

**Virtue and Improvement:  
The Panic of 1837 and the Making of Manhattan Whig  
Ideology**

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Who Were the Whigs?	3
I. Political Economy: The Path to Recovery	13
II. Internal Improvements: Growth and Greater Employment	30
III. Aid to the Poor: Fusing Public Assistance with Republicanism	39
IV. Vagrants and Lazaroni: Immigrants and the Threat to Virtue	54
Conclusion: What Was Whig Ideology?	67
Bibliography	73

## Introduction

### Who Were the Whigs?

New York City during the Panic of 1837 was in turmoil. An economic crisis had struck the country, and Manhattan was the epicenter of despair. Bank failures had reduced Wall Street to a shadow of itself, and people throughout the city struggled to stay afloat amidst an ocean of economic ruin. The local newspaper the *Courier and New York Enquirer* described the city's decay in stark terms. Reflecting on the ruinous effects of the Panic, the daily editorialized, "Our commerce has been prostrated, our manufactories destroyed, and the industry of our people rendered unavailable; heavily as the blow has fallen in other regions, and on other sections of the country, in New York alone has its greatest force been felt."<sup>1</sup> The crisis that began in Manhattan would spread devastation throughout the country, but perhaps the crisis inflicted on the people of Gotham the most acute pain.

In the midst of the crisis, the Whig Party channeled economic frustration into electoral success. During the panic years of 1837-1839, New York's Whigs controlled both the mayoralty and the Common Council, which predated the modern City Council. Never again in New York's

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<sup>1</sup> *Courier and New York Enquirer*, Morning, 1837-1839, New York Public Library. September 28, 1837.

history would the Whigs have unified control of Manhattan government. This narrow window of Whig leadership offers a view into the concerns and ideology of the local party. What policies did the Whig Mayor Aaron Clark and the Common Council propose? How did the larger Whig community in New York City respond to these proposals? Most significantly, did the Whigs have a worldview uniting these policies, and, if so, what was the content of this vision? The answers to these questions help construct an interpretation of the Whig Party's ideological dedication to government programs that would promote republican ideals and social and economic improvement.

A cascade of events beginning with a contraction of credit in England caused the Panic. In the summer and fall of 1836, the Bank of England feared a shortage of gold and silver reserves and restricted credit to firms involved with American commerce. Facing higher interest rates, English banks and merchants demanded that their American partners repay their outstanding debt. As English credit contracted, English manufacturers could no longer purchase major quantities of American cotton. Without English demand for America's greatest export, cotton prices plummeted, and many southern planters could not repay their debt to Manhattan's financial institutions, leading to widespread bank failures. Anticipating a drain on their specie, New York banks on May 11, 1837 stopped issuing specie in exchange for promissory notes, and banks throughout the country followed suit. The suspension of specie payment further depressed the value of paper currency. As people found themselves stuck with nearly worthless paper notes, economic pain consumed the nation.<sup>2</sup>

As the center of the nation's finance, Manhattan's economy experienced a dramatic decline. By April 1837, a committee informed President Van Buren that, in Gotham, there had

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<sup>2</sup> Causes for the Panic: Michael F. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 59–63.

been “more than 250 failures of houses engaged in extensive business,” and that merchandise in the City’s warehouses had lost a third of their value.<sup>3</sup> The real estate boom that had lifted the City during the 1830’s collapsed. Landowners near Bloomingdale Village in September 1836 had sold their properties for an average of \$480 per acre, and, by April 1837, the same landowners struggled to sell their land for \$50 an acre. All told, the value of real estate in New York City had declined by \$40,000,000. The volume of trading on the New York Stock Exchange and Board plummeted from a daily average of 7,393 shares in January to 1,535 in June. Banks halted virtually all lending in order to preserve their reserve of gold and silver, and interest rates soared to 24 percent. Without access to credit, even established businesses struggled to stay afloat, causing a major contraction in manufacturing and commerce.<sup>4</sup> With the real estate market in tatters, little access to credit, and devalued paper currency, the recession inflicted a scale of economic anguish previously unimaginable to those in the midst of its distress. The economy revived slightly in May 1838 after the Bank of England sent an infusion of specie to New York’s banks, but the American economy would not fully recover until the start of the next decade.<sup>5</sup>

While the economic crisis struck the country with ferocity, many historians interpret the Panic of 1837 as a turning point in the success of the Whig Party. The recession offered the Whigs a chance to distinguish themselves and their policies from the Democrats. Historian Michael Holt writes that the Panic of 1837 “was the pivotal episode in the growth of the Whig Party.”<sup>6</sup> In response to the crisis, Whigs promised “to promote economic development and to restore prosperity through the expansion of banking credit, government subsidies, and economic

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<sup>3</sup> Economic statistics: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 612.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 613.

<sup>5</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 63–64.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

diversification.”<sup>7</sup> The Whigs supported distributing funds to the states using revenue generated from federal land sales, and they hoped that states would spend these resources on internal improvements that would increase employment and improve long-term economic growth. They opposed a Democratic proposal to remove all federal funds from private banks and instead redoubled their commitment to an economy based on credit and paper currency. These prescriptions for economic rejuvenation required significant government involvement in the economy, and they reflected the Whig ideology that “government, particularly during a depression, had an obligation to promote economic recovery.”<sup>8</sup>

The Whig’s economic agenda produced widespread electoral success in both local and national contests. With a broad coalition built around farmers who grew cash crops, miners, manufacturers, merchants, and tradesmen, the Whigs were able to convert “hundreds of thousands of previous nonvoters into Whigs and transformed a losing party into a winner.”<sup>9</sup> They captured the White House in 1840 for William Henry Harrison and secured the governorships of many states, including William Henry Seward of New York. According to Holt, the “Whigs triumphed in the panic period of 1837-1838 because they won so many new votes in the areas most crippled by the banks suspensions and reduced government expenditures.”<sup>10</sup> Moreover, they retained these voters in subsequent elections because they were “pleased with the Whig efforts to expand currency and to promote growth.”<sup>11</sup> Quite simply, voters identified with the Whig plans for an active government response to the crisis.

As economic calamities multiplied in New York City, the Whig’s primary rival, the Democratic party, experienced a reversal of fates along the lines of its national counterparts. In

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

April 1836, the Democratic party had split over the government's allegedly corrupt role in economic behavior. William Legget, editor of the *Evening Post*, split from the Democratic party to form the Loco Foco party. The party gained its name after a group of Democrats stormed a meeting in New York's Military and Civic Hotel and turned off the gaslights, but the Democratic deserters had come prepared with new "loco foco" friction matches and lit up the room. The Loco Focos diverged from the Democrats in promoting antimonopoly laws. Legget attacked the exclusive privileges of ferries in Brooklyn and advocated a single law to govern incorporations. They alleged that the existing system of incorporation encouraged individual businessmen to bribe politicians in exchange for the right to incorporate. Beyond attacks against monopolies, Legget "tore into the ancient network of municipal regulations, dismissing the notion that government had any moral obligation to intervene in the economy on the public's behalf."<sup>12</sup> According to Legget and other Loco Focos, the government excessively interfered in people's lives, and they sought to limit the Common Council's involvement with trade by opposing inspectorships, cart licensing, and donations to literary and cultural institutions. The Democrats worked to integrate the Loco Focos and their vision of the negative state into their party, and they would reunite to support the same mayoral candidate in 1838.<sup>13</sup>

In 1837 and 1838, Gotham's Whigs took advantage of economic discontent and division in the Democratic party by winning the mayoralty and a majority of seats on the Common Council. Aaron Clark, a former lottery magnate and member of the Board of Alderman, won the mayoral election by over 3,000 votes in 1837 when the Democrats and Loco Focos had divided and by nearly 500 votes in 1838, becoming the fourth directly elected mayor in New York City.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 608.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 607–609.

<sup>14</sup> Kenneth T. Jackson, Second ed., "The Encyclopedia of New York City" (New Haven: Yale University Press, September 26, 1995), 806–808.

On the Common Council, Whig representatives won 9 out of 17 seats in 1837 and 12 out of 17 seats in 1838.<sup>15</sup> The Whigs succeeded by rallying “evangelical and Episcopalian merchants, bankers, and businessmen, master craftsmen and the middling classes, and working class voters hard hit by the depression.”<sup>16</sup> During the election, they presented themselves as the defenders of “order, morals and religion,” and they slandered Democrats as agrarians and people associated with “infidelity, anarchy, the riot, butchery, and blood of the French revolution.”<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, the Whigs promoted government support for internal improvements, regulation of the banking industry, extending paper currency, improvements to the almshouse, and restricted immigration.

While the Whigs certainly succeeded during the crisis years, historians offer conflicting explanations of the nature of their success and the contours of their ideological vision. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., in *The Age of Jacksonian Democracy* (1945), offers an interpretation of the Whig Party that continues to influence historians. Working in the context of the New Deal, Schlesinger identifies Jackson’s Democrats as the ancestors of Franklin D. Roosevelt and disapprovingly connects the Whigs to Hoover and Taft. According to this interpretation, the Whig Party was a group of elitists set in opposition to the progressive Democratic party of Andrew Jackson. While the heroic Jackson championed the rights of the common man, the Whigs promoted the business elite at the expense of the average American. From Schlesinger’s point of view, no serious ideology united the Whigs. They were a disparate combination of groups whose main unifying position was opposition to Jackson, Van Buren, and the Democrats. If anything connected the Whigs beyond a desire for electoral success, it was their elitism and favoritism for bankers.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, April 14, 1837, and April 15, 1838.

<sup>16</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 621.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> For a review of Schlesinger’s relation to contemporary Whig historiography see: Allen Guelzo, “The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War by Michael Holt,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association, University of Illinois Press* 22, no. 2.

