



William Sidney Mount's lithograph *Raffling for a Goose*, based on his painting *The Lucky Throw*, courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

“SOUND ON THE GOOSE”:

A Search for the Answer to an Age Old “Question”

by Emmett Redd and Nicole Etcheson

During the early settlement of Kansas Territory, Missourians used the phrase “sound on the goose” to signify commitment to the proslavery cause in Kansas. In May 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act opened Kansas Territory to settlement and allowed settlers to vote on whether Kansas would be a free or slave state. The abolitionist newspaper, the *Liberator*, described how Missourians commandeered the ballot box at an early Kansas territorial election and prevented anyone from voting “unless he was right on the ‘Goose question,’—a slang phrase used among the Missourians, implying they are in favor of extending the institution of Slavery over Kansas.”¹

The phrase “sound on the goose,” when posed as a question, functioned as a password. Those looking to move into the territory would be asked whether they were “sound on the goose question.” English traveler Thomas Gladstone, taking passage on a Missouri River steamboat, recalled that the welcome “One of our boys, I reckon? All right on the goose, eh?” accompanied invitations to share a round of drinks at the bar.² Sara Robinson, the wife of a free-state leader and the author of an influential free-state tract on Kansas, described the role the phrase played in the formation of a vigilance committee in Leavenworth in the tumultuous month of May 1856: “All persons, who could not answer ‘All right on the goose’ . . . were searched, kept under guard, and threatened with death by the rope or rifle.”³ Those who answered the goose question in the negative

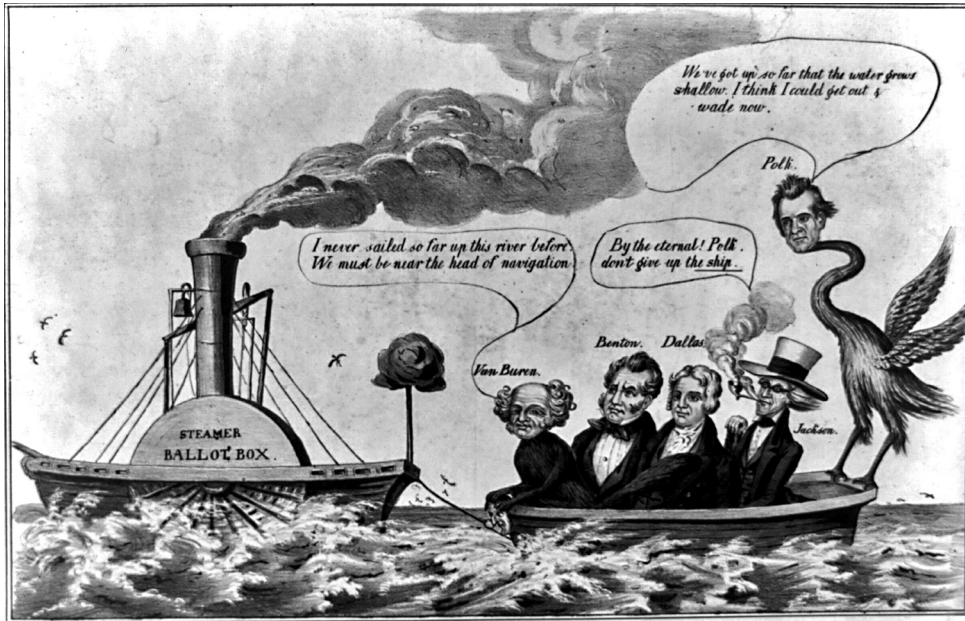
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Due to the subject matter of this article, which necessitates the use of nineteenth-century quotations, readers will find some passages and words that are offensive by our twenty-first-century standards. They are coarse and racially charged, but they reflect the reality of the time and place in which the phrase “sound on the goose” developed.

1. *Liberator*, July 27, 1855, available online at www.wadsworth.com/history_d/templates/student_resources/0534607411/sources/old/ch13/13.1.kansaselection.html.

2. Thomas H. Gladstone, *Kansas; or, Squatter Life and Border Warfare in the Far West* (London: Routledge, 1857), 41.

3. Sara T. L. Robinson, *Kansas: Its Interior and Exterior Life* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1856), 252. See also Alice Nichols, *Bleeding Kansas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 24.



Cartoon by J. J. Smith, published in the New York Tribune, 1844. The cartoon is a political satire on the 1844 presidential election, showing the Democratic candidates James K. Polk, Martin Van Buren, George M. Dallas, and Andrew Jackson, along with the vice-presidential candidate George M. Benton, being towed up the Salt River by the "Steamer Ballot Box." The river is a metaphor for the political process, and the cartoon suggests that the Democrats are being towed up the river, away from the head of navigation, and are therefore in danger of being lost.

It is possible that the phrase “sound on a goose” may have arisen from cartoons that attributed certain goosey characteristics to politicians such as Democratic presidential candidate James K. Polk. “Polk & Co. Going up Salt River,” drawn during the 1844 presidential race, shows Polk—depicted as a long-necked bird—along with Martin Van Buren, Thomas Hart Benton, vice-presidential candidate George M. Dallas, and Andrew Jackson being towed by the “Steamer Ballot Box.” The river upon which the party sails suggests they are headed for defeat, as the Salt River was used in other cartoons of the time to illustrate political missteps. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

encyclopedia entry concluded in 1912.⁵ John Ciardi’s 1980 *A Browser’s Dictionary and Native’s Guide to the Unknown American Language* defined the phrase as “in favor of slavery.” Ciardi further commented that this was “a mysterious idiom of Bloody Kansas. . . . I have found no historian who has been able to explain the term.” His entry concluded: “origin unknown.”⁶

Physicist Emmett Redd became interested in the origins of the phrase while working one night decades ago in an ion-atom scattering laboratory at the University of Missouri at Rolla (now the Missouri University of Science and Technology). A fellow graduate student’s radio was tuned to the local National Public Radio station, KUMR, which was broadcasting John Ciardi’s program “A Word in Your Ear.” Ciardi featured the phrase “sound on the goose,” defining it as “in favor of slavery” and suggesting that it was used to answer the question “How do you stand on the goose?” during the pre-Civil War Kansas-Missouri border conflict over slavery.⁷

Redd had grown up in southwest Missouri and had never heard the phrase. After that night, he asked others if they had heard “sound on the goose” and re-

ceived harassment. One victim of such maltreatment, William Phillips, said proslavery intolerance of differing opinions constituted as gross a violation of free speech as that of “the veriest tyrant in Europe” and the query “sound on the Goose Question?” struck fear in the hearts of western Missourians.⁴

Despite its ubiquity, historians are not sure precisely where or when the phrase “sound on the goose” originated. “Just how the phrase originated, and for what purpose—if there was any fixed purpose—is rather problematical. A diligent search through the archives of the Kansas Historical Society fails to bring to light any information on the subject,” an

4. William A. Phillips, *The Conquest of Kansas, by Missouri and Her Allies* (Boston: Philips, Sampson and Company, 1856), 47–48.

5. Frank W. Blackmar, ed., *Kansas: A Cyclopedia of State History, Embracing Events, Institutions, Industries, Counties, Cities, Towns, Prominent Persons, etc.* (Chicago: Standard Pub. Co., 1912), 1:765, available online at http://skyways.lib.ks.us/genweb/archives/1912/g/goose_question.html.

