On the evening of June 28, 1855, Horace Greeley sat at his desk choosing his words with the utmost care. He was weary from long hours spent at the office of his New York Tribune, and frustrated with the complacency and indecision exhibited by his remaining compatriots in the Whig Party. He was writing an editorial to be printed the next morning: “By persisting in calling ourselves Whigs...we do but divide our forces of Freedom at the moment of [its] utmost need, and expose her sacred cause to the calamity of utter and enduring defeat.” Like a fiery inferno, the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 had reduced America’s political landscape to a wasteland, with the remnants of parties, formerly strong and unified in purpose, scattered among the ash. Yet certain Whigs insisted on remaining faithful to their ideological boundaries in the face of what Greeley and others saw as an inevitable truth: the party was nearing its final, dying gasp.

Over the past decade, the pages of Horace Greeley’s Tribune had increasingly come to reflect a prominent shift in political thought that ultimately coalesced in the aftermath of Kansas-Nebraska. Obstinacy for the sake of tradition seemed, in the eyes of those who had already made the...
transition to the new, as no more than an obstacle to a commonly desired goal. Greeley continued writing: “If ever a body of freemen were called on to lay aside minor differences and unite for a high, patriotic end, it is the men who are earnestly opposed to the Kansas-Nebraska legislation…They who insist on remaining Whigs now…must remain Whigs to the end, even though the cause of Freedom should be irretrievably lost by their so doing.”

For those who accepted the death of their party as inevitable, the fate of freedom and liberty in America now rested in the hands of the Republicans.

Although Greeley had remained a faithful Whig and supporter of Henry Clay for much of his life up to this point, he had undergone a gradual yet significant process of ideological radicalization that led him away from the party’s conventional platform. The religious influence of the Second Great Awakening and his involvement in both the social and land reform movements of the age, most notably American Fourierism and the Free Soil movement, are readily perceivable in the columns of his New York Tribune. Yet this transformation is only a single example of a larger trend within nineteenth-century political progressivism, and the socio-political factors that led Greeley away from the party were the very same that ultimately would internally fracture the Whigs, spurring a large faction of progressives towards a new party formed along the lines of sectional interest. Thus by examining Greeley’s transformation in depth, we afford ourselves, perhaps paradoxically, a better understand of the larger context of American politics which allowed for the Republicans to rise so rapidly in the wake of Kansas-Nebraska, as both the single largest and first sectional political party in American history.

Horace Greeley was born on February 3, 1811, on his family farm near the town of Amherst, New Hampshire. The eldest of five, he showed boundless intellectual promise: by fifteen, he had acquired his first job, working for Amos Bliss, the editor of the Northern Spectator. Within the office of the Spectator, a paper “on the edge of oblivion,” Greeley developed his passion for acquiring information and began his gradual ascent to the journalistic giant he would eventually become. Although he soon relocated to the great American center of journalism, New York City, his time spent in New England exposed him to the religious forces that would form the foundation of his moral sensibilities. In the early part of the nineteenth-century, the
Second Great Awakening swept across America, spurring tremors of religious revival among Evangelical Protestant churches. A reaction against both Deism and the attempt to combine rationalism with religious thought, the movement established Protestantism as the dominant religious force in America by the 1830’s. Furthermore, the role of Christianity in American life significantly expanded, and increasing emphasis began to be placed on the primal importance of the individual conscience, giving birth to morally driven social reform movements such as temperance and abolitionism. Not only did this reflect the growing democratic spirit of early nineteenth-century America but intensified it, threatening established social orders. Such was the religious atmosphere into which Greeley was born.

As one of his biographers explains, “If Horace Greeley’s New England had practical experience for him, it also nourished the emotional side of his nature. It exposed him to New England Piety.” This piety gave way to an unbending sense of morality, grounding him at an early age in opposition to institutions that defined American life in many parts of the country, most notably that of chattel slavery. Such moralism however, was not exclusive to Greeley’s upbringing and left its mark on a gradually expanding faction of progressive thinkers and politicians, whose increasing investment in both social and land reform movements would ultimately dislodge them from the conventional policies of the Whigs, the traditionally progressive party of the age.