Schlesinger's interpretation endures in the modern work of historian Sean Wilentz. In *The Rise of American Democracy* (2009), Wilentz belittles the Whigs as intellectually meager compared to the Democrats. Even though he acknowledges that the Whigs relied on Scottish moral philosophy, Wilentz writes that, "the Whig intelligentsia, even among the younger new-school Whigs, was meager in comparison to the Federalists and the Jeffersonians before them-as well as to the robust Jacksonians."<sup>19</sup> Unlike the Democratic party, Wilentz belittles the Whigs for "lacking intellectual sparkle and strenuousness."<sup>20</sup> Although Wilentz acknowledges that the Whigs supported a consistent set of economic and social policies, such as support for internal improvements and public schools, he does not organize these policies within the framework of a robust intellectual vision. Instead, he attributes the Whig's sporadic victories to their appropriation of Democratic rhetoric. Belittling the Whigs for a lack of intellectual ingenuity, he writes that even when the Whigs beat the Democrats, "it was on their own democratic political terms that old-guard [Whig] conservatives had abhorred."<sup>21</sup> Although Wilentz admits that Whiggery entailed a consistent platform, he attributes the success of these policies to the Whig's appropriation of Democratic rhetoric rather than to a unique Whig ideology.

Other historians, such as Michael Holt, in *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (1999), and Daniel Walker Howe, in *What Hath God Wrought* (2007), have combated disapproving interpretations of the Whigs by describing a coherent Whig worldview. According to these historians, while the Democrats pursued limited government, the Whigs encouraged Washington to actively improve society. Describing the Whig's commitment to improvement, one historian writes that, "Whether the subject was a bank, a road, or a school for the deaf,

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<sup>19</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln*, Reprint (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006), 257.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 267.

Whigs usually lined up in favor of a systematic program for social uplift.”<sup>22</sup> From an economic perspective, the Whig’s dedication to improvement led them to embrace costly public works, such as canals and railroads. To finance these programs, the Whigs encouraged tariffs on imported goods, and they distributed these funds to states. They also advanced the development of the infant banking system so that entrepreneurs could access credit and expand their businesses. Just as the Whigs hoped to augment the country’s wealth, they aimed to enhance individual welfare. According to the Whigs, the government should sponsor “public schools, benevolent societies, rehabilitative prisons, juvenile reformatories, and insane asylums.”<sup>23</sup> These government-sponsored programs would help assure that America offered success to anyone who worked hard. Together, the Whig’s economic and social programs reflected their dedication to government programs that would advance individual and national welfare.

Republicanism was a critical feature of the Whig’s prescriptions for social improvement. According to the Whigs, republicanism signified a dedication to “hard work, temperance, frugality, domesticity, literacy, benevolence, gentility, and a desire for self-improvement.”<sup>24</sup> Whigs upheld these values because they claimed that the emerging market economy demanded republican characteristics for success. Reflecting on the interconnectedness of moral virtue and prosperity, historian Henry Watson writes that, “The fundamental political goals of many Whigs included both the prosperity they expected from a commercialized economy and the spread of the evangelical virtues they associated with economic progress.”<sup>25</sup> Because Whigs claimed personal virtue and individual success were indivisible, they promoted programs that would develop American’s moral habits. Public schools, benevolent societies, and almshouses offered

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<sup>22</sup> Harry L. Watson, *Liberty and Power: The Politics of Jacksonian America*, 2nd ed. (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006), 186.

<sup>23</sup> Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 257.

<sup>24</sup> Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 211.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

the chance to teach Americans the virtues they would need to succeed. The Whigs pursued policies to improve society from a conviction that society was an interconnected and “harmonious entity with a single overriding interest—the common good—which was distinct from yet incorporated the interest of every social group.”<sup>26</sup> To be sure, Whig republicanism could lead to controversial moralizing. Whig attempts to enforce Sabbath laws or to teach Protestantism in public schools might rightfully strike contemporary Americans as unwarranted extensions of government power. Nonetheless, Whiggery’s commitment to republicanism led to some progressive reforms based on the notion that government should promote moral virtue.

In New York, the Whig’s dual dedication to improvement and republicanism shaped the party’s response to the Panic of 1837. The four chapters of this paper will explore several of the Whig’s crucial concerns in the wake of the economic crisis in Manhattan: (1) political economy, (2) internal improvements, (3) aid to the poor, and (4) immigration. Believing that government should promote economic vitality, they advocated an expansion of credit through the development of paper currency and banking. Infrastructure programs gained Whig approval as a means of increasing employment and creating the foundation for future growth. Soon after the 1837 election, the Whig Common Council embarked on a comprehensive examination of the city’s system of public relief and promoted reforms that would improve the city’s various almshouse programs. The period also witnessed a dramatic surge in immigration, and Whigs proposed restricting the flow of newcomers because foreigners supposedly threatened republican virtue. While these programs were far from perfect, they reflected the Whig conviction that government could improve society and bring about a republican transformation.

Despite the Whig dedication to enhancing individual welfare, they excluded several constituencies from their vision of who deserved government aid. The national Whig coalition

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<sup>26</sup> Thomas Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 171.

relied on the support of Southerners, and so most Whigs sought to suppress the issues of slavery and equal rights in order to preserve their political alliance with Southern Whigs. Moreover, in several urban regions such as New York City, some Whigs deemed immigrants unworthy of government support. Especially in the case of foreigners, republicanism was a key factor in explaining the Whig's seemingly bigoted views. To some Whigs, immigrants did not deserve the state's help because they did not espouse republican characteristics. Some Whigs alleged that foreigners were indolent and undisciplined, making them unworthy of assistance. The Common Council and Mayor Clark dedicated significant energies to limiting immigration during this period, so Whig treatment of newcomers features prominently in this work. In contrast, this work does not explore the relationship between African-Americans and Whigs. This absence should not denote any historical finding, but only that African-Americans do not feature prominently in the discussions of Manhattan's Common Council and Whig newspapers.<sup>27</sup>

Instead of relying on the example of New York Whigs to extrapolate themes about the national Whig Party, this paper will use the city as a test case to examine the viability of a Whig worldview on the local level. As Lee Benson, a historian of New York State, writes, "Single cases do not verify general conclusions, of course. But to verify general conclusions eventually, it is necessary to start somewhere."<sup>28</sup> This thesis considers the ideological framework of the Whigs by examining the local party in Manhattan. A picture will emerge of the Whigs in New York as dedicated to an active government that supported economic and social improvement through republican ideals.

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<sup>27</sup> This paper also will not explore gender issues. However, an analysis of Whiggery's views of women is critical to determining whether the Whigs sought the improvement of all Americans, or only native white males.

<sup>28</sup> Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), vii.

## **Chapter I**

### **Political Economy: The Path to Recovery**

By 1834, acrimony between the Whigs and Democrats in New York City had reached a fevered pitch. A year earlier, the city amended its charter to finally allow New Yorkers the right to elect their own mayor, and the metropolis responded to the first direct election of its chief executive with a surge of political engagement. On the first day of the municipal elections in 1834, James Watson Webb, the Whig editor of the daily *Courier and NY Enquirer*, constructed a float-size frigate named the *Constitution* and led a procession of 1,500 Whig supporters through Broadway. The next day, they organized “in military order,” and marched through the Democratic sixth ward. Democrats retaliated and attacked the Whig headquarters on Broadway, leading to an urban shootout that injured many. The Democrats set out to destroy the *Courier’s* head office, but “Webb, forewarned, erected a barricade of bundled papers and retired to the roof with thirty young merchants, seventy muskets, one hundred pistols, and six loads of paving stones.” Webb threatened to fire upon the “first man who moved towards his property,” successfully dispersing the riotous crowd that had gathered below the building. Reflecting on the

violent election, and, unknowingly, perhaps the era in general, the *Sun* observed that, “We were indeed in the midst of a revolution.”<sup>29</sup>

While the 1834 election may have been exceptionally hostile, profound economic policy differences animated the politics of the 1830’s, and the decade’s economic trials exacerbated these disputes. According to historian Thomas Brown, “The Whigs’ perspective on the government’s proper role in the economy was first fully elicited by the Panic of 1837.”<sup>30</sup> Whigs reacted to the crisis by elaborating a platform that would encourage economic growth through republican ideals. While Democrats advised Washington to do as little as possible, Whigs claimed that policymakers had a duty to promote economic improvement. They attacked Jackson’s anti-banking policies and opposed Van Buren’s similar attempts to divorce the government from banks. Instead, New York City’s Whig politicians, journalists, and local activists promoted the party’s national ideology by advocating government action that would augment paper money, expand banks, and facilitate an economic resurgence.

Economic questions resonated in New York because, by the 1830’s, Manhattan had become the financial hub of the nation. Banks in Gotham controlled far more capital than the banks of any other city. In the wider finance industry, “the collective assets of the city’s insurance companies exceeded those of Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore combined.”<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the New York Stock Exchange and Board had already assumed its position of national prestige. The Exchange handled “a greater volume of stocks” than any other national market, and its prices “were quoted throughout the country.”<sup>32</sup> At the time of the Panic, New

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<sup>29</sup> Description of the 1834 election: Edwin G. Burrows and Mike Wallace, *Gotham: a History of New York City to 1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 574-575.

<sup>30</sup> Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship*, 172.

<sup>31</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 446.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

York had become the near undisputed center for national finance, making it a prime location to explore the questions of political economy that dominated the era.