6. John Ciardi, *A Browser’s Dictionary and Native’s Guide to the Unknown American Language* (New York: Harpers and Row, 1980), 158.

7. Ciardi had his Kansas history badly muddled. He thought Leocompton and Lawrence were the same town and that Kansas became a state under the free-soil Topeka constitution. (Kansas was admitted under the Wyandotte Constitution.) He also attributed the goose to a supposed Article G of the Leocompton Constitution, which “provided that a freed slave would lose his freedom if he went to Kansas.” Actually, Article VII of the Leocompton Constitution guarantees that slaves already in the territory cannot be emancipated by the state legislature. In addition, the Leocompton Constitution was not proposed until 1857, at least three years after “sound on the goose” became a common phrase on the Kansas-Missouri border. John Ciardi, radio script for “Sound on the Goose,” folder 1, box 2, John Ciardi Papers, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 59.

ceived no affirmative answers. Over twenty years later, he returned to this interest and began a Web search for the term and its origins. Redd's work attracted the interest of historian Nicole Etcheson, who had published on the Kansas civil war of the 1850s.⁸ After several years of tracking leads, they believe cartoon imagery, a widely reprinted story about a meeting between Northern and Southern politicians at a Washington hotel, and local political issues converged to produce "sound on the goose" as shorthand for support of slavery's territorial expansion.

The phrase came into common usage on the Missouri frontier between 1852 and 1854. John McNamara, an Episcopal priest who had moved from western Missouri in 1852, was questioned as to whether he was sound on the goose when he returned in October 1854. "Strange cabalistic!" McNamara wrote, "I had to learn afterwards what it meant." McNamara's comment indicates that the phrase began to circulate during his absence. His labeling the phrase as the creation of a cabal perhaps referred to its use as a password by Blue Lodges or Self-Defensive Associations, organizations committed to the spread of slavery into Kansas. McNamara also described Missourians from Platte County who, when they crossed over to Kansas to vote in the March 30, 1855, election of a territorial legislature, carried a live goose strapped to a pole, physically embodying the symbol of their cause.⁹

Historian Christopher Phillips implied that the goose phrase came from the tradition of eating a goose dinner at Christmas. Phillips wrote that "Missourians saw Kansas as a gift. Even the term commonly used by Missourians when debating Kansas—'the Goose question'—connoted the sense of largesse implicit in the Kansas issue, in this case a Christmas goose."¹⁰ There is no documentation, however, that "sound on the goose" drew from the tradition of a Christmas goose and there were certainly a variety of other possible associations with geese that could have given rise to the 1850s phrase.

The bird is, for example, familiar from the story of killing the goose that laid golden eggs. The analogy might be made that the slavery cause was the goose and Kansas the golden egg, but no such direct parallel has been found. Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton used the story of the goose and its golden eggs to caution the North against alienating the South. In Benton's fable, the Union was the goose and the North was most likely to kill it to extract all possible material benefit. Although Benton was writing during the period of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, he did not reference that conflict directly. Rather, he spoke more generally of the increasing divisiveness between North and South over the slavery question. In contrast, the phrase as used in Missouri was associated specifically with the pro-

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8. Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

9. [John McNamara], *In Perils by Mine Own Countrymen: Three Years on the Kansas Border by a Clergyman of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Miller, Orton & Mulligan, 1856), 24, 140–43, available online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=moa;idno=ABA0775>. McNamara speculated that the strap might have been intended to represent the confinement of slavery, but he also thought it probably had the more practical purpose of keeping the goose attached to the pole. Sardonicly, he compared the "Missouri Geese" to the use of eagles on standards by the Romans in military processions. See also, Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 32.

10. Christopher Phillips, *Missouri's Confederate: Claiborne Fox Jackson and the Creation of Southern Identity in the Border West* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000), 198. See also Christopher Phillips, "'The Crime against Missouri': Slavery, Kansas, and the Cant of Southernness in the Border West," *Civil War History* 48 (March 2002): 60–81. The periodical *Punch* mentions a "Goose question" connected to a Christmas "goose club," but this appears to be a spurious reference. "The Goose Club," *Punch* 25 (July–December 1853): 186, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=ISxXAAAAMAAJ>.



THE HUNTER OF KENTUCKY.

Polk is also depicted as a long-necked bird in "The Hunter of Kentucky," a Whig cartoon from the 1844 election. In it Henry Clay, the hunter, wears his trophies in his belt, including Van Buren as a fox and Polk as a crane or goose. He boasts, "Thus perish the enemies of my Country, and of the People, who have honored me with their suffrages!" Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Americans lost money. Titled *Raffling for the Goose*, the painting shows a group of white men bent over a plucked goose on a table. Mount used the goose image again in an 1850s painting titled *The Lucky Throw*, which was issued as a lithograph called *Raffling for a Goose* the following year. The image shows a young black boy holding a plucked goose. Art historian Elizabeth Johns believes the goose in this latter work was meant to represent the political phrase "sound on the goose," but the fact that the painting was made in 1850 suggests that it predates the connection between the goose and the slavery question. Because speculation in western lands was, by the 1850s, a frequent activity and was certainly occurring in territorial Kansas, it is also possible that the goose was related to the opening of the Kansas lands that Missourians eagerly coveted, but again there is no documentary evidence to support this hypothesis.¹²

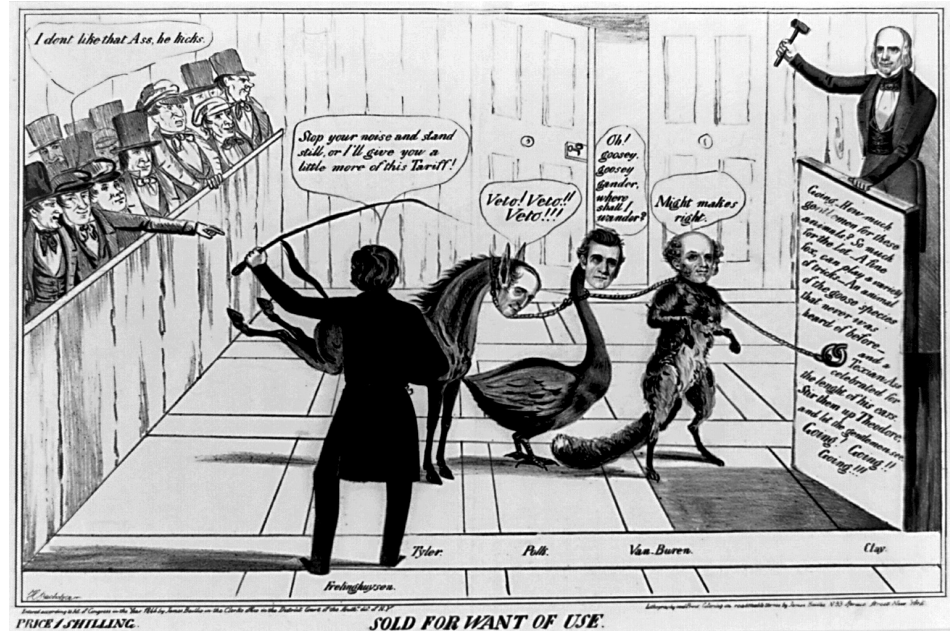
slavery cause in Kansas, and the goose in this case represented the South.¹¹ Furthermore, when Missourians asked about being "sound on the goose" or border residents mentioned the "goose question," they did not use imagery of golden eggs. Thus the goose of the "goose question" seems not to be related to that fable.

