open their own businesses. The residents began to build a sense of community for themselves.⁵⁸ This rapid growth of the city’s Black community became a “nuisance to white society,” especially white merchants using the river to transport and receive goods who resented the poor, Black neighborhoods near the river which they claimed negatively affected their business with their southern partners. The Black community’s expansion also increased the racial anxieties held by Cincinnati’s white residents.⁵⁹

Because Black and poor white citizens shared neighborhoods, Antebellum Cincinnati was not a place of racially segregated neighborhoods. Instead, there were “residentially segregated clusters throughout” the poor neighborhoods which were made up of mostly black, poor white, and German and Irish immigrant populations.⁶⁰ It was in these neighborhoods, where clusters of cultures lived in close proximity, that many immigrants developed negative attitudes toward their Black neighbors with whom they shared jobs and living spaces. The negative feelings held by white immigrants and their desire to distance themselves from the Black community, led to the immigrant involvement in the anti-abolitionist movement and the eventual race riots of 1829, 1836, and 1841.⁶¹

⁵² *Id.* at 109.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ Calkins, *supra* note 6, at 345.

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 43.

⁵⁷ *Id.* at 43-46.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 48.

⁵⁹ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 51.

⁶⁰ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 377.

⁶¹ *See generally id.* at 325-378.

A. COMPETITION AND WHITE FEARS OF A GROWING BLACK
COMMUNITY: THE RIOT OF 1829

The riots of 1829 are, as Taylor states, “one of the earliest examples in American history of a white effort to forcibly cleanse society of its Black population.”⁶² Prior to and during 1829, the “removal project” of Black residents gained political backing by much of the city’s white population to slow the rapid growth of the city’s Black community. The removal project was started by Cincinnati’s chapter of the American Colonization Society, whose goal was the “voluntary” resettlement of Black residents to Africa.⁶³ Their project was largely unsuccessful because very few of Cincinnati’s Black residents were interested in leaving the lives and communities they were building to move to Africa.⁶⁴ Additionally, there were other groups of citizens working to drive Black residents out of the city and its various neighborhoods by way of city council petitioning. However, by 1829 the Black community had formed an “institutional base” in churches, schools, and leadership and stood their ground, unwilling to migrate or be forced out of their homes.⁶⁵

In the weeks leading up to the 1829 race riot, community discussions between individuals and in public forums were held on the practicality, legality, and morality of the Black Codes. At a time when there was both a push by abolitionists to repeal the Black Codes and a push by anti-abolitionists to displace significant portions of a community, there were significant media influences on both sides. The clearest example in the media at the time was the supporting and opposing letters to the editor in the *Cincinnati Gazette* over issues of the Black Codes and the “removal project.”⁶⁶ When the Black Codes were upheld as constitutional,⁶⁷ the Ohio Supreme Court stated:

Our constitution was framed and adopted by white people, and for their own benefit; and they of course had a right to say on what terms they would admit [B]lack emigrants to a residence here, and whether they would admit them ...Unquestionably they were not contemplated by the framers of the constitution as becoming citizens on terms of equality with the whites...we have a right to legislate for our [white citizens] own protection in regard to them [Black citizens].⁶⁸

⁶² TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 50.

⁶³ *Id.* at 210.

⁶⁴ *Id.* at 211.

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 212; TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 57.

⁶⁶ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 218-220.

⁶⁷ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 58.

⁶⁸ *Id.*; Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 230-231.

