

March 23



A Divided Connecticut: Politics in the Civil War

For this entry into the *Connecticut Industry During Times of War* series, we will be taking a further detour than usual by discussing the complexities of Connecticut's political landscape during the Civil War. This topic piqued my curiosity recently when rewatching Scorsese's famous *Gangs of New York*, set in the backdrop of the Civil War and heavily involving themes of patriotism, race, and politics. Now that over 160 years have passed since the start of the conflict, it seems rather easy to boil down the beliefs of the time period to Connecticut being a Northern state and therefore decidedly and wholly behind the Union cause. As we all know, individual beliefs and politics are a bit more complicated.

By the time of the American Revolution, there were more enslaved people in Connecticut than any other New England state. It would be one of the slowest New England states to emancipate its slaves as well, passing the Gradual Abolition Act in 1784, leading to an official abolishment of slavery in 1848 (Menschel 184). US Census data shows Connecticut's recorded slave population in the year 1800 was 1,000 and by 1830 it numbered only 25, showing the process was successful albeit slow. Even still, Connecticut could never fully absolve itself from the use of slavery. It was an industrialized State with diverse industries reliant on many raw goods from the South, primarily cotton (Cowden 540).

CT industry's use of raw goods from the South is just one of the many reasons our State had a sizable minority of what were called "Peace Democrats". In the year before the Civil War, the Democratic party was split into two main factions: The Northern Democrats and the Southern Democrats. To oversimplify, Northern Democrats often believed in popular sovereignty, having the position that if a State's population favors the idea of slavery then it can be allowed there, while the Southern Democrats were more in favor of slavery and wished to see it expand westward. Once the war began in 1861, the Northern and Southern Democrats in the Union States would colloquially be called "War" and "Peace" Democrats respectively. The moderate Northern Democrats joined in support of the war along with the Republicans. The Southern "Peace" Democrats disagreed with the necessity of the war, arguing that coercion from the national government through war was unacceptable.

The reasoning behind the affinity for the South held by the soon-to-be Peace Democrats of CT was varied. Perhaps they had family in the South, were against the industrializing and rapidly changing life in CT, marketed their goods to Southern States, were against emancipation or pro-slavery, or somehow benefited from slave labor as discussed above (Cowden 540). The split in the Democratic party was evident in the Connecticut 1860 presidential election results where Democratic candidate Stephen A. Douglas received 17,364 votes and the more South-aligned Democrat John C. Breckinridge received 16,558 votes. The sole Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, won CT easily by a margin of 32.36% with

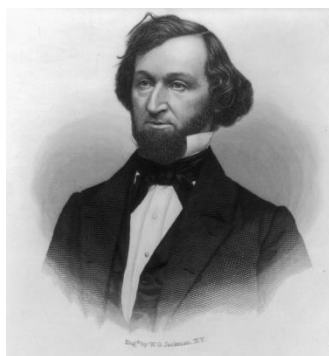
43,486 votes. The 1860 Connecticut election for governor was far closer. Both parties ran one candidate, with the CT Democrats choosing Thomas Seymour, who sympathized with the South and would become a Peace Democrat leader. He lost to incumbent Republican, William Buckingham, by a mere 0.3%, only 538 votes. Evidence that even on the eve of war, nearly half of Connecticut did not fully support fighting the South.

The disagreements between war supporters and opposers turned ugly in Connecticut. Protest gatherings by Peace Democrats sprung up around the state as war supporters tried to break them up. Newspapers such as the Litchfield Enquirer, New Haven Journal, Hartford Courant, Bridgeport Farmer, and others, wrote inflammatory comments and half-truths about competing papers based on political beliefs (Cowden 546). The Bridgeport Farmer, a markedly pro-South newspaper, was struck by mob violence in August of 1861, destroying one of its printing presses and causing the discontinuation of the newspaper entirely (Litchfield Enquirer Aug 29, 1861). The first year of the war also saw violence between neighboring Connecticut towns. Anti-war townspeople of New Fairfield raised a white peace flag near Charcoal Brook in that same month of August. A few Union Soldiers home from the war in Danbury decided to gather supporters and march to the neighboring town to tear down the flag. New Fairfield caught word of this and prepared with farming implements. The forces, roughly 50 from Danbury and 200 from New Fairfield, met in this battle of “Charcoal Run”. The Danbury residents were beaten back and retreated that night. Thankfully, only some injuries occurred (Miller). A similar altercation happened in Ridgefield, in which two men were shot trying to take down a peace flag. Over the course of the war, these violent clashes became less common, although the debate was still tense on the political stage (Warshauer, connecticuthistory.org).

In 1863, the Union’s fortunes were bleak. Democrats in Connecticut saw this as an opportunity to run staunch Peace-advocate Thomas Seymour again in the election for governor against the incumbent Buckingham. Once again, the margins of Buckingham’s victory were narrow: 2,636 votes. There is evidence that the soldier vote was the deciding factor in Republican victory, as in other states, soldiers voted Republican by huge margins (Cowden 548). Democrats accused the Republican party of fraud, stating that the number of votes that separated Buckingham and Seymour was quite close to the number of soldiers furloughed home and that Democrat soldiers were not allowed to return (Warshauer; Cowden 547). Regardless of these close and contentious 1860-1863 elections in Connecticut, Buckingham remained Connecticut’s governor throughout the war and a massive aid to President Lincoln, who wrote fondly of him and his State’s efforts. As the war began to move in favor of the Union, the Peace Democrats of Connecticut’s Democrat party either joined the moderates or were relegated to the sidelines (Cowden 553).



Connecticut's Republican Governor during the Civil War, William Buckingham. (Taken 1860-1875). Source: Library of Congress.



Leader of the Connecticut Peace Democrats, Thomas Seymour. Source: Library of Congress.

It is clear that most people of Connecticut supported the war effort, which has been shown multiple times throughout this article series. The purpose of this article was to shed a small bit of light on the fractured and complicated politics of Connecticut during the Civil



Statue of Governor Buckingham in the State Capitol Building. Source: Library of Congress.

War. Anti-war, pacifist, or pro-Southern Peace Democrats did not appeal to just a small vocal minority, but a sizable chunk of the population. After the war, returning Connecticut veterans had a great deal of respect for Buckingham. He was instrumental in recruitment for the Union and in raising money to equip CT's regiments. He was known to take out personal loans in order to pay soldiers on time (Lucian). A statue of William Buckingham sits in the West atrium of Connecticut's State Capitol, placed there in 1884.

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The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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