In the nineteenth century, raffling for poultry was a common way to gamble and the phrase "gone goose" meant to lose, especially in a speculation. Genre painter William Sidney Mount used the goose in paintings depicting gambling scenes, the first of which appeared during the Panic of 1837 in which many

11. Thomas Hart Benton, *Thirty Years View: Or a History of the American Government for the Thirty Years from 1820-1850* (New York: D. Appleton, 1854-1856; New York: Greenwood, 1968), available online at www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/preservation/epochs/vol6/pg42.htm. The fable of the goose with the golden eggs was used during the American Revolution to indict British policy for alienating the colonies, the valuable goose. But other images—that of the colonies as a rattlesnake or a child—were more commonly used to represent the relationship between the colonies and Great Britain. Lester C. Olson, *Emblems of American Community in the Revolutionary Era: A Study in Rhetorical Iconology* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 240-45.

12. Elizabeth Johns, "'Boys Will Be Boys': Notes on William Sidney Mount's Vision of Childhood," in *William Sidney Mount, Painter of American Life*, by Deborah J. Johnson (New York: American Federation of Arts, 1998), 9-15; Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 123-26, 38-41. The juxtaposition of the black youth with the goose at the time of the Compromise of 1850, however, is interesting. An 1861 travel account listed a variety of epithets for African Americans including "Sable Brother," "Darky," and "alias the Goose." "Through the Cotton States," *Knickerbocker: or New York Monthly Magazine* 58 (October 1861): 316, quoted in Kate Masur, "'A Rare Phenomenon of Philological Vegetation': The Word 'Contraband' and the Meanings of Emancipation in the United States," *Journal of American History* 93 (March 2007): 1050-84, particularly 1066.

It is possible that the phrase “sound on a goose” may have arisen from cartoons that mocked certain goosey characteristics—their noisiness, their constant excretion, their scrabbling in the dirt—to poke politicians. The goose was used in Revolutionary-era cartoons to depict British parliamentarians and their Loyalist allies as silly, stupid, and easily led.¹³ Similar associations may have been used to criticize Democratic presidential candidate James K. Polk in the mid-1840s, when the cartoonist of “Polk & Co. Going up Salt River” drew Polk as a long-necked bird, probably a crane but possibly a goose.¹⁴ Polk is also depicted as a long-necked bird in “The Hunter of Kentucky,” a Whig cartoon from the 1844 election. In it Henry Clay, the hunter, wears his trophies in his belt, including Van Buren as a fox and Polk as a crane or goose.¹⁵ The association is more explicit in another 1844 cartoon, “Sold for Want of Use,” featuring a livestock auction in which President John Tyler is an ass, Martin Van Buren a fox, and Polk a goose. Polk continued to be represented with fowl imagery during the 1848 election, in which he was not a candidate, when he was depicted as a dead goose lying on the road in the cartoon “The Day after the Fair.”¹⁶ Thus a decade before the goose began to be used on the Missouri-Kansas border to signal proslavery commitment, the bird was used to represent a Democratic Party candidate who many Northerners viewed as a tool of proslavery interests as a result of his support of



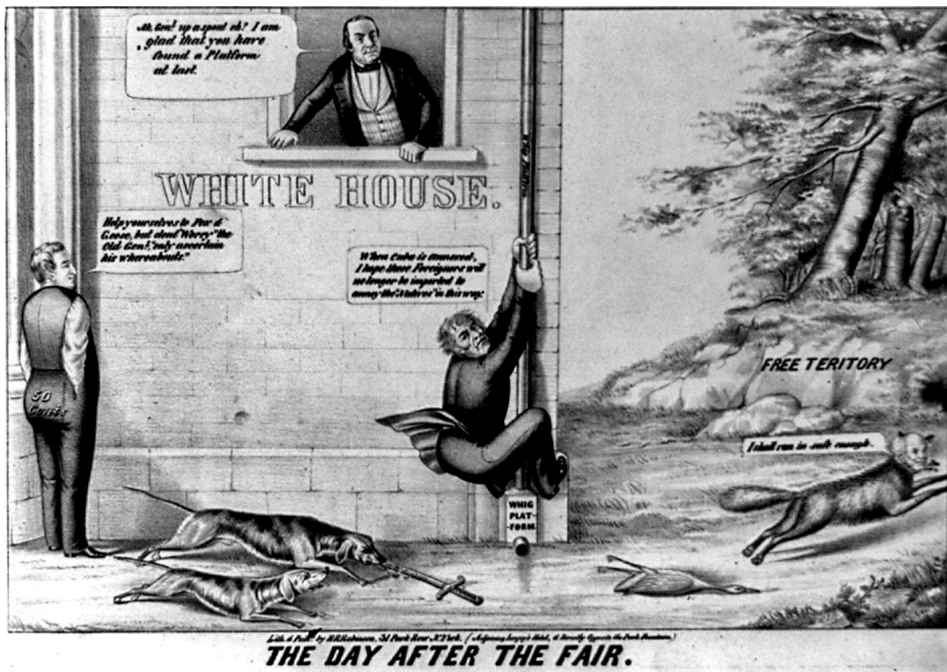
This 1844 cartoon, “Sold for Want of Use,” features a livestock auction in which President John Tyler is an ass, Martin Van Buren a fox, and Polk a goose. Clay asks from the auctioneer’s podium, “Going—How much gentlemen for these animals? So much for the Lot—A fine fox, can play a variety of tricks—An animal of the goose species that never was heard of before—and a Texian Ass celebrated for the length of his ears,” while Polk prattles, “Oh! Goosey, goosey gander, where shall I wander?” Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

13. Ann Fairfax Withington, *Toward a More Perfect Union: Virtue and the Formation of American Republics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 229–33. The goose had been used as early as 1829 to represent women’s rights. In “A Downright Gabbler, or a Goose that Deserves to Be Hissed,” the British reformer Fanny Wright was given the head of a goose. “A Downright Gabbler, or a Goose that Deserves to Be Hissed,” in Bernard F. Reilly, *American Political Prints, 1766–1876: A Catalog of the Collections in the Library of Congress* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991), 38. See also, Elizabeth R. Varon, *Disunion: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789–1859* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 205. The sisters and radical women’s rights activists Tennessee Claflin and Victoria Woodhull used “sound on the goose” to refer to women’s condition in marriage in the 1870s. Woodhull & Claflin’s *Weekly*, December 23, 1871, available online at www.victoria-woodhull.com/wc122399.htm.

14. H. Bucholzer, “Polk & Co. Going up Salt River,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a12798>; Frank Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature in the United States* (New York: Arno, 1953), 80, 89–90; Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 227. “Salt River” was a common political expression in the nineteenth century implying defeat and disaster. Polk is a crane in H. Bucholzer’s 1848 cartoon, “The Fox Hunt,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b37741>.

15. H. Bucholzer, “The Hunter of Kentucky,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b37736>; Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 1766–1876, 231–32.