With this ruling, the Black community began to worry about their safety and security in the community they had built in Cincinnati. The continuous push for the displacement of Cincinnati's Black residents caused many Black residents to leave. The Black community even announced in the *Cincinnati Gazette* that it had the "intention to emigrate" to Canada of their own accord.⁶⁹

However, on August 15 and 16, a large mob of white residents used force to push Black residents from the city's First Ward.⁷⁰ The white mob destroyed homes, beat Black residents, chased them through the streets, and drove them beyond the city limits.⁷¹ Some residents fought back, causing the death of a single mob member. More violence broke out on August 17 and 22.⁷²

Although there was significant media coverage surrounding the discourse that led to the riot, there was *very* little written explicitly about the August 15 riot itself. The media coverage included a single newspaper article in a paper eighty-five miles away from Cincinnati.⁷³ The article was based on a vague letter which indicated merely "extensive mischief" was had by the violent mob.⁷⁴ Authorities' responses were equally minimal. The mayor was shockingly slow to respond, even after the Black community's appeals to many authorities.⁷⁵ Additionally, the Black community was given no formal policy protections moving forward.⁷⁶

This violent outbreak, lack of official response, and the recent decision upholding the Black Codes' constitutionality worried and pushed out a significant portion of the Black community. However, for the white community "the city and township governments had not enforced the Black [Codes] effectively" and they "used collective violence to establish, or reinforce, the conditions of the settlement of their social conflict."⁷⁷ Neither group was happy and tensions continued to rise. The riots led to a mass migration of Cincinnati's Black community to Canada and other various stops along the trip north.⁷⁸

⁶⁹ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 233-234; TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 63.

⁷⁰ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 237-238; Taylor, *supra* note 15, at 63; Charles Cist, *The Cincinnati Directory for the Year 1842*, UNIVERSITY OF CINCINNATI ARCHIVES & RARE BOOKS LIBRARY, <https://libraries.uc.edu/arb/collections/urban-studies/cincinnati-maps.html> (demonstrating that, based on maps from the time period, Cincinnati's First Ward spanned parts of what is now known as the city's Over-the-Rhine and Mount Adams neighborhoods).

⁷¹ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 64.

⁷² Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 240.

⁷³ *Id.* 238-240.

⁷⁴ *Id.*

⁷⁵ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 64.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 248.

⁷⁸ *See generally* TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 65-70.

A. A DROWNING OF AN ABOLITIONIST PRINTING PRESS: THE RIOTS OF 1836

The first anti-slavery, abolitionist newspaper in the U.S., *The Philanthropist*, was created just outside of Cincinnati in Mount Pleasant by Charles Osborn in September 1817.⁷⁹ Despite wide circulation throughout Ohio and Pennsylvania, the paper ceased publishing in 1822. However, in late 1835, former slave owner, James G. Birney picked up the well-known paper's name and again began publishing under *The Philanthropist* in Cincinnati's city center.⁸⁰ Though he first began publishing abolitionist material further south, he moved his publishing endeavor into Ohio because it was "no longer safe for him to continue to print antislavery materials in the South." While unwelcomed by much of the white population just north of the Ohio River, Cincinnati's Black community appreciated its open attacks on slave owners, slavery, and Christians justifying slavery, in addition to its commitment to equality.⁸¹ Birney would go on to "receive national recognition as a leading abolitionist" and *The Philanthropist* was recognized as an "official organ of the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society."⁸²

By January of 1836, the most influential men in Cincinnati, including senators and former mayors, began discussing ways to stop abolitionists and their movements in the city.⁸³ *The Philanthropist* became a key target, which left city leaders "determined to snuff the paper out by any means necessary."⁸⁴ Then, in April a fight broke out between a Black boy and a white boy, which led to a white mob burning down Black homes and businesses and terrorizing Black residents. Throughout the violent uprising, there was no mention of it in the media for several days. However, when news finally broke about the violence, the victims (who were Black) were labeled "vicious," "very depraved," and of "the lowest and most abandoned" character.⁸⁵ Similarly, the community that had been destroyed was characterized as one populated by thieves and prostitutes. But because it was populated by both poor white and Black residents, the media masked the racial motivation behind the attack. In the end, the news article did call for an end to the violence, but only after providing cover to the racially motivated mob.⁸⁶

Finally, sparked by the events throughout that year, in July 1836 anti-abolitionist riots took place. Motivated by *The Philanthropist's* presence in

⁷⁹ *The Philanthropist*, OHIO HISTORY CENTRAL, http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/The_Philanthropist (last visited Apr. 10, 2019).