### **Villainous Jackson**

In antebellum America, banks and paper currency inspired controversy. Most people conducted their daily transactions using paper notes, but banks, not the government, issued them for use. A bank would issue loans by distributing its own bank bills, “which were paper certificates supposedly convertible to specie on demand and which therefore passed as money.”<sup>33</sup> Any person could use a bank note to pay for goods and services, giving paper notes the same functional purpose as regular currency. Despite the widespread use of paper notes, most Democrats opposed their use. Instead, they supported the use of gold and silver coins known as specie. The metallic coins used for transactions were “issued by the federal government and foreign nations,” but were “scarce and cumbersome to use.”<sup>34</sup> Although paper money was more common than specie, Democrats feared that paper money relied on imaginary wealth and that allowing bankers to issue their own currency would lead to speculative bubbles. Throughout the era, Democrats beginning with Andrew Jackson would seek to restrain the expansion of banks and paper currency, and these commercial concerns became among the most controversial of the era.

The local Whig establishment decried Jackson’s anti-banking policies as the cause of the economic panic plaguing the city, and Jackson’s legislative act known as the Specie Circular was at the center of these attacks. President Jackson in 1836 had grown concerned that the government’s land sales in the frontier had created a speculative bubble. Democrats claimed that

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<sup>33</sup> Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 35.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

bankers relied on large amounts of borrowed paper money to buy federal land and used the land as collateral on dangerous loans. In order to restrain the speculative expansion that Jackson saw developing, he prohibited the federal land office from dealing in paper currency. To purchase federal land, an individual or a corporation would need to pay for the land in gold or silver. Jackson's proposal depleted the specie reserves of New York City's banks as metallic currency migrated west in order to pay for federal lands. The largest Manhattan banks lost more than \$10 million in federal deposits, and their specie reserves plummeted from \$5.9 million in August 1835 to \$1.5 million in May 1837. If a speculative bubble existed, Jackson certainly burst it, and the resulting drain in specie helped lead to the Panic of 1837.<sup>35</sup>

Validated in their initial opposition to the Specie Circular, New York Whigs took advantage of the Panic to settle an old score with Jackson and the Democrats by pinning the economic chaos on the President's supposedly ill conceived banking policies. The *Courier and New York Enquirer* wrote that, "the present general derangement of the business of the country proceeds from that unjust and oppressive circular, and the measures connected to it."<sup>36</sup> The *Daily Whig* echoed the *Courier* in ascribing the Panic to the effects of the Specie Circular. In an editorial, the *Daily Whig* wrote, "The Specie Circular and other measures of the government caused the banks to suspend specie payments, because the government itself demanded the gold and silver, which it had promised the people that they should have."<sup>37</sup> According to the *Daily Whig*, banks were unable to redeem paper currency for specie because, "the government interfered, and by demanding gold and silver for lands, and postage and duties, put all the metals into the treasury."<sup>38</sup> Because the government required specie in exchange for land and other

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<sup>35</sup> Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy*, 439–446.

<sup>36</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, April 5, 1837.

<sup>37</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 2, 1838.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

government services, the Whigs claimed that the Circular had depleted banks of their specie, making them unable to exchange paper currency for metallic currency.

### **Martin Van Buren and Jackson's Third Term**

Just as the Whigs opposed Jackson's anti-banking policies, they attacked his protégé and successor, Martin Van Buren, whose primary response to the crisis was a plan to create a system of independent treasury banks. The Whigs decried his proposal as counterproductive and anti-republican. In the Democrat's scheme, Washington would pursue a divorce from private banks by removing all federal deposits from private financial institutions and placing them in independent sub-treasuries. The measure also weakened banks by requiring all government transactions to use specie instead of paper currency. Democrats attacked bankers and paper currency because they claimed "parasitic and aristocratic bankers used [paper money] to cheat honest farmers and mechanics out of their hard-won earnings by refusing to redeem their notes."<sup>39</sup> When Jackson first proposed the plan in 1836, it met fierce opposition from conservative Democrats and Whigs, but Jackson would succeed in passing the measure in 1840.<sup>40</sup>

Whigs feared that Van Buren's sub-treasury plan contradicted republican principles and that it would impede economic recovery by weakening banks and paper currency. They feared that placing the government's extensive currency holdings in the power of the President created the potential for a dishonest executive to misuse the funds for party purposes. The Whiggish fear of corruption had its roots in republican theory. According to Whig republicanism, all of society is linked together in harmony, and what is good for the whole is good for its constitutive parts. In

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<sup>39</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 74.

<sup>40</sup> Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 457-464.

the words of historian Thomas Brown, “The Anti-interventionist policy symbolized by the sub treasury plan was an abandonment of the people as a selfish measure to benefit the President and his clique of spoils men.”<sup>41</sup> Instead of rewarding Democratic officeholders, the Whigs encouraged government relief that would help all Americans. Moreover, by requiring all government transactions to occur in specie and by removing federal funds from banks, Whigs claimed Van Buren’s measure would destroy the banking system. Without a robust banking sector, Whigs saw economic recovery as impossible. Just as the Whigs rebuked Jackson’s Specie Circular, they condemned Van Buren’s sub treasury plan as counterproductive to economic recovery and at odds with republicanism.

Local Whig leaders expressed apprehension about the sub treasury plan and its potential for fraud. A meeting of the Young Whigs of New York in the fifteenth ward opined that the plan would allow the President to use the government’s deposits for partisan purposes. The group drafted resolutions objecting to “the sub treasury scheme because it increases and aggrandizes executive power. The tendency of power is always accumulative: to aid the tendency by placing within its grasp that potent agent ‘money’ is certainly a questionable policy.”<sup>42</sup> Fearing a legion of dishonest and partisan public servants, they objected that the sub treasury scheme would “create a new army of office holders, to be fed, clothed, and paid for in gold and silver by the people when the present hard times have clearly demonstrated that there is not gold and silver enough for the people themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Another meeting of Whigs in the fifth ward objected to the sub treasury plan “because it organizes a set of greedy office holders who will fatten upon the people and eat out their substance.”<sup>44</sup> These attacks against the sub treasury emerged from the

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<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Politics and Statesmanship*, 42.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 8, 1838.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, March 8, 1838.

accusation that Democrats protected party loyalists when the government should be helping millions of ordinary Americans.

Whig journalists echoed local Whig leaders in their condemnations of the sub treasury. According to the *Courier*, the sub treasury plan showed that the administration is “afraid to trust the people with their own money and are determined to hold on to it that they may supply their partisans the means of sustaining and continuing their corrupt domination.”<sup>45</sup> The *Courier* expressed alarm that Van Buren’s plan was “liable to the grossest abuses. It may be made to minister to the vilest corruption. It will put into the hands of the President by his necessary control of the paper Money Makers of the government, the power of multiplying a hundred fold the means of the Treasury and of converting them to the subjugation of the people.”<sup>46</sup>

The Whig’s claim that the independent treasury would lead to partisan corruption relates to the Whigs’ ideological claim that government should help the entire people, not just party loyalists. Since the sub treasury plan called for the government to deal only in specie, the plan would require government employees to receive salaries in silver and gold. Democrats, according to New York Whigs, called for the government “to save itself while abandoning the rest of the population to rot in the decay of the depression.”<sup>47</sup> Referring to prominent Democrat Amos Kendall, the *Daily Whig* complained that “Amos gave notice that members of congress should be paid in gold and silver and yet he has no precious metals to give the poor pensioners.”<sup>48</sup> Why should government employees receive salaries of silver and gold when millions of Americans were unable to redeem paper currency for specie? With so many

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<sup>45</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, April 6, 1837.

<sup>46</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, September 22, 1837.

<sup>47</sup> Holt, *Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 69.

<sup>48</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 2, 1838.

Americans struggling to survive amidst economic peril, Whigs scolded their opponents for saving Democratic loyalists and abandoning the millions of Americans in danger.

The *Daily Whig* illustrated the injustice of the independent treasury in personal terms. In an emotional hypothetical story, the *Daily Whig* presented the case of a widow who was unable to receive a package at the post office containing money from her son because she did not have silver to pay for the package. Angrily, the *Daily Whig* argued that a poor widow “must run from door to door and beg a silver shilling to pay the postage, for if she offers even a treasury note at the window, it will not be taken, for the change must be given in silver, and Uncle Sam can’t spare silver to the poor widows. *If the poor widow gets not her silver shilling, she must starve before she can get her own money from the national post office!*”<sup>49</sup> According to the *Daily Whig*, by forbidding the post office from receiving paper currency, Washington prevented people from enjoying a basic function of government. In a similarly emotional appeal, a meeting of the Young Whigs of New York asked whether there should be, “a currency of gold for the servants, and of paper for the masters; Specie for those who hold office, and rags for those who bestow it.”<sup>50</sup> For both the *Daily Whig* and local Whig leaders, the independent treasury showed that the Democrats would save themselves while abandoning the rest of America. Instead of rewarding fellow Democrats, Van Buren should have supplied a stable currency to all Americans.

Besides their fears of corruption, Whigs criticized Van Buren’s plan by claiming it would strengthen specie at the expense of paper currency, leading to the collapse of the banking industry. By requiring the government to conduct business exclusively with gold and silver, Washington would make specie more valuable than paper currency. If demand for specie exceeded demand for paper notes, people would always have an incentive to exchange paper

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, November 1, 1837.

currency for more valuable specie. No bank would ever be able to resume payments of gold and silver because it would be impossible to overcome the flood of customers demanding metallic currency. In an editorial, the *Courier* claimed that, “It is as inevitable as the laws of gravitation that if the specie is more valuable than Bank notes, the latter will always be converted into the former as soon as they are attempted to be issued.”<sup>51</sup> With perpetually diminished demand for bank notes, the infrastructure supporting paper currency would presumably collapse. Because people would never consent to banks that did not redeem paper currency in exchange for metallic currency, “all the banks in the United States are bound to be wound up,” and the banking system “must forever be destroyed.”<sup>52</sup> With no viable banks to provide paper currency, Whigs alleged the country was bound to remain trapped in economic turmoil.