16. “Sold for Want of Use,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b37750>; “The Day after the Fair,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b36097>; Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature*, 81, 96; Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 229–30, 304.



Polk continued to be represented with fowl imagery during the 1848 election, as when he was depicted as a dead goose lying on the road in "The Day after the Fair." Thus a decade before the goose began to be used on the Missouri-Kansas border to signal proslavery commitment, the bird was used to represent a Democratic Party candidate who many Northerners viewed as a tool of proslavery interests. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

is invoking the phrase "higher law" made infamous to Southerners when Senator William Henry Seward argued against the Fugitive Slave Act that there was a higher law than the Constitution. In the right panel, Mr. Pumpkindoodle wishes to recover goods he claims were stolen from him by Mr. Palmetto. Palmetto replies, "They are fugitives from you, are they? As to the law of the land, I have a higher law of my own, and possession is nine points in the law. I cant cotton to you. Kick out the abolitionist Cesar." Cesar helpfully concurs, "Of course Massa. De dam Bobolitionist is the wus enemy we poor niggers have got." Although its racist stereotypes were not unusual for nineteenth-century cartoons, one annotation calls this a "rare pro-Southern cartoon." There is no explicit goose imagery in the cartoon, however, and it could as easily have been titled "Turn about Is Fair Play."¹⁸ The use of the phrase, "what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander," might indicate goose imagery was connected to the slavery issue by 1851 or it may have been coincidental.

Bird imagery was also used to comment on the 1852 election between Democrat Franklin Pierce and Whig Winfield Scott. In one cartoon from that year, Edward Williams Clay represented Scott as a turkey and Pierce as a gamecock. The

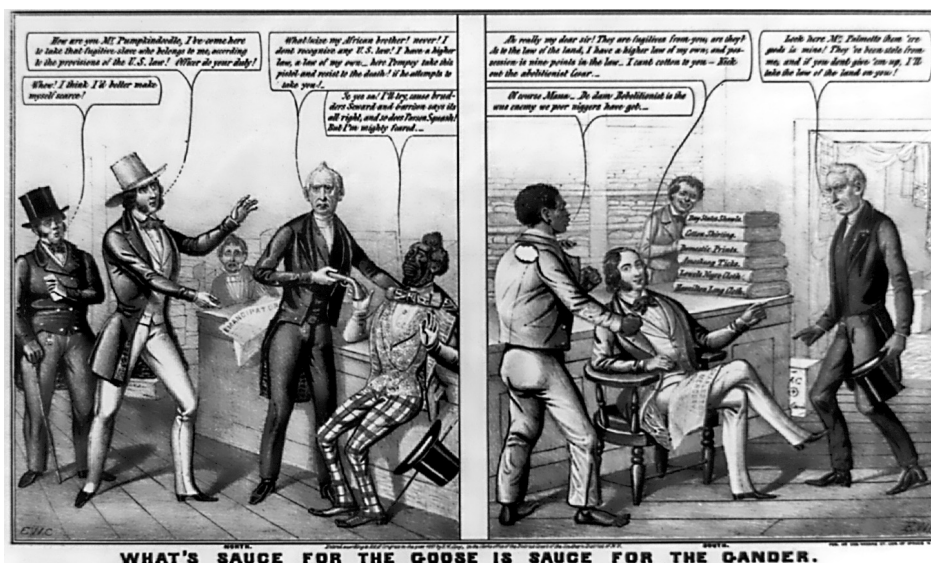
Texas annexation and war with Mexico.¹⁷

The first use of goose imagery as related to slavery seems to have been in an 1851 cartoon by Edward Williams Clay titled "What's Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander." A pro-Southern view of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, the cartoon's left panel depicts the scene as slaveowner "Mr. Palmetto" tries to recover the fugitive "Pompey" from a Northern abolitionist, "Mr. Pumpkindoodle." Pumpkindoodle encourages the over-dressed Pompey to resist, handing him a gun, and asserting, "I dont recognize any U.S. law! I have a higher law, a law of my own." Here Pumpkindoodle

17. Although one commonly thinks of the donkey as the symbol of the Democratic Party, and the donkey had been so used since 1837, in Southern states the rooster was also used. Stephen Hess and Milton Kaplan, *The Ungentlemanly Art: A History of American Political Cartoons* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 32, 40–41. An 1837 cartoon by E. W. Clay, titled "This is the House that Jack Built," parodied Democrat Andrew Jackson's policy against the Second Bank of the United States. The concluding square of the cartoon shows a cock with a man's head crowned with a military-style plumed hat. The cock is "Major Jack Downing," the humorous newspaperman Seba Smith created to gently satirize Andrew Jackson. As used by Smith and other satirists, the fictional Downing was a common man and friend of Jackson's. William Murrell, *A History of American Graphic Humor 1: 1747–1865* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1933), 149–50; John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 79–90.

18. Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 343–44; Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature*, 103. On Seward and the higher law, see David M. Potter, *The Impending Crisis, 1848–1861* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 102.

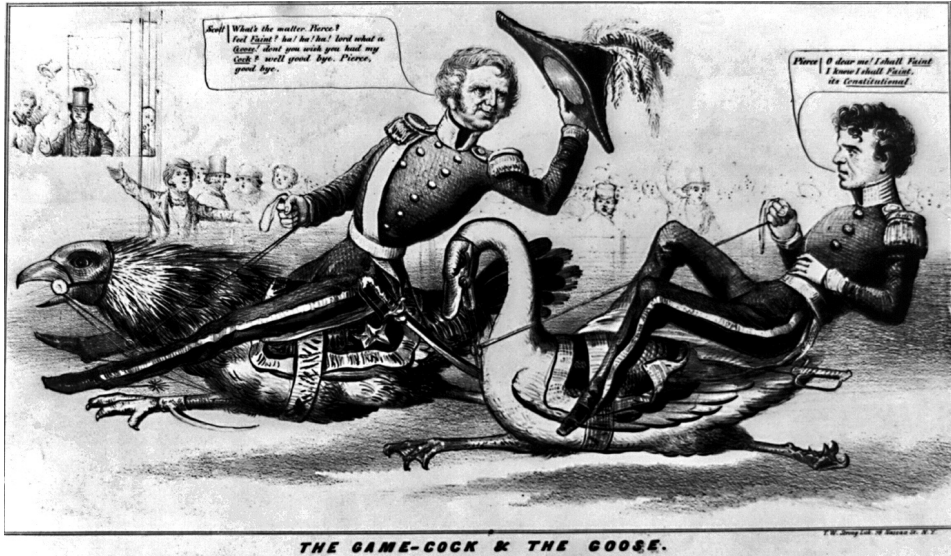
particular birds chosen may have been linked to the perception of the two candidates as serving interests on opposite sides of the Mason-Dixon Line. Scott, on the Northern side, is the turkey, associated with Pilgrim and Thanksgiving festivals. Pierce, on the southern side, is the gamecock, symbolizing Southern attachment to such pursuits as cockfighting. Ironically, Scott was a native Virginian and Pierce was from New Hampshire. At the time of his nomination, however, Southerners at the 1852 Democratic convention found Pierce “as sound on all Southern questions as any Southern man.”¹⁹ A more suggestive cartoon from the 1852 campaign is “The Game-Cock & the Goose,” in which Scott is seen riding a gamecock, possibly because the fighting qualities of the cock are an appropriate representation of his role as a general.²⁰ Pierce rides a goose, perhaps harking back to use of that bird to represent the previous Democratic candidate, Polk. Scott, whose mount is in the lead, taunts the trailing Pierce, “What’s the matter, Pierce? feel *Faint*? ha! ha! ha! lord what a Goose! dont you wish you had my Cock?” During the election, Whigs imputed weakness and cowardice to Pierce because he had