⁸⁰ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 65-70.

⁸¹ *Id.* at 109-110.

⁸² Calkins, *supra* note 6, at 340.

⁸³ TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 110.

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 282.

⁸⁶ *Id.* at 282-283.

Cincinnati, a group of about fifty men destroyed the paper's new home. The men broke into the newspaper's shop, threatened people, and destroyed equipment, including the paper's press, supplies, and the space itself.⁸⁷ Although many community members saw the violence, none stepped in or alerted the authorities.⁸⁸ Following the violence, destruction, and threats, and after several meetings between officials and Birney, white community representatives met with "Birney about ceasing [the paper's] publication."⁸⁹ Despite the violence and coercion, *The Philanthropist* repaired itself and continued its abolitionist work out of the space which rioters had attempted to destroy. However, threats—including those of death and tar and feathering—to the business, its owner, and its employees continued.⁹⁰

With the white community fully enraged by Birney's tenacity in continuing to print *The Philanthropist*, another anti-abolitionist mob of several thousand attacked the paper's print shop only a few weeks after the first attack.⁹¹ The mob "scattered the type in the streets, tore down the presses, and completely dismantled the office."⁹² Following this, the mob, armed with various weaponry and supplies for tar and feathering, went to "punish" known abolitionists at their homes.⁹³ Upon finding none, the mob returned to the printshop in an effort to burn it down. However, instead of burning the shop down, the mob settled on the complete dismantling and "drowning" of the newspaper's printing press in the Ohio River.⁹⁴ After destroying *The Philanthropist's* printing press, the mob turned their violence to Black owned homes and businesses. When the Black community fled, the mob demolished and destroyed the contents of the residences.⁹⁵ After hours of destruction, Cincinnati's Mayor finally addressed the mob around midnight saying:

Gentlemen, it is now late at night, by continuing longer you will disturb the citizens and rob yourselves of rest! Besides, there is danger of punishing the innocent with the guilty, which I am convinced that none in Cincinnati would wish to do. We have done enough for one night (three cheers for the Mayor). The abolitionists must be convinced by this time what public sentiment is, and that it will not do to disregard it. (Three cheers). I advise you to go home.⁹⁶

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 287.

⁸⁸ *Id.*

⁸⁹ *Id.* at 306.

⁹⁰ *Id.* at 297.

⁹¹ *Id.* at 310.

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ *Id.* at 310-311.

⁹⁴ *Id.* at 311.

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 311-312.

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 312.

Violence and pillaging continued for two days. On August 1, the Mayor “finally issued a proclamation asking for citizens to cooperate in helping to restore order.”⁹⁷ With the help of volunteer patrols, the mob violence at last ceased. In its aftermath, despite the destruction the mob had caused to the city at large, the *Republican* called the mob “the most systematic, orderly and well behaved mob, we ever witnessed, and at the same time the most determined,” while the *Whig* classified the mob as “restrained” and the riot as “not ‘within the design of the mob.’”⁹⁸ A resident of Cincinnati at the time and author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote,

[a]ll the newspapers in the city, except Hammond's ('Gazette') and Henry's (the 'Journal'), were either silent or openly 'mobocratic.' As might have been expected, Birney refused to leave, and that night the mob tore down his press, scattered the types, dragged the whole to the river, threw it in, and then came back to demolish the office . . . The mayor was a silent spectator of these proceedings, and was heard to say, 'Well, lads, you have done well, so far; go home now before you disgrace yourselves;' but the 'lads' spent the rest of the night and a greater part of the next day pulling down the houses of inoffensive and respectable blacks. The 'Gazette' office was threatened, the 'Journal' office was to go next; Lane Seminary and the water-works also were mentioned as probable points to be attacked by the mob.⁹⁹

The effects of the mob, and the response of officials made it clear that “[t]he violence against African Americans...was a race making technology, intended to make it clear that blacks should not get overly comfortable in Cincinnati, just because there were sympathetic abolitionists in town... given the provisions of the state’s Black Laws and prejudices... they could be pushed out of their safety, and out of their homes.”¹⁰⁰

C. A SMALL WAR: THE RIOTS OF 1841

The relative “prosperity” of Cincinnati’s Black community angered white residents, which led to the organization of white residents to prevent Black residents from buying property. By the early 1840s a sense of fear emerged among Cincinnati’s white residents around the potential loss of trade with the South and the huge surge of fugitive slaves escaping into

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 314.