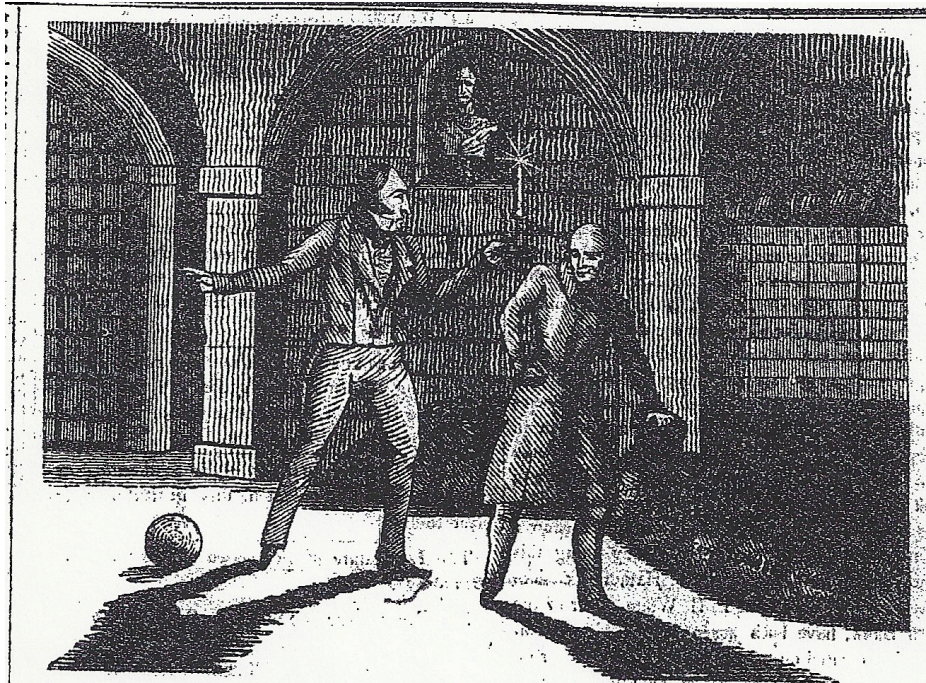
### **Support for Small Notes**

While the Whigs attacked the hard money policies of the Democrats, they presented their own positive vision for the government’s role in the economy. Rather than promote a divorce between government and banks, they insisted that government could intervene to promote economic growth. They hoped the government would improve public welfare by allowing banks and paper currency to expand. Democrats had long opposed issuing paper currency in small denominations, and Whigs latched onto the policy as a means of restoring credit while banks continued to refuse specie payments. On the state level, Whig electoral gains in the state legislature in 1838 gave the Whigs an opportunity to propose legislation permitting banks to issue currency in small denominations. Although the measure failed to pass the Senate, local Whig leaders in New York City championed the expansion of paper credit, and they used the issue to define themselves in opposition to the Democrats.

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<sup>51</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, September 26, 1837.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



### THE SUB-TREASURY.

The advantages of a Sub-Treasury are clearly manifest in the above. *Facilis descensus Avernus*, it is an easy thing to go down into the Sub-Treasury vault, provided as the lawyers say, you have the key of the pit. Here we have a representation of "THE TREASURY," by way of eminence, situated somewhere in Washington, near the President's House. It is allegorical, of course! Some ten millions of dollars are safely snug'd away, and the two worthies are making an evening call to see how things look by candle light. The following dramatic sketch explains the whole:—

The curtain draws: that is to say, a loco foco match has just supplied a candle with fire, the light of which discovers a *Magician* and a *Ball-roller* in a subterranean vault of the Treasury.

*Benton*.— Solitary and alone,  
Martin! you know I set this ball in motion—  
What though it be a humbug? while 'twas going,  
No one could read th' inscription. But methinks  
Now it has stop'd, there's no mistake. What say you?

*Martin*.—Worthy St. Lewis! thou hast done a deed  
That scourges my slow love—thou art a man  
Whom I have planted in the ample field  
Of my large bounty, where thy roots shall strike  
Watered by golden waves—come to this heart.  
I'll cherish thee, deep planted in my breast.

(*Benton throws himself into his arms, exclaiming*)

There if I grow—the harvest is thine own!

*Martin*.—Thou hast stolen that from Shakspeare!

*Benton*.— We came here

Only to steal—

*Martin*.—True! 'twas a foolish fancy!

Hold thou the light, St. Louis, while I steal.

*Benton*.—I cannot hold a candle to thee, Martin,

Alas! who can!

*Martin*.— St. Louis! lowliness

Is young ambition's ladder—throw it away—

My pockets are too small.

*Benton* (starting)—Art not afraid?

Methinks I hear the people!

*Martin*.— Blast the people!

(*The light goes out*)

Ah me, how often goodness wounds itself!

I raised the wind indeed, but when 'twas raised

It blew my light out.

*Benton*.—Kendall's at the door.

*Martin*.—Bring me some loco foco's! Where is  
Woodbury?

Oh would I were safe back at Kinderhook,

Eating Dutch herrings—Woodbury! I say—

Help! Kendall! Benton! any body! oh!

Ah! I smell brimstone—here are loco foco's.

(*Mephistopheles enters, and the scene closes.*)

Figure 1: This political cartoon from the *Courier* shows Martin Van Buren descending into the treasury under the cloak of night to steal gold from the people.

"*Courier and New York Enquirer*," February 12, 1838.

The Whig members of the Board of Aldermen repeatedly supported legislation permitting banks to issue small currency. Only days after banks in New York City suspended specie payments, the New York Chamber of Commerce appealed to the Common Council for the City of New York to issue its own currency. The petitioners encouraged the “Common Council to apply to the Legislature to enable the Corporation to issue notes and bills to the amount of \$1,000,000, not less than 50 cents, nor more than \$3.00, to be made payable at any of the incorporated banks.”<sup>53</sup> In this scheme, the Common Council would request permission from the state legislature to issue paper notes that individuals could redeem at local banks. The legislature would grant the city permission to issue \$1 million in currency consisting of bills worth less than \$3. By increasing the availability of currency, the Chamber of Commerce hoped to enhance access to credit and to revive economic activity.

While the Common Council did not consent to issuing its own currency, it supported the Chamber of Commerce’s desire to increase the circulation of small denomination bills. The Board of Aldermen’s Committee on Laws responded that only the state legislature possessed the authority to effectively increase the circulation of small currency. According to the committee’s report, Albany controlled the exclusive “authority, and undoubtedly the disposition, to meet the crisis effectually.”<sup>54</sup> They encouraged the legislature to augment paper currency through a “repeal of the restrictions upon the banks from issuing notes under five dollars, or by an issue of the obligation of the State itself, upon the faith and credit of the people, and for the relief of the people.”<sup>55</sup> The Board of Alderman objected to the Chamber’s request because it would be unfair for the City to assume all the risk of issuing debt. Nonetheless, the Whig Common Council supported the Chamber of Commerce’s stance that small bills would facilitate economic

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<sup>53</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, May 13, 1837.

<sup>54</sup> *Common Council Minutes, Board of Aldermen*, May 13, 1837.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

recovery, and they urged the Chamber to appeal to the legislature for a measure that would increase the circulation of small bills.

The Common Council received several other petitions encouraging the city to issue notes of small denomination. On July 5, 1837, the Common Council accepted a “petition of William J Morrison and a large number of other persons praying that the Common Council issue out small bills for the convenience of the citizens.”<sup>56</sup> Similar to its response to the Chamber of Commerce, the Committee on Laws claimed it could not issue small notes because of a state law that restricted the ability to issue paper currency to corporations explicitly created for banking purposes. Despite this legal constraint, the Committee maintained its support for small bills. The Whig Common Council declared that there is “no doubt that such a currency would greatly facilitate the operations of trade,” and that it was embarrassed “by the deficiency of small change.”<sup>57</sup> While the Board of Aldermen declined to circumvent state law, it voiced strong support for government intervention that would increase the exchange of small bills.

Echoing the calls of the Common Council, the Whig press emphasized the importance of small bank notes. When the New York State Legislature in 1838 considered legislation to allow banks to issue small bills, Whig editorialists rallied to its cause. According to the *Courier*, “the small bill law is the poor man’s only hope. If it should not pass, the spurious paper of the neighboring states will inundate us, for we must have such a currency.”<sup>58</sup> Repeating the call of the *Courier*, the Daily Whig argued that, “it is not a matter of opinion whether small bills shall be current here! It is one of necessity and the only question to be decided is, shall we have our own bills issued by solvent and responsible banks, or shall we submit to the degradation of using

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<sup>56</sup> *Common Council Minutes, Board of Aldermen*, July 5, 1837.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, January 23, 1838.

those of our neighbors, which are depreciated more or less and are so unsafe to us?”<sup>59</sup> Both the *Courier* and *Daily Whig* endorsed the importance of small bills and cited the perils of allowing notes from banks in other states to enter New York. Claiming that banks outside of the state had questionable reputations, they encouraged the legislature to permit reliable New York banks to issue their own currency to prevent dangerous out of state banks from flooding the Manhattan market.

Whigs claimed that Van Buren’s policies exacerbated the pressing need for small bills. According to the Whigs, if Van Buren’s sub treasury plan became law, the government would take possession of nearly all the country’s gold and silver. Without access to specie, the demand for currency in small denominations would surely burgeon. In the words of the *Courier*, “If Mr. Van Buren’s monstrous sub treasury plot goes into effect, gold and silver can never be a circulating medium, for it must be absorbed by the government and lost to the country. We would then require small bills even more than we do now. When will our currency tinkers learn wisdom? Should their last great scheme be carried out, a political revolution is inevitable.”<sup>60</sup> According to the *Daily Whig*, the sub treasury plan would increase demand for notes of small denomination because the amount of specie in circulation would dwindle. Because the government would lock in its vaults the country’s supply of silver and gold, people would require small bills to replace the missing specie, and the government would have an obligation to expand currency circulation.