On the left in this 1851 cartoon, “What’s Sauce for the Goose is Sauce for the Gander,” the slaveowner “Mr. Palmetto” tries to recover the fugitive “Pompey” from a Northern abolitionist, “Mr. Pumpkinhead.” Pumpkinhead encourages Pompey to resist, handing him a gun, and asserting, “I don’t recognize any U.S. law! I have a higher law, a law of my own.” On the right, Pumpkinhead demands the return of stolen goods from Palmetto, who replies, “They are fugitives from you, are they? As to the law of the land, I have a higher law of my own, and possession is nine points in the law. I can’t cotton to you. Kick out the abolitionist Cesar.” Cesar helpfully concurs, “Of course Massa. De dam Bobolitionist is the wus enemy we poor niggers have got.” Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

19. Hudson Strode, *Jefferson Davis: American Patriot* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1955), 242; “Ornithology,” in Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 361; Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature*, 109. Cockfighting was, along with horse racing and gambling, a fixture of southern white male society. Through cockfighting men demonstrated their manliness against other men, or their birds. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 277, 281. In political cartoons, it was common to represent an election as a sporting contest: a race, a boxing match, or a cockfight. Hess and Kaplan, *Ungentlemanly Art*, 77. An 1860 cartoon shows Stephen A. Douglas and James Buchanan as cocks in the pit. The Douglas bird crows about its victory over Buchanan boasting, “I can beat the Lincoln Cock, and old Kentucky too!” referring to the John Breckinridge chicken being placed in the ring. [Louis Maurer], “The Great Match at Baltimore, between the ‘Illinois Bantam’ and the ‘Old Cock’ of the White House,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a12788>.

20. Cartoons made use of animal imagery rich in associations and often containing gendered significance. The cock in particular, a symbol of manliness, was much used in political cartooning. Because a horse can be “ridden,” a sexual term, the image of a horse as “being ridden booted and spurred” suggested not just dominance over the animal but it also captured male fear of dominance by others. The cock, however, rides rather than being ridden and fights to the death rather than submit. Cocks thus represented the fulfillment of, not the threat to, manliness. Edward E. Baptist, *Creating an Old South: Middle Florida’s Plantation Frontier before the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). The cock might particularly represent a soldier, the embodiment of masculinity. For example, William Henry Harrison—a native of North Bend, Ohio, and hero of the War of 1812—was represented as a cock in the 1840 election cartoon “North Bend Game Cock.” Cartoonist Nathaniel Currier turned similar imagery against U.S.-Mexican War hero Winfield Scott when Scott ran for president in 1852. Scott, whose nickname was “Old Fuss and Feathers” because of his love of lavish military regalia, was depicted as a cock with sword, epaulets, sash, and plumed hat. But in Currier’s drawing titled “A Bad Egg,” he is shown hatched from an egg labeled “Free Soil,” crowing that he belongs to New York Senator William Seward. The cock’s military virtue is rendered ludicrous by his outrageous gear, including wicked looking spurs, and undercut by his subservience to antislavery forces. Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 173, 358.



In "The Game-Cock & the Goose," drawn in 1852, Whig Winfield Scott rides a game-cock, while Democrat Franklin Pierce rides a goose. Scott, whose mount is in the lead, taunts the trailing Pierce, "What's the matter, Pierce? feel Faint? ha! ha! ha! lord what a Goose! . . ." The questions hint at Whig imputations of cowardice and weakness to Pierce. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

principles of non-interference with slavery in the territories keep him from making up to "such an adorable creature as this."²²

It was in 1853 that the first use of the phrase "the goose question" appeared in print. The Washington, D.C., *Evening Star* ran a rumor about a meeting at the National Hotel between John Van Buren, a New York politician and son of former President Martin Van Buren, and Virginian Beverley Tucker, publisher of the newly established *Washington Sentinel*. The story reported that John Van Buren had avowed his intent to "buy a nigger" and condemned the Wilmot Proviso, the famous legislation proposed by free-soil Democrat David Wilmot to exclude slavery from any territory acquired from Mexico after the U.S.-Mexican War. When Tucker expressed surprise at the New Yorker's prospective purchase, Van Buren purportedly replied, "Why I am as sound on niggers as the stump candidate for selectman was on the goose question."²³ This phrase, Tucker's proslavery apolo-
gia, and the expressed intent to "buy a nigger" explicitly connect slavery to being "sound on the goose question."

Local politicians such as the selectman Van Buren cited as being "sound," or on the right side of, "the goose question" often campaigned on local concerns. The regulation of geese and other livestock by municipal ordinances, for example, led to disputes between those who supported restrictions so that animal excrement would not foul public walkways and livestock owners who often opposed the trouble and expense of confining their stock.²⁴ By professing that he was "sound on the goose question," Van Buren's selectman could appear to be taking the issue seriously, though the answer did not reveal whether he was for or against regulat-
ing geese. The *Evening Star's* connection between this method of addressing an

fainted after being wounded in the Battle of Churubusco during the war with Mexico. The nature of Pierce's wound—a groin injury—suggests the question, "dout you wish you had my Cock?" was a slur against the candidate's manhood.²¹ In any case, the cartoon clearly places Pierce on a goose. The goose makes an appearance in another cartoon, in an 1852 edition of *Yan-kee Notions*, in which a number of prominent politicians court a "Coquette" whose fan labels her "Southern Rights." Stephen A. Douglas avows that he is "not such a goose" as to let his prin-

21. John L. Magee, "The Game-Cock & the Goose," Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3a13236>; Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature*, 109; Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 360–61. Roy Franklin Nichols, *Franklin Pierce: Young Hickory of the Granite Hills* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931), 161; Larry Gara, *The Presidency of Franklin Pierce* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), 30.

22. *Yankee Notions: Or, Whittlings of Jonathan's Jack-Knife* 1 (July 1852): 224, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?vid=HARVARD32044092738459&printsec=titlepage#PPA193,M1>.