⁹⁸ *Id.* at 316.

⁹⁹ “*Slavery Riots in Cincinnati:*” *Extract from Life of Harriet Beecher Stowe*, THE PRO-SLAVERY RIOT IN CINCINNATI, <http://utc.iath.virginia.edu/abolitn/abauhbsat.html> (last visited Apr. 26, 2019) (citing LIFE OF HARRIET BEECHER STOWE: COMPILED FROM HER LETTERS AND JOURNALS (Charles Edward Stowe ed., 1890)).

¹⁰⁰ Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 319.

Cincinnati while en route to Canada.¹⁰¹ The year 1841 was particularly violent in southern Ohio with violence in Dayton and other smaller cities throughout.¹⁰² This violence culminated with continued loss of trade with the South. Abolitionists claimed the loss was due to Southerners' inability to pay debts which they accrued and their untrustworthiness; anti-abolitionists claimed abolition in Cincinnati caused tensions which affected business. Regardless of the reason, trade with the South had significantly waned causing unease throughout the city.

During this time, tensions continued to grow between white and Black residents. Many violent outbursts over the course of several weeks in the summer of 1841 led to a weekend of violence and terror.¹⁰³ On Tuesday, August 31, 1841 there was a large fight between a group of Irish immigrants and a group of Black men which resulted in injuries on both sides.¹⁰⁴ The next day, September 1, a crowd of white men came back to the sight of the fight with weapons looking for a fight. When they did not find one, the group went to a Black boarding house and ordered that a man from the original fight be sent out. When the man was not sent out and the mob was prevented from entering the building, the mob began to attack the building and threaten the community and the people inside. From inside the building defensive shots were fired into the white crowd.¹⁰⁵ There was little news coverage of this event, however, word spread throughout Cincinnati that the Black community had "won."¹⁰⁶

On September 2, with tensions rising in the city, two white boys threw gravel at a Black couple who ignored the incident. However, following this incident, some Black residents returned to the scene of the incident, which led to a fight during which two white men were stabbed.¹⁰⁷ The incidents of September 1 and 2 contributed to the white community's feeling that it had been defeated by the city's Black residents. This added to the grievances of the city's white anti-abolitionist residents—they had lost trade with the South, land, business, and the favor of the media, and now they also had been "defeated" in interracial altercations. Racial tensions were reaching a climax and Cincinnati's Black residents knew rising tensions meant something terrible was coming for their community.¹⁰⁸ However, white political leaders continued to ignore the inevitable. Only a single newspaper acknowledged the Black residents' need to defend themselves in an organized way was the result of the city's failure to protect them from white violence.¹⁰⁹ The Black

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 23; TAYLOR, *supra* note 15, at 118-126.

¹⁰² Crowfoot, *supra* note 19, at 338-341.

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 343.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.* at 345.

¹⁰⁵ *Id.* at 345-346.

¹⁰⁶ *Id.* at 346.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.*

¹⁰⁸ *Id.* at 347-348.

¹⁰⁹ *Id.*

community started to prepare themselves. They organized: sending the women and children away, gathering weapons, and positioning themselves for what they knew was coming.¹¹⁰

As anticipated by the Black community, by Friday, September 3 a crowd of white residents organized an attack to drive Black residents out of the city. What started with about 800 white people soon grew to 1,500.¹¹¹ With Black community members ready and in position for the impending attack, all the white mob could do was begin to ruin buildings, starting with a Black-owned candy store.¹¹² The Mayor unsuccessfully tried to stop the mob violence before it went any further. However, the attackers were urged on by onlookers and those who were attacked began to defend themselves with gunfire.¹¹³ The attackers retreated, attacked, and retreated again to regroup and gather supplies.