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<sup>59</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 2, 1838.

<sup>60</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, January 23, 1838.

## Free Banking Law

In addition to promoting small bills, Whig assemblymen in the state legislature urged an expansion of banking, and their allies in Manhattan supported their efforts. With an influx of Whig assemblymen in the state legislature following the 1838 state elections, Whigs advanced reforms in Albany that would make it easier for banks to incorporate. Before 1838, banks had to receive a charter from the legislature in order to begin operations. The process of applying for a charter led to significant corruption as politicians traded votes for bribes.<sup>61</sup> With their newfound electoral success, the Whigs hoped for a bill that would allow the banking industry to grow while increasing government regulations that diminished corruption.

Reflecting their vision of an interventionist government and repelling the Loco Foco vision of the negative state, the Free Banking Law created a board of bank commissioners who would supervise banking activities. Instead of requiring banks to apply for charters, the law granted any group of individuals the right to incorporate as long as they maintained \$100,000 in reserve capital. According to Lee Benson, these measures collectively reflected the Whig's belief that

government intervention in the economy could foster equal opportunity and free enterprise. Instead of abdicating responsibility, as the Loco Focos and radical Democrats demanded, the state had a positive responsibility to act. It must regulate society as to promote general welfare, raise the level of opportunity for all men, and aid all individuals to develop their full potentials.<sup>62</sup>

While the Democrats opposed measures that would expand banking, the Whigs hoped that lower reserve requirements would make it easier for banks to form and that the expansion of banking would facilitate economic recovery. Not only would these measures increase economic dynamism, it would further the Whig's ideological commitment to programs that aided the entire citizenry.

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<sup>61</sup> Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 97–102.

<sup>62</sup> Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*, 103.

During the 1838 legislative session, the *Courier* supported Whig attempts in Albany to pass the Free Banking Law. The Whig newspaper reflected a concern that granting banks charters with rights similar to a monopoly contradicted basic liberal values of equality. Instead of allowing banks to receive charters that granted them exclusive franchise, it encouraged a system of minimum capital requirements. According to the *Courier*, “Our solicitude for the fate of the banks themselves arises from no wish to perpetuate their exclusive franchises. We are decidedly hostile to that feature, as both unjust and absurd; as contrary to every principle of political liberty as it is to those of sound political economy.”<sup>63</sup> In an attack against the monopolistic character of bank charters, the *Courier* editorialized that “the monopoly was a violation of every sound principle of legislation of republicanism, and yet as long as we had a Loco Foco Assembly, it was impossible to correct this evil.”<sup>64</sup> Because the bill replaced legislative bank charters with minimum capital requirements, the *Courier* claimed the bill would eliminate monopolistic tendencies and encourage universal opportunity.

After the legislature successfully passed banking reform, the *Courier* expressed its satisfaction in strengthening the financial system. Among a list of accolades that the *Courier* lavished on the Free Banking Law, its authors praised the bill for throwing “open the business of banking authorizing associations under a general law, thus relieving the great interest of the odious features of monopoly, which had so long embarrassed and restricted it.”<sup>65</sup> In addition to supporting the anti-monopoly feature of the legislation, the *Courier* admired that the bill would diminish the corruption that had characterized the earlier bank charter system. According to the *Courier*, “there will be no partition of stock and charters among an ascendant faction-no more opportunity of corrupt influence and profligate distribution-but the People will be incalculably

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<sup>63</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, August 34, 1837.

<sup>64</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 6, 1838.

<sup>65</sup> *Courier and NY Enquirer*, March 21, 1838.

the gainers.”<sup>66</sup> By eliminating appeals for individual charters, the bank reform bill would significantly reduce corruption in Albany and strengthen the banking industry.

In contrast to the Whig’s unrestrained support for the Free Banking Law, Manhattan Democrats voiced disappointment over a supposedly partisan Whiggish measure. According to the Democratic *New York Evening Post*, because the legislation “was framed in a Whig House of Assembly, it was not concocted by the wisest heads in the world.” The *Evening Post* disapproved of several components of the bill, and it voiced dismay that the bill would create a board of supervisors to regulate banking. In a list of the bill’s flaws, it wrote that, “Another defect is that by substituting an artificial, official, and therefore imperfect supervision of the banking associations, for the more jealous and clear sighted vigilance of private interest.” Because the bill established an official bank oversight board, the *Evening Post* asserted that, “it will keep the persons engaged in banking in too close and dangerous a dependence on the legislature.” In addition to reprimanding the legislature’s regulatory authority, they opposed measures in the law that allowed banks to maintain capital in paper currency instead of specie. Objecting to the legislation’s support for paper bills, the *Evening Post* editorialized that the bill “does not allow the greatest of all restrains on excessive paper issues to operate.” Given its numerous objections to the bill, the *Evening Post* unsurprisingly claimed that, “it is very clear to us that the bill must hereafter undergo much amendment.”<sup>67</sup> Because the bill challenged the Democratic vision of a negative state with a policy that encouraged banking and paper currency, the Democrats had difficulty supporting the legislation.

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> *New York Evening Post*, March 20, 1838.

## **Conclusion**

During the panic years of 1837-1839, the Whig establishment in New York City supported policies that allowed the government to promote a recovery and to instill republican virtues. Whigs opposed Van Buren's attempts to weaken the banking industry and paper currency because the President's policies contradicted their republican conviction that government should promote programs that helped all Americans, not just Democratic party loyalists. To heal the economy and to help the entire nation, the Common Council encouraged an expansion of paper currency in small denominations, and Whig journalists encouraged Albany's attempts to strengthen the banking system. Together, these policies reflected Whiggery's dedication to advancing economic welfare through republican ideals.

## **Chapter II**

### **Internal Improvements: Growth and Greater Employment**

A transportation revolution swept the country during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and New York led the national movement to improve the country's infrastructure. Governor DeWitt Clinton opened the floodgates of transportation innovation with the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. The engineering marvel traversed 363 miles of wilderness and allowed New York's merchants to trade with the furthest reaches of the American frontier. Soon after the development of canals, railroads again transformed American transportation. The French traveler Michel Chavelier observed that, "The American has a perfect passion for railroads. He loves them...as a lover loves his mistress."<sup>68</sup> Matching its leadership in canal construction, the Empire State was at the forefront of developing railroads. The Long Island Rail Road received a charter in 1834, speeding travel between New York and Boston, and the New York and Erie line further connected New York's merchants to the larger nation. New York City itself also experienced a transportation revolution. The New York and Harlem Rail Road won a charter in 1831, and, by 1838, it was possible to travel from City Hall to Harlem for 25 cents.<sup>69</sup> With railroads and canals

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<sup>68</sup> Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 25–26.

<sup>69</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 564–567.

crisscrossing the nation, Gotham's entrepreneurs could reach countless new customers, allowing them to ride the transportation revolution to new heights of commercial success.

Support for railroads and canals comprised an integral element of the Whig's ideological commitment to economic and social improvement. In Gotham, local Whigs encouraged the state and city to finance internal improvements that would facilitate growth and offer opportunities to the unemployed. According to the Whigs, "private capital was too small and fragmented to finance economic development."<sup>70</sup> As the representative of the people, the Whigs claimed that the national government should promote prosperity through "railroad corporations that could pool capital and thus accomplish tasks beyond the capacity of individual actors."<sup>71</sup> New York's Whigs insisted that the government blaze a path towards economic recovery, and they considered infrastructure programs an important instrument in facilitating commercial expansion.

### **Support for State Action**

After the Whigs took a majority of the statehouse in 1838, Albany's Whigs passed several measures encouraging internal improvements, and the local Manhattan party supported their efforts. In 1838, the state legislature approved a bill to expand funding to the New York and Erie Railroad by \$3,000,000. Two years later, in 1840, as one of his first acts of governor, the Whig William Henry Seward approved \$6.5 million in bonds for railroads and canals.<sup>72</sup> Local Whig activists and journalists praised these state actions. Referring to the expansion of the New York and Erie Railroad, the *New York Daily Whig* remarked that, "There is no public work now contemplated in the state which should be pushed forward with greater energy than this," and that, "the construction of this great railway is calculated to improve New York more than any

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<sup>70</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 69.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 78.

work which has been undertaken since the Erie Canal.”<sup>73</sup> A meeting of merchants in New York City voiced similar approbation for the legislature’s activity. In a resolution, the group declared that it was “deeply impressed with the necessity of hastening the completion of these works of internal improvement within this state.”<sup>74</sup> As the Whigs came to power in the New York statehouse, railroad construction became a legislative priority, and the Whigs of New York City supported the statewide crusade.

Similar to the contemporary liberal impulse to use infrastructure programs to increase employment during a recession, the Whigs supported railroads as a way to raise employment in the wake of the Panic. According to the *Daily Whig*, internal improvements “will give business to an immense number of laborers and mechanics who are now suffering for their daily food. The state can thus give employment to thousands who are almost starving in our streets from absolute want.”<sup>75</sup> The *Daily Whig* also connected internal improvements to Van Buren’s destructive currency policies. According to the paper, “We have no currency, and the credit of the commonwealth for the present is the only source for the poor.”<sup>76</sup> Because of Van Buren’s policies, paper notes were nearly worthless. The only source of credit for the poor was the credit of the government, and the *Daily Whig* encouraged internal improvements in order to offer the unemployed a financial lifeboat. The *Courier* similarly supported internal improvements because of the employment it would offer the underprivileged. According to the *Courier*, internal improvements were “all valuable investments for the state—all furnishing the employment of thousands of laborers—all sustaining the industry, stimulating the enterprise, developing the

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<sup>73</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 23, 1838.

<sup>74</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, November 4, 1837.

<sup>75</sup> *New York Daily Whig*, February 23, 1838.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

resources, and augmenting the wealth of the state.”<sup>77</sup> With almost no access to work or credit, the Whigs encouraged the government to increase employment opportunities in order to facilitate economic recovery and to help the unemployed find jobs.