23. (Washington, D.C.) *Evening Star*, November 16, 1853; Lyon Gardiner Tyler, *Encyclopedia of Virginia Biography* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1915), 5:37–38.

issue without actually taking a stand and Van Buren's views on the slavery question highlighted the politician's reputation as a "scheming political agitator," who was both a strong abolitionist and in favor of popular sovereignty depending on which stance fit best the moment.²⁵ According to the *Star's* report Van Buren essentially admitted this when he lamented, "Everybody seems to doubt everything I say about niggers."²⁶

The *Evening Star's* story indicates that the phrase "sound on the goose question" may have risen out of a local political dispute over animal control. By 1853, however, it was being applied to the contentious issue of slavery's expansion, perhaps because the goose had been used in cartoons to represent proslavery Democrats such as Polk and Pierce. The story is of course meant to convey the pro-Southern tendencies of a prominent Northern politician, but it also demonstrates that "sound on the goose question" was already being used as code for support of slavery well before the Kansas-Nebraska Act. As was common in the nineteenth century, the Van Buren story was reprinted verbatim in other newspapers, including Milwaukee's *Weekly Wisconsin* within three weeks, showing that the story was turning up far to the west of Washington.²⁷

The earliest newspaper references to "sound on the goose" on the Kansas-Missouri border so far discovered date from the spring and summer of 1855. The virulently proslavery Atchison *Squatter Sovereign* used the phrase in May to endorse the publishers of a new paper out of Parkville, Missouri, the *Southern Democrat*. This newspaper presumably would supplant the less reliable *Parkville Luminary*, which had its press thrown in the river by a proslavery mob when it criticized Missourians voting in the Kansas territorial election. In June, the *Liberty Weekly Tribune*, published in Clay County, Missouri, reported that the prominent Missouri politician David Atchison was considered "sound, as the vulgar phrase goes, on the 'Goose Question.'" Over the next two years, the phrase turned up repeatedly and editors no longer bothered to dismiss it as "vulgar."²⁸

By the 1856 presidential race, "sound on the goose" was clearly linked to the Kansas, territorial, and slavery issues and so it appeared in election-related cartoons. As was frequently the case with cartoons, the campaign was depicted in "The Great Presidential Race of 1856" as a sporting event. In the drawing Demo-

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24. An 1862 article claimed that the origins of "sound on the goose" came from an 1856 election for constable in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, over whether geese should be confined. But the John Van Buren story and the general use of "sound on the goose" to indicate a proslavery stance predate that election by two to three years. *Continental Monthly* 1 (January 1862): 105.

25. Quotation from *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 25 (December 1849): 569, see also 566-70, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=CVIJAAAAMAAJ>.

26. *Evening Star*, November 16, 1853.

27. (Milwaukee) *Weekly Wisconsin*, December 7, 1853. The John Van Buren story appeared in *Yankee Notions* 3 (February 1854): 56, available online at <http://books.google.com/books?id=BW0AAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover#PPP7,M1>. In October 1854, at the same time that John McNamara was hearing the phrase "goose question" on the Missouri border with Kansas, the phrase appeared in the *Cleveland Leader* to describe anti-Nebraska candidate Samuel Galloway's victory in an Ohio congressional race. Galloway opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the *Cleveland Leader* would become a staunch Republican newspaper. So when the *Leader* stated that Galloway's victory showed "The center of the State is sound on the 'goose question,'" it foreshadowed later uses that were ambiguous as to which side of an issue one favored if one was "sound." *Cleveland Leader*, October 14, 1854. "Samuel Galloway," *Biographical Dictionary of the United States Congress*, <http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=G000027>; "Cleveland Leader," *Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, <http://ech.cwru.edu/ech.cgi/article.pl?id=CL>.

28. (Atchison) *Squatter Sovereign*, May 8, 1855; Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas*, 58; *Liberty Weekly Tribune*, June 20, 1855. See also *Liberty Weekly Tribune*, September 28, 1855; January 25, February 8, May 23, October 3, 1856; January 16, 23, 30, July 17, November 17, 1857. The St. Joseph newspaper also carried a report that settlers near the Arkansas River were "sound on the goose." *St. Joseph Commercial Cycle*, July 27, 1855.

During the period
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cratic candidate James Buchanan curses a black man standing on a platform with which Buchanan’s mount, a stag, has collided. Shaking his fist, Buchanan says, “You Infernal Black Scoundrel, if it had not been for you and that cursed Slavery Plank that Scared and upset my Buck, I should have won this race certain.” Here the stag is used to represent Buchanan and the Democrats as a play on the candidate’s nickname, “Old Buck.” Another participant in the race is Millard Fillmore, the former president running in the 1856 election for the anti-immigrant American (or Know-Nothing) Party. It is Fillmore who rides the goose, crying “*I’m All Right On The Goose*, . . . if I’m not the next President the Union Will be Dissolved [*sic*], The South Wont Stand It.” One bystander asks, “Little too much Squatter Sovereignty about that Goose Fillmore?” In the background, the Republican candidate, John C. Frémont, riding an actual horse, is winning the race.²⁹ Here the cartoonist opted to use the buck imagery for Buchanan, making use of his nickname, despite Buchanan’s proslavery policy. Instead the goose is assigned to proslavery Know Nothings, led by Fillmore.

Both “The Game-Cock & the Goose” and “The Great Presidential Race of 1856” were the work of Philadelphia lithographer John L. Magee, who resided in that city from 1850 until the post-Civil War period.³⁰ Magee may have gotten the idea for riding the goose, an image that appears in both cartoons, from a Philadelphia neighbor. In 1848, during the controversy over expanding slavery into the territory acquired from Mexico, a Philadelphia satirical newspaper, the *John-Donkey*, published an illustrated poem “Wilmot, the Wizard,” lampooning David Wilmot and his proviso. The *John-Donkey* was published on Chestnut Street, two blocks from Magee’s establishment. The poem accuses Wilmot of having produced “A monster weird and spunkey / With hair like fire, a head like a goose, / and ears like a huge John-donkey.” The monster “swallowed the South at a gulp, with all / Its niggers and other people.” Accompanying the poem was a drawing of Wilmot riding the monster, which looks like a combination of a dragon and a bird with donkey ears.³¹ Here the goose is part of the monster free soil, which is a threat to slavery. Magee may have borrowed the imagery of riding the goose for his cartoons, adopting the goose as representative of Democrats and slavery and borrowing the *John-Donkey*’s image of riding or being “on the goose.” Magee continued to use goose imagery, as when he produced a patriotic envelope during the Civil War with the image of Jefferson Davis riding backwards on a goose. Titled “Jeff Sound on the Goose” it was accompanied by a verse:

Our brave Union Eagle you thought to stride and ride,
But the bird wouldn’t bear such a burden.
For he soon kicked you loose, on the back of an old goose,
To bear you to the other side of Jordan.³²

29. John L. Magee, “The Great Presidential Race of 1856,” Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b38355>; Weitenkampf, *Political Caricature*, 116; Reilly, *American Political Prints*, 402. A correspondent of the *Liberty Weekly Tribune* asserted that the local American Party “Is composed of men sound on the ‘Goose.’” *Liberty Weekly Tribune*, January 25, 1856.

30. “John L. Magee,” http://www.askart.com/askart/m/john_l_magee/john_l_magee.aspx.