It was at this point that the riot became a “small war.”¹¹⁴ The white mob had grown and gathered weapons which included guns and cannons.¹¹⁵ Many were killed, and even more were injured. Finally, militias were called in by Cincinnati's Mayor to end the violence. However, these militias treated Black residents as the perpetrators and initiators of the violence.¹¹⁶ Black residents were rounded up and held until they could prove they were not fugitive slaves, while white residents were free to roam the city, causing destruction and breaking into buildings and homes.

The following day, ten anti-Black and anti-abolitionist resolutions were passed within the city's government.¹¹⁷ The Black community also held meetings which resulted in the community agreeing that they would conduct themselves peacefully and in an orderly manner, give up their weapons, comply with the Black Codes, and thank the Mayor.¹¹⁸ However, while the government and Black community leaders tried to find resolution, terror continued in the Black community. White police and community members continued to round up Black men, arresting every Black man they could find and confiscating all weapons because organized Black defense was considered a threat.

With no way to defend themselves and most of the men in the Black community jailed the previous day, the Black community was again attacked by white mobs on Saturday and into Sunday. During this attack Black-owned homes, businesses, and property were destroyed. The mob looted, vandalized, brutalized, terrorized, and raped Black women and children

¹¹⁰ *Id.* at 348.

¹¹¹ *Id.* at 349.

¹¹² *Id.*

¹¹³ *Id.* at 350.

¹¹⁴ *Id.*

¹¹⁵ *Id.*

¹¹⁶ *Id.* at 351.

¹¹⁷ *Id.* at 352.

¹¹⁸ *Id.* at 354-355.

across Black communities on Sixth Street, Columbia Street, Sycamore, and Broadway.¹¹⁹ This violence continued through the weekend and worsened as more of the Black residents were jailed. By Monday, the violence and terror had come to an end.¹²⁰ Finally, the local media could no longer ignore this level of violence. There was constant discussion of the causes and the repercussions of the weekend of vicious mob violence. Regardless of the media's opinions of the violence, all reports condemned the violence, encouraged citizens to stop participating in it, and reported that this type of violence was bad for the Cincinnati community at large.¹²¹

IV. PAST AS PROLOGUE

While the Black Northerner “enjoyed obvious advantages over the Southern slave,”¹²² segregation in the North was used as a system to dehumanize and subjugate its Black citizens. Because the North did not enjoy the benefits of the “extensive repressive machinery associated with the slave regime”¹²³ due to both political messaging and its urban setting's inability to uphold a system of masters and slaves,¹²⁴ it was imperative that they create a system in which whites were clearly upheld as the superior and Blacks ever more clearly defined as the inferior. It was the Northern system of racism and segregation that provided the model for the Jim Crow laws of the South.

Since learning about Cincinnati's Antebellum history, I see the city and the state differently. The nineteenth century riots have provided me with a new lens with which to view and understand current racial tensions and Cincinnati's more recent history. Patterns of development have mirrored those in the Antebellum period and contemporary news coverage of Cincinnati's racial tension often shares many problematic aspects of the historical coverage seen in the nineteenth century.

What began as a casual conversation with my partner has led me on a journey to discover the complexities of my identity as a “Northerner.” The history I was never taught is important to understanding the full picture of the past. Though I have always been aware that Ohio, the North, and the U.S. generally is not a place of racial equality or equity, using the lens of Antebellum Cincinnati has allowed me to come to terms with my subconscious identity attached to a mythic, enlightened North. Through my investigation of the past I have learned that, much like today, the North has never been too far from the South.

¹¹⁹ *Id.* at 355-356.

¹²⁰ *Id.* at 362.

¹²¹ *Id.* at 363.

¹²² WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 18.

¹²³ Morris, *supra* note 20, at 41.

¹²⁴ WOODWARD, *supra* note 11, at 16-17.