For much of the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the Whigs functioned as the rallying point for the vast majority of progressives in America and it was in 1834 that Greeley made the decision to join the party, in the wake of the protective tariff nullification crisis. As an issue, protection had been debated since the nation’s creation. In the 1820’s, however, ever-developing American industries in the North led to a sharp rise in the popularity of the protectionist movement in favor of maintaining a high tariff. The issue came to a climax in 1832 when Senator John C. Calhoun of South Carolina suggested that a state unhappy with tariff laws could simply nullify them. As a result, South Carolina immediately declared the tariffs passed in 1828 and 1832 to be null and void, simultaneously voting appropriations for raising an army to enforce the agreement.

The decision to invoke such an aggressive means for enforcement reflects the already prominent tensions in existence between the northern and southern states of the union, forming what many considered to be two societies unto themselves rather than two halves of a larger whole. Although President Jackson made it clear that such actions were illegal and would
not be tolerated, it was Henry Clay, a senator from Kentucky and leader of the protectionist movement, who engineered a compromise to avert the violence that seemed imminent. He proposed a gradual reduction of the tariff to a twenty percent cap by 1842, resulting in two consequences: the first was the avoidance of a potential national breakdown. The second was Horace Greeley’s decision to become a fervent Whig and his devotion to his new hero, Henry Clay.\(^7\)

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of Henry Clay in maintaining a sense of unity within the Whigs throughout the party’s existence. Greeley’s famous words in reflection of his hero are indeed illuminating: “I have admired and trusted many statesmen. I profoundly loved Henry Clay.”\(^8\) Yet perhaps even more telling are the words proclaimed by Senate chaplain Charles M. Butler as he stood in front of Clay’s coffin in 1852, displayed on the floor of the Senate Chamber: “Bury the records of your country’s history—bury the hearts of the living millions—bury the mountains, the rivers, the lakes, and the spreading lands from sea to sea, with which his name is inseparably associated, and even then you would not bury HENRY CLAY—for he lives in other lands, and speaks other tongues, and to other times than our’s.”\(^9\) Clay was both a staple of party cohesion, and an object of political and personal devotion.

Neither can the effect of Clay’s death on the party’s cohesion be exaggerated: at his greatest prominence, he represented a politician who was in many respects above sectional conflict. In fact, one of the greatest reasons why Whigs would continue to remain within the party two years later despite its imminent demise post Kansas-Nebraska, is their continuing dedication to the idea of the traditional Henry Clay Whig program, representative of both southern planters and northern industrialists working together to enact reform based upon whatever political similarities that could be found. After Clay’s death however, sectional tensions quickly overwhelmed this sense of cohesion as leaders representing northern and southern interests began to vie for control of the party. Until this decisive point though, the Whigs largely remained the party of reform and Greeley quickly rose to a level of prominence.

Greeley first achieved recognition within the party when Thurlow Weed, editor of the *Albany Evening Journal*, asked him to produce a campaign publication for the approaching elections of 1838. His task was to help elect William Henry Seward, a lawyer with a commitment to the abolition of slavery, as governor of New York, initiating a sixteen-year working relationship between Weed, Greeley, and Seward. Yet in the very
same year, the financial panic of 1837 struck, and Greeley’s commitment to the Whigs began a gradual yet dramatic process of decay as the scope of necessary social reform began to seem increasingly incompatible with traditional Whig politics and policy.