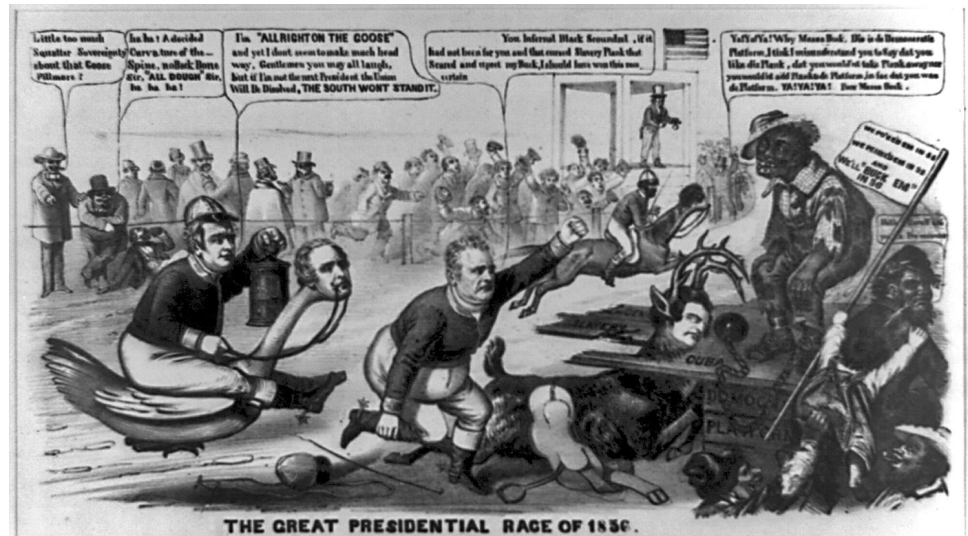
31. “Wilmot, the Wizard,” *John-Donkey*, January 8, 1848. See also Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Anti-slavery & the Politics of Free Soil, 1824–1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 181.

32. William R. Weiss, *The Catalog of Union Civil War Patriotic Covers* (Bethlehem, Pa.: W. R. Weiss, 1995), C-B-46. Weiss agrees that John L. Magee is the true creator of “Jeff Sound on the Goose” and the other covers that his book mistakenly attributes to James Magee (William R. Weiss to Emmett Redd, February 27, 2008, in Emmett Redd’s possession).

Magee maintained the image of riding on the goose, using the bird as the proslavery courier of Jefferson Davis's expulsion from the promised land of the Union.³³

During the period of Kansas Territory, from 1854 until 1861, "sound on the goose" retained its connection to the proslavery cause. Former territorial governor Andrew H. Reeder used the language, for example, when he suggested that a proslavery man be used as intermediary to retrieve papers he had left in Kansas: "[William H.] Russell is so undoubtedly sound on the goose that he can afford to ask for them."³⁴ Similarly, an editorial in the *Quindaro Chindowan* used "sound on the goose" to describe the Kansas Democratic Party as proslavery in 1857.³⁵

Into the Civil War, "sound on the goose" kept its proslavery meaning. A satirical poem by James Russell Lowell labeled certain Northern Democrats "sound on the goose" when they refused to support the Union war effort and sympathized with the Confederacy.³⁶ On the other side of the issue, when a Confederate politician suggested a convention of all the states to negotiate an end to the war, South Carolina soldiers debated how vigorously to condemn him. All the soldiers opposed the idea of a convention, but they divided on whether the politician's "errors" were forgivable. Those who felt he was "sound on the goose," believed this mistaken idea was "more of the head than the heart." Additionally, an 1865 song celebrating Confederate cavalryman John Hunt Morgan's escape from the Union began "John Morgan's 'all right on the goose.'"³⁷



In "The Great Presidential Race of 1856," Democratic candidate James Buchanan curses a black man standing on a platform with which Buchanan's mount, a stag, has collided. Shaking his fist, Buchanan says, "You Infernal Black Scoundrel, if it had not been for you and that cursed Slavery Plank that Scared and upset my Buck, I should have won this race certain." Another race participant, Know-Nothing candidate Millard Fillmore, rides the goose, crying "I'm All Right On The Goose, . . . if I'm not the next President the Union Will be Dissolved [sic], The South Wont Stand It." One bystander asks, "Little too much Squatter Sovereignty about that Goose Fillmore?" In the background, the Republican candidate, John C. Frémont, riding an actual horse, is winning the race. Cartoon courtesy of the Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

33. These prints had their origins in the Northeast with New York and, to a lesser degree, Philadelphia and Boston producing the bulk of the political prints in circulation in the mid-nineteenth century. Improvements in printing that lowered the prices of papers and transportation, which in turn lowered the cost of sending publications to subscribers, meant that these northeastern papers had a national market. If the goose image used on the Missouri border came from these political prints, it would have ironically meant that Southerners adopted the imagery from a Northern source. Bernard F. Reilly, Jr., *American Political Prints, 1766–1876: A Catalog of the Collections in the Library of Congress* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1991), xiv–xv; Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life, and the Crisis of Gilded Age America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 23.

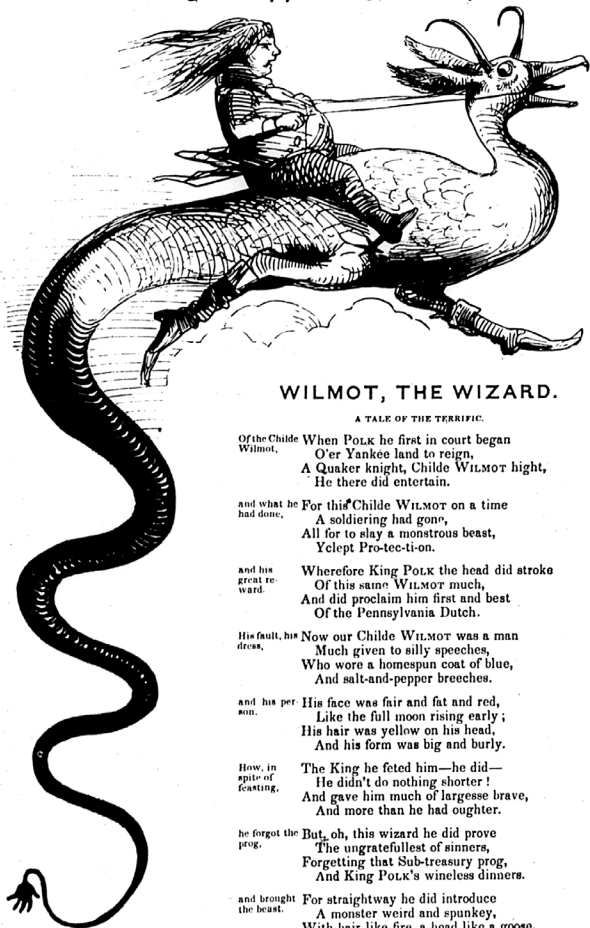
34. A. H. Reeder to [J. A. Halderman], Jan. 14, 1857, Territorial Kansas Online, [http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=show_document&document_id=100281&SCREEN_FROM=keyword&selected_keyword=Russell,%20William%20H%20\(of%20Russell,%20Majors%20and%20Waddell\)&startsearchat=0](http://www.territorialkansasonline.org/~imlskto/cgi-bin/index.php?SCREEN=show_document&document_id=100281&SCREEN_FROM=keyword&selected_keyword=Russell,%20William%20H%20(of%20Russell,%20Majors%20and%20Waddell)&startsearchat=0).

35. *Quindaro Chindowan*, Sept. 26, 1857, available online at http://kansascitykansascommunitycollege.org/ss/quindaro_chindowan/articles/issue19/qc19.htm.

36. James Russell Lowell, "A Message of Jeff Davis in Secret Session," in *The Complete Poetical Works of James Russell Lowell* (New York: Grossett & Dunlap, 1896), available online at <http://www.fullbooks.com/The-Complete-Poetical-Works-of-James-Russell11.html>.