Local Whig activists supported railroads from a similar conviction that government should not stand idly by in the midst of an economic crisis. A meeting of Whigs at the Masonic Hall in 1838 supported internal improvements because they were “calculated to develop the resources, revive the energies, expand the power, and promote the prosperity of the State.”<sup>78</sup> By intervening in the economy to promote growth, the government would not only help the railroad companies and their owners but “the agriculturalist, the laborer, the merchant, and the mechanic.”<sup>79</sup> A meeting of Whigs in the seventeenth ward supported legislation to expand railroads that would give “to the people all the relief in their power and in giving forward measure of internal improvement calculated to add to the greatness and develop the vast resources of the whole state.”<sup>80</sup> For the Whigs of New York City, the government had an important responsibility to help the economy realize its full potential, and they recognized that promoting economic development would help New Yorkers stay afloat amidst the recession.

On the local level, budget shortfalls restricted New York City’s budget, but the Whigs nonetheless supported internal improvements. In December 1838, local New Yorkers appealed to the Common Council requesting support for a railroad between New York City and Albany. Although the state legislature was responsible for funding such a program, the group asked the Common Council to submit a letter of support to the statehouse. In response, the Common Council enthusiastically endorsed the measure and wrote that, “the completion of such a rail road

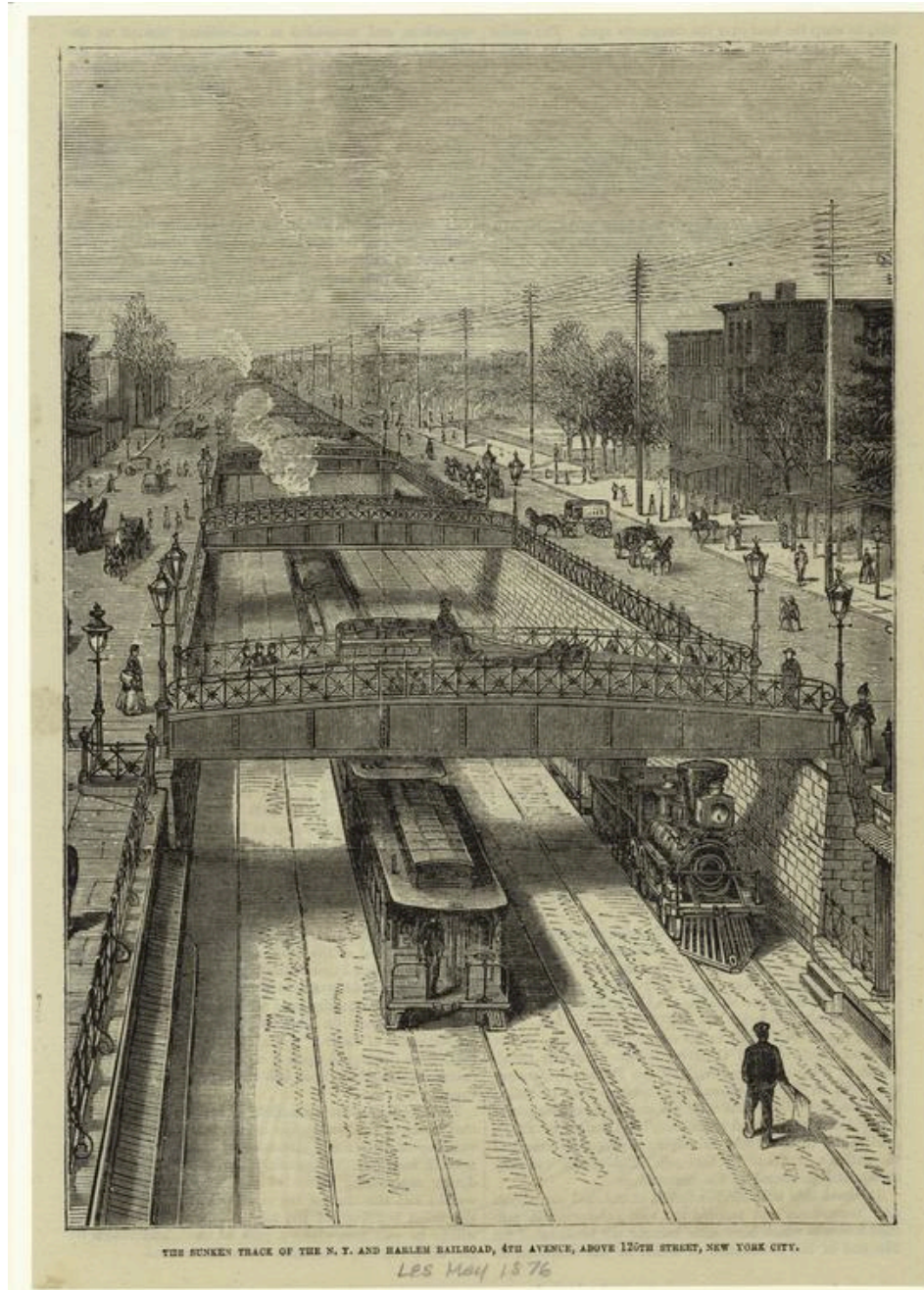
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<sup>77</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, April 21, 1838.

<sup>78</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 22, 1838.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 22, 1838.



**Figure 2: The sunken track of the N.Y. and Harlem Railroad, 4th Avenue, above 126th Street, New York City.**

**Pictured above in 1876, the N.Y. and Harlem Railroad came about as part of the Whig's dedication to internal improvements.**

**New York Public Library, Mid-Manhattan Picture Collection, Record ID: 705957**

will be attended with great benefits.”<sup>81</sup> Because of the economic growth the railroad would make possible, the Common Council “recommends the same to the consideration of this State, as worthy of legislative aid and encouragement.”<sup>82</sup> The Common Council realized that “it may be difficult to procure capital” for the railroad, but the public interest that the railroad would bring about led them to endorse the project from the conviction that the government had a responsibility to foster prosperity when private investments proved deficient.

### **Local Improvements**

Beyond the state level, the Common Council supported internal improvements within the municipality. The most significant such program was the Croton Aqueduct, the construction of which represented a significant dedication to using the government’s funds for economic interests. The Croton Aqueduct gained legislative approval in 1834 and passed a city referendum in 1835. To finance the project, the state issued an initial grant of \$2.5 million in stock, and the city requested a series of additional appropriations during the Panic that would bring the project’s total cost to \$12 million. Although the Panic choked off most sources of credit, the state’s sterling credit based on the success of the Erie Canal allowed investors to quickly accumulate the capital needed to finance the project. Construction began in earnest during the Panic of 1837 and concluded in 1842.<sup>83</sup>

With the project’s completion, New York had accomplished one of the greatest engineering achievements of the century. The project’s technical dimensions convey its historic extent. A dam on the lower Croton River established a reservoir containing 500 million gallons of water, and “an unpressurized conduit of brick and masonry, averaging 7.5 feet (2.3 meters)

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<sup>81</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, December 31, 1838.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 625–626.

wide and (2.6 meters) high,” led the water to the city.<sup>84</sup> Upon reaching Manhattan, the water continued to a 150-million-gallon receiving reservoir on the area that would become Central Park between 79<sup>th</sup> and 86<sup>th</sup> streets. Next, a distributing reservoir on the grounds of today’s New York Public Library led to a network of cast iron pipes that provided water at a daily capacity of 90 million gallons.<sup>85</sup> For the next century, Gotham would enjoy the best big-city aqueduct system on earth.

Although the planning of the aqueduct preceded the Panic of 1837, construction increased during the economic crisis in order to provide more employment. In a report to the Common Council reviewing the progress of the project, the committee reported that there was a significant increase in those working to excavate and cut open land. The Council attributed this to “the pressure of the times, which brought forward a great number of laborers seeking employment.”<sup>86</sup> In response to the masses of unemployed seeking assistance and “to meet this emergency, permission was given to proceed with this description of labor, in order that as many of these people as practicable might be employed, rather than confine the contractors to the more important mechanical operations, on which only few comparatively could be engaged.”<sup>87</sup> For the promoters of the aqueduct, the program represented an opportunity for the government to provide work to those struggling to obtain employment. It allowed the government to create the foundation for future economic growth in the city and to help those struggling in the city at the time of the project’s construction.