During the first agonizing winter of the depression, Greeley helped relieve those most affected and gained a first hand glimpse at the often deplorable conditions of urban life, witnessing that “thousands of New York’s inhabitants lived in ‘damp, narrow cellars, or rickety, wretched tenements, unfit for cleanly brutes.’” In the wake of the depression, he began to shift towards a more proactive and interventionist conception of governmental responsibility. Greeley recognized the need for social reform and embraced the notion that social cooperation, along with the efficient sharing of labor to increase productivity, appeared to offer a solution. It is in this context that Greeley was exposed to the teachings of Charles Fourier, through the help of Albert Brisbane, one of Fourier’s students. In the spring of 1841, when Greeley launched his *New York Tribune* and his ascent to national recognition in a dilapidated building at 30 Ann Street, Brisbane was among his European correspondents.

A European socialist, Fourier held that society as it currently existed was essentially artificial, for it had been achieved at the expense of man’s “passional” attractions. For Fourier, “most men are poor ‘because their passions are unfulfilled, their senses are not appeased, their amorous emotions are curbed, and their naturally complex social sensibilities can find outlets only in pitifully limited channels.’” In order to encourage the development of the passions and thus overcome society’s artificiality, Fourier constructed a complex social system centered on the 1600-member phalanx, in which “work and play would be merged in systematic fashion.” The Second Great Awakening had promulgated principles of Christian communalism and a moral desire for the promotion of justice and equality leaving many Americans receptive to Fourier’s concept of utopian communities. Greeley’s own interest in Fourierism largely resulted from its compatibility with the Henry Clay program he so arduously supported, which intended to remedy the detriments of capitalist society without threatening the institution of capitalism itself, or imperiling social cohesion. In this sense, the phalanx offered a means to achieving his desired end: “institutional reform that reconciled ‘progressive measures’ with ‘conservative objectives,’” counteracting the ruinous effects of capitalist society without infringing upon...
natural property rights or leading to class conflict. Greeley’s propagation of Fourier’s ideology created a surge of utopian activity in the northern states, with nearly thirty phalanxes established in the decade following 1842.

American Fourierism, however, would ultimately dissipate in reaction to its perceived failure throughout Europe in the wake of the French Revolution of 1848, and Greeley’s attention had been shifting towards another means of reform for quite some time. Furthermore the very idea of social reform by way of conservative objectives began to seem inadequate to enact the necessary scope of improvement. Thus, the attention of many progressive politicians gradually began to shift westward, leading them still further away from conventional Whig ideologies, and eventually culminating in a complete break with the party. Horace Greeley is a prime example of this nineteenth century phenomenon: giving up his long held belief in the neutrality of the law and conceding to “the role of power, interest, necessity, and violence in social and political change,” Greeley and his Tribune adopted land reform as the interventionist movement to combat the social ails many saw as a byproduct of society dominated by market capitalism.

Unlike the social reform programs traditionally employed by the Whigs which focused on improving urban conditions, land reformers saw the reservoir of land in the West, currently protected by the government from speculation and slavery, as the most viable solution to the issue of overpopulation and thus an oversupply of labor in the East. Yet in the years approaching 1848, this governmental protection came to seem increasingly imperiled, and indeed the influx of territory gained during the Mexican-American War would bring these fears to fruition. Furthermore, land reformers began to explore the relationship between the conditions of labor and the availability of land, developing a doctrine that linked the political fate of the western lands to the potential rise of a “southern feudalism,” a consideration that would become the most important factor in the anti-slavery movement. These considerations ultimately pushed Horace Greeley and a rapidly expanding faction of Whigs to view the South and slavery as the primary obstructions to the eventual realization of social democracy.

Greeley’s own political shift in support of the land reform movement can be traced to the 1839 Anti-Rent Rebellion in New York, a dispute between tenant farmers and their landlords whose monopolization of the soil had essentially created a landed aristocracy with the yearly rent, restricted merchant activities, and required services associated with the seigniorial privileges of pre-revolutionary France. The movement initially began
as a rent strike on the Manor of Rensselaerwyck, a 726,000-acre parcel. Governor Seward endorsed the rebellion (though condemned its violence) and assembled a committee to discuss the possibility of ending land tenure, throwing off the final remnants of European aristocratic society that still existed in New York.¹⁸