37. A. E. A. Muse, *John Morgan's Escape*, sheet music (New Orleans: A. E. Blackmar, 1865), available online at <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/ihas/loc.natlib.ihas.200000677/default.html>; Lewis F. Knudsen, Jr., compiler, "The 3rd (Gill's) Battalion South Carolina Reserve Infantry: Reports from the Front, 1864–1865," October 18, 1864, http://www.geocities.com/sc_seedcorn/Bn03SC_Eccles.html.

Go it, ye Cripples! Pa-a-up!



WILMOT, THE WIZARD.

A TALE OF THE TERRIFIC.

Of the Child When Polk he first in court began
Wilmot, O'er Yankee land to reign,
A Quaker knight, Child Wilmot hight,
He there did entertain.

and what he For this Child Wilmot on a time
had done, A soldiering had gone,
All for to slay a monstrous beast,
Yclept Pro-tee-tion.

and his great re- Wherefore King Polk the head did stroke
ward, Of this same Wilmot much,
And did proclaim him first and best
Of the Pennsylvania Dutch.

His fault, his Now our Child Wilmot was a man
dress, Much given to silly speeches,
Who wore a homespun coat of blue,
And salt-and-pepper breeches.

and his per His face was fair and fat and red,
son, Like the full moon rising early;
His hair was yellow on his head,
And his form was big and burly.

How, in The King he feted him—he did—
spite of He didn't do nothing shorter!
feasting, And gave him much of largesse brave,
And more than he had oughter.

he forgot the But, oh, this wizard he did prove
prog, The ungratefulest of sinners,
Forgetting that Sub-treasury prog,
And King Polk's wineless dinners.

and brought For straightway he did introduce
the beast, A monster weird and spunky,
With hair like fire, a head like a goose,
And ears like a huge John-donkey.

During the controversy over expanding slavery into the territory acquired from Mexico, a Philadelphia satirical newspaper, the John-Donkey, published an illustrated poem in its January 8, 1848, edition titled "Wilmot, the Wizard," lampooning David Wilmot and his proviso. The monster, a combination of a dragon and a bird with donkey ears, "swallowed the South at a gulp, with all / Its niggers and other people." Here the goose is part of the monster free soil, which is a threat to slavery.

But even before the Civil War, "sound on the goose" evolved to become the equivalent of "politically orthodox." By the time Union soldier Lindsa Lamb wrote his wife about the marriage of an acquaintance in 1864, "sound on the goose" had seemingly become divorced from its association with proslavery. The bride, Lamb wrote in what appears to be a simple statement of approbation rather than a comment on the woman's politics, was "all rite [sic] on the goose question."³⁸ In another example of the phrase's shift in meaning, when the West Virginia constitutional convention considered the credentials of a potential delegate, testimonials to his character included assertions that he was "of sound principles in regard to the Union and a very respectable citizen" as well as being "'sound on the goose' question." Here "sound on the goose" seems unrelated to proslavery as the gentleman was both pro-Union and the new state of West Virginia would not have slavery.³⁹

Even Kansans came to use "sound on the goose" to signify a position other than proslavery. The editor of the Atchison newspaper *Freedom's Champion* wrote a satirical editorial to celebrate Kansas's admission as a state in 1861. The editorial took the form of an obituary for "the child 'K.T.," or Kansas Territory, whose "place is filled by the youth, Kansas." This promising youth had many virtues, among them its understanding of "Mt. Oread to be just as sound on the goose as Bunker Hill." Here "sound on the goose" linked Mt. Oread—a hill in Lawrence, Kansas, a community settled by New Englanders and the site of some of the armed conflict during Bleeding Kansas—with the fount of New England and American freedom at Bunker Hill, thus aligning the goose not with proslavery but with antislavery tendencies.⁴⁰

"Sound on the goose" as an aphorism of antislavery can also be seen in communications dispatched from a post in western Virginia early in the war, in which future President Rutherford B. Hayes worried about the possible results of elections in Ohio. When the news that David Tod, the candidate of war Democrats and Republicans, had won the 1861 gubernatorial race finally reached his unit, Hayes exulted, "Glad Ohio is sound on the goose." Hayes's use of the phrase in reference to Tod's victory over the antiwar Democrat H. J. Jewett, indicates that "sound on the goose" had by this time become associated with the pro-Union

38. Lindsa Lamb to wife, August 21, 1864, Lamb Manuscripts, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington.

39. "Debates and Proceedings of the First Constitutional Convention of West Virginia," January 20, 1862, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/statehood/cc012062.html>; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Ballantine, 1988), 303–4.

40. (Atchison) *Freedom's Champion*, February 2, 1861, quoted in "When Kansas Became a State," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 27 (Spring 1961): 1–21. Ironically, the *Freedom's Champion* was the predecessor of the virulently proslavery *Squatter Sovereign*; freestaters purchased and converted the paper in early 1858 under the editorship of John A. Martin.

cause rather than with proslavery.⁴¹ In another example of such usage, a Union soldier who sought to reassure his wife that he would not “get caught in a trap” by Confederates, told her that the woman who laundered for the soldiers at their Maryland camp was “a union woman. . . . She is sound on the goose.” Here the phrase was used expressly to indicate pro-Union sentiments and seemed divorced from the connection to slavery. Ciardi maintains that in the late nineteenth-century, “sound on the goose” had come to mean “politically orthodox.” But it is clear from these examples that the trend toward that meaning—in which the phrase, rather than indicating exclusively a proslavery or antislavery stance, referred to one’s standing on the same side of the issue as the person evoking the saying—started very early in the expression’s history.⁴²

Although there is no clear indication of how “sound on the goose” came to signify the proslavery issue in Kansas, cartoons from the 1840s onwards link the goose image to both the Democratic Party and slavery, as when the bird was used to depict proslavery Democratic politicians such as James K. Polk and Franklin Pierce. The 1853 newspaper story reporting John Van Buren’s attempt to purchase slaves directly links the “goose question” to slavery. The association between the Democrats and slavery solidified when the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which opened formerly free territory to slavery, became Democratic Party policy during Pierce’s administration and with his support. Furthermore, politicians had long been asked if they were sound on various issues. The goose question, once a staple of local politics, now became the phrase adopted for the slavery expansion issue. “Are you sound on the goose?” became shorthand for whether or not one supported the Democratic Party policy opening Kansas to slavery. In later years the phrase once again lost its direct association with the proslavery position and instead came to signify strong support for any given cause while remaining ambiguous as to which side of the issue one actually favored. Eventually, “sound on the goose” faded from use, and today the phrase is remembered only for its association with Bleeding Kansas. [KH]

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41. *The Diary and Letters of Rutherford B. Hayes, Nineteenth President of the United States*, ed. by Charles Richard Williams (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archeological and Historical Society, 1922), October 15, 1861, entry, 2:115, available online at <http://www.ohiohistory.org/online/doc/hayes/Volume02/Chapter16/GAULEYBRIDGEOctober151861.txt>; William B. Hesseltine, *Lincoln and the War Governors* (New York: Knopf, 1948), 226–27.

42. [Samuel McClain] to Lucinda, June 17, 1864, Samuel McClain Papers, Center for Archival Collections, Bowling Green, Ohio, available online at <http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/cac/ms/trans/page53990.html#10>; Ciardi, *Browser’s Dictionary*, 158.