Although the New York City Whigs supported internal improvements, the Common Council did not always support government spending aimed at increasing employment. In April

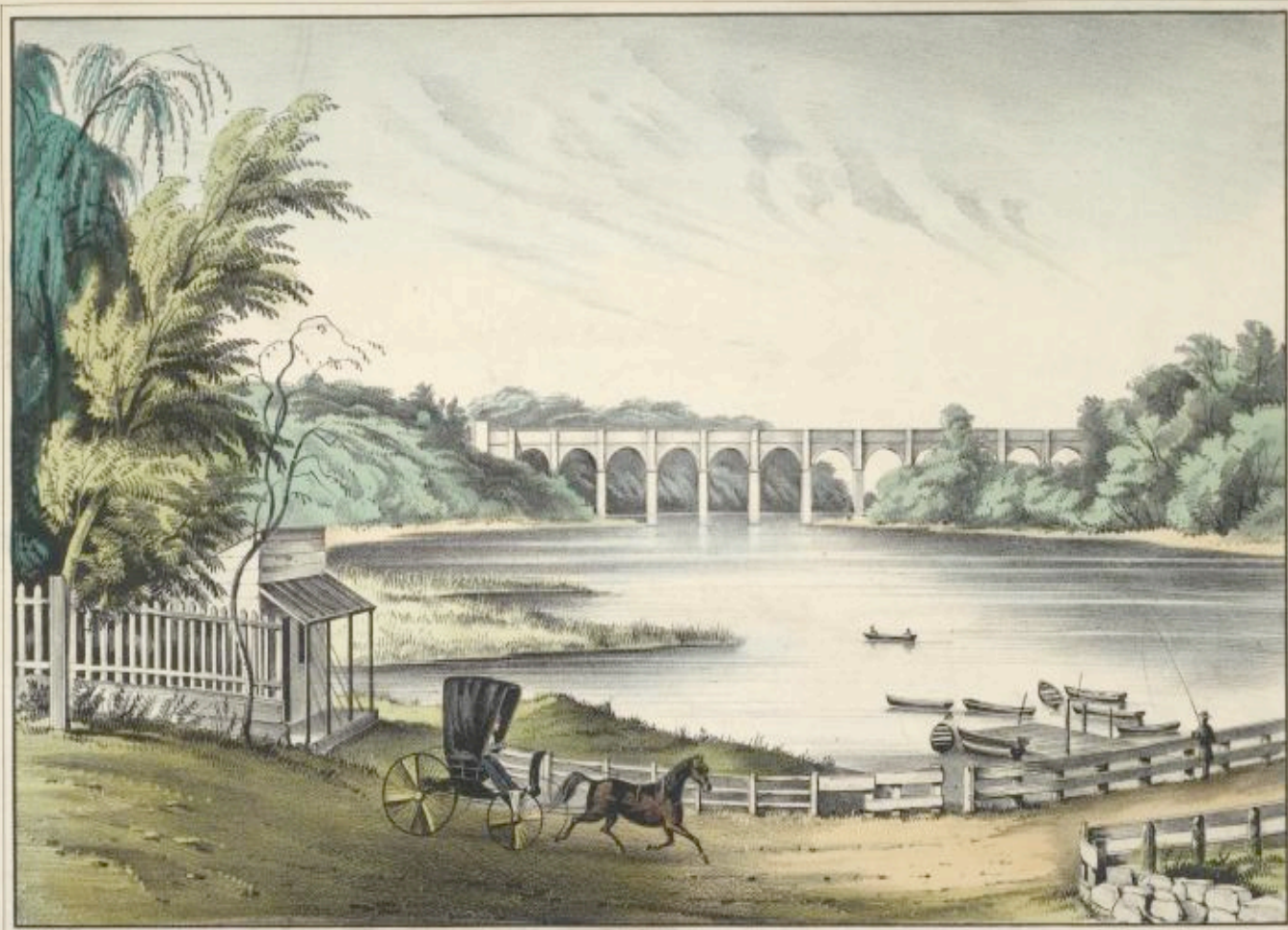
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<sup>84</sup> Jackson, “The Encyclopedia of New York City,” 332–333.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, January 3, 1838.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



174 1/2 PER. BY H. CUPPERS.

Engraving of the High Bridge at Harlem, N.Y. in the year 1826 by H. Cuppers in New York after a drawing by the Architect James H. Rensselaer.

THE HIGH BRIDGE AT HARLEM, N.Y.

Length 1450 ft.

### THE HIGH BRIDGE AT HARLEM, N.Y.

Height 114 ft.

*This magnificent bridge of stone, forms a part of the immense works erected to bring the water of the Croton river to the City of New York. — The length of the aqueduct from the Croton river to the City Hall, is 44 1/2 miles, and cost about \$43,000,000. ...*

179

**Figure 3: Length 1450 ft. The High Bridge at Harlem, N.Y. Height 114 ft.**

**Reflecting an incredible engineering achievement, the above bridge brought the Croton Aqueduct's water to Manhattan.**

**New York Public Library, Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art. Record ID: 1788309**

1838, the Common Council recommended against applying to the state legislature for a loan of \$500,000 for the support of internal improvements. According to the Common Council, “This is rather an inauspicious time to create more city debt than is absolutely necessary.”<sup>88</sup> Despite opposing the proposed loan, the Common Council did not reject the initiative because it opposed internal improvements. The Council supported infrastructure programs but indicated that the city’s weak pecuniary standing prevented a loan of such magnitude. As the construction of the Croton Aqueduct suggests, the Whig Common Council supported internal improvements but worried that the Panic created a discouraging environment for excessive city debt.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the Panic of 1837, New York City Whigs considered internal improvements an essential tool in facilitating recovery and increasing employment. Although the Common Council did not always have the financial means or the legal authority to approve of large-scale infrastructure programs, Whig journalists and local activists endorsed internal improvements on both the local and state level. Whig support for railroads, canals, and the Croton Aqueduct relied on the position that the government should play an active role in guiding economic development and in creating opportunities for the unemployed. By encouraging internal improvements, the Whigs built upon their ideological commitment to a positive government involved in promoting commercial growth.

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<sup>88</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, April 16, 1838.

## **Chapter III**

### **Aid to the Poor: Fusing Public Assistance with Republicanism**

Before Manhattan's banks officially suspended specie payment in May 1837, New York had been reeling under the strain of an inflationary spiral, and a surge in prices for daily necessities led to violence on the evening of February 8, 1837. Since December, the price for flour had soared from \$4.87 to \$12.00 per barrel, and the price of pork had climbed from \$13.00 per barrel to \$24.50. As a sheet of snow and ice covered the city, a discontented group of 5,000 New Yorkers met in City Hall Park to demand "BREAD, MEAT, RENT, FUEL! THEIR PRICES MUST COME DOWN!" Speakers blamed landlords and merchants for "the outrageous price of shelter and provisions," and one fiery orator roused the protestors to pillage the warehouse of Eli Hart and Company, one of the largest flour producers in the city. Violence seemed imminent as the rioters met the barricades outside Hart's store. When the Mayor arrived to restore calm, he was "shouted down, barraged with stones, and compelled to retreat for his

life.” After entering Hart’s warehouse, the rioters “smashed desks and scattered papers,” and “hurled hundreds of barrels of flour and sacks of wheat to the street below.”<sup>89</sup>

While violent reactions to economic despair may not have been a daily occurrence in Gotham, discontent over the market revolutions of the 19<sup>th</sup> century dominated the era. Before an economic reordering accelerated capitalist changes in production, many Americans worked as apprentices in the same home as an established artisan and learned skills that would allow them to gain independence as a journeyman and eventually as a master craftsman. With advances in the availability of credit and transportation, ambitious middlemen could purchase large quantities of supplies and produce goods in bulk. Instead of relying on a single artisan to create a product from start to finish, entrepreneurs would “break up each job into its component tasks, and assign each to a different, poorly skilled worker.”<sup>90</sup> Apprentices who once expected to gain their own shop after a designated period of training gathered into overcrowded neighborhoods, unable to compete with large-scale producers. Failing to overcome changing economic tides, thousands of artisans became permanent wage earners. Without the certainty of being one’s own master, “crises were woven into the working class experience, and periods of unemployment were normal.”<sup>91</sup> People could no longer expect financial security, and the “working class experience [became] a continuum [where] no clear line separated the respectable poor from paupers.”<sup>92</sup> As independent producers lost their place in the marketplace, fiscal uncertainty became a permanent feature of working life in New York City.

In response to growing financial insecurity, the Whigs urged the government to ameliorate poverty among those who merited help. When the Whigs controlled the mayoralty

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<sup>89</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 609–611.

<sup>90</sup> Watson, *Liberty and Power*, 30.

<sup>91</sup> Michael B. Katz, *In the Shadow Of the Poorhouse: A Social History Of Welfare In America, Tenth Anniversary Edition*, Second Edition (Basic Books, 1996), 10.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

and the Common Council, they advocated expanding the almshouse facilities, the public hospital, and the insane asylum. Yet, they made significant exceptions to their vision of who deserved the government's support. They did not believe that immigrants or those who abstained from work qualified for public assistance. Instead, they constructed their notion of public alms from within their ideological commitment to Christian moral virtue, hard work, and independence. The programs that they supported sought to educate their beneficiaries about the value of Christian morality and the benefits that industry could deliver. Their vision included an active role for the government in promoting a certain moral outlook, and they hoped that the government's involvement in fostering a moral community and helping those who deserved aid could diminish poverty over time.

### **Support for Reform in the 1837 Campaign**

During the 1837 mayoral campaign, the *Courier* demanded reforms in the almshouse department that would improve the negligent condition of those who received aid. Linking the need to help the poor to the democratic principle of equality, a meeting of Whigs at the Masonic Hall declared that, "The public charities of our city have been cramped in their operation by a heartless policy demanding the interference of every elector who regards our privileges as equal."<sup>93</sup> By explicitly connecting economic justice to equality, the Whig activists suggested that democratic and equal rights required fair treatment of those in need. Although the Whigs believed that government should treat the poor with dignity, they blamed the Democrats for decay in the almshouse. Exposing the supposed incompetence of Democratic appointed commissioners, the Whig convention wrote that, "Institutions for the accommodation of the poor and sick have been placed under the charge of individuals known to be unfit for their stations in

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<sup>93</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 29, 1837.

any sense.”<sup>94</sup> Because of the commissioners’ ineffectiveness, “the pains of unfortunate inmates have sounded through our city.”<sup>95</sup> For local Whig politicians, the state of the almshouse was embarrassing and required reform. Under proper leadership, the almshouse could allow the government to be a vehicle for fighting poverty, and the Whigs encouraged voters to support their crusade to improve the distribution of public welfare.