For Greeley and many others, the Anti-Rent rebellion posed questions that transcended the movement. While he too condemned the rebellion’s violence, he found himself questioning the justice of large land holdings that had once been granted by monarchies or seized in large-scale market speculation. Greeley contended that there should indeed be some limit on land holdings, and he quickly employed his Tribune to espouse a doctrine of equal rights to American soil: “The more we reflect on the social history and condition of the Human Family, the stronger grows our conviction that there should be some limit to the right of anyone to monopolize the soil which God has made for the sustenance of the race.”¹⁹ This commitment to a broad distribution of property cemented Greeley and the members of the future Republican Party in opposition to the South and its institution of slavery, which relied on vast apportionments of land.

Support for the equality of rights to the soil also put progressives at odds with the party’s own internal faction of southern planters, and this tension only increased with the issue of homesteads, an idea that increasingly gained support as the West came to be identified as the solution to class-conflict and prejudice. The concept of homesteads was incompatible with the southern Whigs’ need of large land holdings for the continued expansion of slavery, and the sectional rift that had been created by Henry Clay’s death only became more prominent as southern and northern Whigs solidified their positions in opposition to one another. Within this political atmosphere, Horace Greeley became a “reluctant convert” to the land reform movement.²⁰

Despite his initially hesitant support, Greeley quickly radicalized along the lines of land reform, presenting a program that was even more aggressive than the homestead proposals ultimately debated in congress. His program consisted of three basic tenets: land-limitation laws to prevent any further monopolization, homestead exemptions protecting small farms from speculators and seizure, for debt, and grants of 160 acres of public land, free of charge, to settlers. The Tribune effectively popularized land reform within northern political life, uniting intellectuals, politicians, workers, and farmers behind a common cause.²¹ As land reform brought the question of the expansion of slavery into greater prominence and as the Whigs became less and less cogent of a political body, Greeley and others began to form a
vision for a progressive party unified in purpose—a party that would begin to take shape within the pages of his Tribune.

It was the Mexican-American War that initially led Greeley to begin considering this idea of a progressive fusion party. Deeply against the war, Greeley was lumped into an angry Left exasperated with their own party of timid Whigs, along with radical abolitionists in need of a political base. While his party of Whigs displayed only a cautious and tentative opposition, Greeley vigorously lashed out from the columns of his paper:

People of the United States! Your Rulers are precipitating you into a fathomless abyss of crime and calamity! Why sleep you thoughtless on its verge, as though this was not your business, or Murder would be hid from the sight of God by a few flimsy rags called banners? Awake and arrest the work of butchery ere it shall be too late to preserve your souls from the guilt of wholesale slaughters! Hold meetings! Speak out! Act!”

The Tribune steadily continued its opposition and with the introduction of the Wilmot Proviso of 1846, calling for the territory gained during the war to remain protected against the expansion of slavery, Greeley found that America would soon be ready for his envisioned party.

Land reform essentially functioned as a vehicle for questions surrounding the status of slavery in the western territories, further dividing the Whigs and effectively bringing Greeley’s relationship with the party to its final moments. William Seward’s “Higher Law” speech, which pointed to the injustice of passing the Fugitive Slave Law attached to Steven Douglas’s proposed compromise of 1850, polarized Whigs and fractured the party along a line of separation between southern pro-slavery “cotton” Whigs and anti-slavery northerners. This indication of internal damage beyond repair led Greeley to begin his break from the party. He wrote in an editorial: “We cannot say that the Whig party is hostile to Slavery Extension, and that we might remain in its ranks without violating any principle.” If Seward’s “Higher Law” speech caused the initial crack, the Kansas-Nebraska Act dealt the final blow, and the vision of a united progressive party, one that was essentially Greeley’s in its conception, was not only attainable, but necessary.

Just four years after Seward’s speech, The Kansas Nebraska Act of 1854 marked a turning point in both the American political landscape and the life of Horace Greeley. Reversing both the Missouri Compromise and
Horace Greeley and the Rise of the Republican Party

the Compromise of 1850, it brought Greeley’s vision to fruition, uniting an unlikely coalition of “political bedfellows, conservative Whigs and radical anti-slavery men” in pursuit of the common goal of halting slavery’s expansion and the initiation of vast social reforms. Indeed it was virtually impossible post Kansas-Nebraska to call oneself a southern Whig, or likewise a northern Democrat. The issue of slavery necessitated the transfer of southern Whigs to the Democrats, and the need for a new party representing the plight of abolitionists. It was at this point that Greeley officially broke from the Whigs, dissolving his working relationship with Seward and Weed.

However, it is significant to note that Greeley’s, and in fact many former Whigs’ initial support of anti-slavery was far more of a means to achieving a desired end than a display of morality. While Greeley was opposed to human slavery from a moral standpoint, his decision to vehemently work in opposition to it arguably resulted more from his desire to utilize the reservoir of land in the West to its fullest extent as a means of ameliorating the social conditions of the white working class within overpopulated cities. Thus, the Kansas-Nebraska act pushed Greeley and his coalition into action. The conflict between freedom and slavery had to be resolved, and if the Democrats had now come to represent slavery in their mind, it was time to form a new party representing freedom.

New anti-slavery commissions arose in the northern states under various names, but the title that in Greeley’s mind evoked the greatest poetic justice is the one that ultimately stuck: Republican. In his view, it was a simple name that would accurately represent the party’s “true mission of champion and promulgator of Liberty rather than propagandist of Slavery.” The name was officially adopted at an anti-Nebraska rally in Ripon Wisconsin, and other organizations followed suit. In the meantime, Greeley continued recruiting political allies for the new party.

While Greeley was vital in the party’s initial formation and organization, he would also help define its developing platform. Amidst the young party’s political defeat in the presidential election of 1856, he searched for a way to widen the Republican platform’s appeal, returning his attention to the concept of economic development as a means for advancing democracy and hampering slavery. It was a widely known fact that large expanses of land were necessary for both the survival and expansion of slavery, and thus a...
policy of restriction would inevitably destroy it. Greeley again considered homesteads, reasoning that they would result in an effective restriction on slavery by populating the West with non-slave-holding farms. Furthermore, he saw the addition of a high protective tariff as a means for expanding national industry and creating more jobs for the surplus of labor that would remain in cities even after a westward exodus. Thus, Greeley helped author the wide-appealing Republican platform on which Abraham Lincoln would run and win the presidential election of 1860.

While Horace Greeley would not play a major role in the formal political activities of the party for some time, he can be viewed largely as its major architect. His childhood in New England had left its mark, instilling in him a moral compass crafted by the ideologies of the Second Great Awakening and a deep-felt desire to institute positive and progressive reform. This compass had guided him to the social reform movements of Europe and led him to promote American socialism, in turn propelling him directly towards questions of land reform and ultimately, the issue of slavery.

Greeley’s process of radicalization is perhaps even more importantly indicative of a larger trend within nineteenth-century America: a gradual breaking-up of Whig politics. As the party’s traditional reform policies increasingly came to seem inadequate to cope with the developing sectional conflict within American and indeed the party itself, Horace Greeley’s Tribune became a mouthpiece for a growing faction of discontented Whigs in search of a means to enact more radical and wider reaching progressive reform. Such desires ultimately coalesced, in large part through Greeley’s political engineering, in the form of the Republican Party, America’s first sectional and largest political party.

Author’s Bio:

Harrison Diskin is a senior from Hollywood, Florida, pursuing a double major in History and Humanities with a minor in French. Upon completion, he plans to attend graduate school in pursuit of a PhD in Early American history, with an emphasis on trans-national political culture during the Age of Atlantic Revolutions.
Horace Greeley and the Rise of the Republican Party


2 Ibid.


13 Ibid, 55.


16 Ibid, 38.


18 Ibid, 129-130.

Diskin


21 Ibid, 136-140.

22 *New-York Daily Tribune*, May 12, 1846.