Besides calling for general improvements to the almshouse, the Whigs advocated the specific reform of the insane asylum. The Whigs, reflecting the British Elizabethan poor laws, distinguished between deserving and undeserving poor, and they considered the mentally and physically ill patients at Bellevue Hospital worthy of aid because they had no way to support themselves.<sup>96</sup> According to the *Courier*, the inmates at Bellevue were “the most unfortunate of all our race, dependent upon accommodations, in the miserable constructed and crowded insane Hospital at Bellevue, totally unfit for the required purposes and all this from party opposition and want of feeling for the poor.”<sup>97</sup> In addition to abandoning the physically ill, the *Courier* wrote that, “the most gross outrage upon humanity in this department has been the abandonment of proper provision for the insane.”<sup>98</sup> Once in office, the Whigs hoped to continue “the erection of a noble edifice on Blackwell’s Island began and continued after great reflection and investigation of plans under the last Whig administration.”<sup>99</sup> The insane represented the most vulnerable members of society because they had no meaningful path to independence. Because they lacked the ability for productive work, the government had a responsibility to care for them, and the Whigs urged the construction of additional facilities that would alleviate their suffering.

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<sup>94</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, March 29, 1837.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Katz, *In the Shadow Of the Poorhouse*, 14.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

## Clark's Ambivalence

Although Whig activists called for reform of the almshouse during the election, upon coming into office, Whig Mayor Aaron Clark identified the almshouse as an area where the government could find savings. In a letter written to the Common Council shortly after taking office, Clark indicated that, "In the year 1830, only \$135,021.66 were expended for the Alms House, Bridewell, and the Penitentiary, but in the year 1836, [the city spent] for the same object, \$178,430.88 besides donations of \$5,000 to private associations."<sup>100</sup> Although Clark advocated a reduction in spending, he emphasized that these reductions resulted from the poor pecuniary condition of the city during the economic crisis. Claiming that the city's economic condition prevented the same level of funding for the almshouse, Clark wrote, "The coming winter will find our citizens not less charitable in feeling, but far less able than formerly,"<sup>101</sup> to continue funding charitable societies at the same level as had previously been the case. While Clark continued to recognize the importance of programs that would help the poor, he acknowledged that the city's unfavorable economic condition would restrict the city's ability to fund relief programs.

After Clark's reelection in 1838, his annual letter to the Common Council expressed continued concern about the growing expenses of the almshouse. Clark conveyed a fear that generous aid would attract poor immigrants to New York. Concluding that the city's aid to the poor would attract hordes of immigrants, he wrote that, "It is certain that the *Poor laws* regarding this city require revision. As they now are, New York is likely to become the general rendezvous of beggars, paupers, vagrants, and mischievous persons. It is very natural that they should prefer

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<sup>100</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen, May 22, 1837.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

a place where, as they learn, charitable support is most easably obtained.”<sup>102</sup> Clark’s opposition to almshouse spending was inextricably linked to his disdain for immigrants. With thousands of immigrants coming to New York City every year, Clark did not want generous almshouse policies to offer an incentive for poor immigrants to travel to the United States. While Clark recognized the importance of the almshouse department generally, he did not want it to become a safe haven for foreigners that he alleged did not work, did not value the importance of labor, and expected to survive on the toils of others.

When it came to supporting relief for natives, Clark was more generous. He hoped that public welfare for natives would diminish poverty over time, which would in turn reduce government spending on the poor. Clark believed that providing work to the impoverished would provide them the skills that would allow them to attain independence, and so he proclaimed that, “the establishment of a Workhouse is daily becoming more necessary,” and he supported building a new almshouse on either Blackwell or Randall’s Island. These measures, Clark claimed, would allow spending over time, “to be diminished or at least prevented from being increased.”<sup>103</sup> Despite Clark’s callous treatment of immigrants, he supported building a workhouse and a new almshouse for the native poor. Moreover, Clark likely hoped that a workhouse would teach paupers the skills of a trade and allow the poor to gain independence, thereby diminishing demand for public welfare.

### **Report on the Almshouse**

Despite Clark’s apprehension that almshouse spending would attract poor and idle immigrants, the Common Council called for a thorough investigation of the almshouse soon after

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<sup>102</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*. May 14, 1838

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

the Whigs triumphed at the municipal elections in 1837. The report details the horrific living conditions of the most defenseless citizens of New York City. Reflecting the *Courier's* accusations during the election, the report shows that the commissioners of the almshouse exhibited gross negligence in their treatment of the poor, infirm, and insane individuals who sought the government's protection. According to the *Courier*, the report showed "the pretended regard of the Tammany office holders to the welfare of the poorer classes. Never, we venture to say, has a picture of such cruel inhumanity been held up to a civilized community."<sup>104</sup> Besides documenting the poor condition of Manhattan's most at risk citizens, the report calls for concrete steps that would allow the government to increase its care for the vulnerable.

The Committee for the Almshouse described in vivid detail the dereliction of the institution. Upon visiting the "colored portion" of the almshouse, the committee observed, "an exhibition of squalid misery and its concomitants, never witnessed by your Commissioners in any public receptacle, for even the most abandoned dregs of human society."<sup>105</sup> They described "a scene of neglect, and filth and putrefaction and vermin. The air seeming to carry poison with every breath. It was a scene, the recollections of which, are too sickening to describe." After depicting in general terms the almshouse's unsanitary condition, the committee recounted particular cases of abandonment. According to the report, "There were no arrangements for cleansing and washing paupers when they were received, and the bathing house, at the dock, was used as a privy." When asked to review an inventory, the superintendant of the almshouse said, "it is useless to make one, for there is nothing to inventory." Lacking the most basic supplies of coal, corn meal, flour and potatoes, the almshouse was ill equipped to service the city's impoverished citizenry.

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<sup>104</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, November 8, 1837.

<sup>105</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all of the quotes in this section through page 50 come from the same document and report: "Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen," May 22, 1837.

In addition to criticizing the almshouse, the commissioners delivered a scathing report of Bellevue Hospital. In general, the commissioners claimed that, “the condition of the Bellevue Hospital was such as to excite feeling of the most poignant sympathy for its neglected inmates.” They remarked that, “The hospital was in a condition manifesting great neglect and indifference towards its miserable inmates, and calculated from its filthy state and neglect of ventilation, to produce contagion, unless immediately cleansed and purified.” In addition, the report described particular instances where the hospital had failed. According to the commissioners, “The sick rooms had not been washed since 1835. The clothing of persons who had died was found in an uncleaned state; patients seriously ill were without garments used next to the skin, and females were seen in a high stage of fever with their nakedness only hidden by a dirty blanket. It was a scene degrading to human nature.” For the Whig commissioners, human nature demanded a certain level of dignity, and the government had a responsibility help the vulnerable live in a respectable manner. Yet, the hospital’s dilapidated condition neglected the city’s duty to help the defenseless pursue a life of self-respect.

Besides Bellevue and the almshouse, another critical component of public relief involved a lunatic asylum. Of course, the commissioners described it in bleak terms. According to the report, “Common fame has made proverbial the wretched unfitnes” of the lunatic asylum. The city’s refuge for the mentally ill was “a witness of the blind infatuation of prejudice and miscalculation; affording to a class more deserving commiseration than any other among the afflicted catalogue of humanity, a miserable refuge of their trials, undeserving of the name of an ‘asylum.’” The commissioners considered the insane particularly deserving of relief because they had no means of supporting themselves. Lunatics could not attain independence through hard work, and, as a result, the Whigs were willing to support them. Given the importance of helping

the insane, the report declared that, “No portion of the public charge calls more imperiously for the proper disbursement of money and the vigorous exercise of talent than this.” They celebrated that, “The progress of science and the march of true philanthropy,” have led people to reject “the exercise of brutal severity towards a manic.” Instead, the committee advocated the effectiveness of the “application of medical and moral curatives.” The Whigs supported aid to the insane because they were not able to work, and they hoped that moral education would help alleviate their burdens.

In all three departments of the almshouse, the commissioners observed dangerous overcrowding, and they recommended that the city allocate funds to construct additional facilities. According to the report, “at this point in time, there is not room for new inmates, except as beds are vacated by disease or discharge.” The report ascribed this overcrowding to “want of present employment for the producing classes together with the excessive emigration from Europe.” Given the surge of those seeking public assistance, the report indicated that, “it will be impossible to relieve indoors the wants of threatening pauperism, when the cold season arrives. This will necessarily lead to heavy expenditures for out-door relief.” To solve the problem of overcrowding, the committee proposed constructing an additional hospital, insane asylum, and a house of industry for the poor. According to the commissioners, “Completion of the Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell’s Island is forthwith required for the decent accommodation of paupers,” and that, “It is a matter of course that simultaneously with the erection of a hospital, in the immediate vicinity must begun the construction of an almshouse also if the wants of the city are to be provided for.” For the Whigs, the government had a duty to care for the deserving poor, and they were willing to support this conviction with concrete funding to expand the almshouse establishment.

Although the Committee proposed constructing additional almshouse establishments, reflecting a concern that some Americans still feel today, they feared that aid to the poor would make people dependent on the government. Describing their plans to construct new structures to support the poor, the Committee wrote, “In exterior appearance they should not resemble palaces for the poor that invite by their grandeur, the lazy dependent who prefers a shilling given to a shilling earned.” Attempting to strike a balance between helping the poor and creating dependency, the committee cited its “duty to make provision for the demands of law and humanity; affording the necessaries, but not the luxuries of life, lest they prove ‘a premium to sloth and idleness.’” The Whigs maintained an ideological commitment to the importance of work and industry, and the Whig Common Council proposed that the new almshouse facilities administer programs that would train inmates in a trade. Discussing their plan for a new almshouse, the committee proposed that, “When it shall be determined to erect proper buildings for pauper purposes, we trust that some portion of them will be devoted to the proper objects of a workhouse.” In addition to promoting a workhouse at a new almshouse, the committee suggested that beneficiaries of city assistance work to support the department’s expenses. The committee proposed “an application to the Legislature, for the passage of an act authorizing the Commissioners at their discretion, to retain at labor, those who become a charge.” While the committee proposed building additional structures to support the poor, they committed themselves to a program that would encourage the value of labor over dependency.

In addition to promoting industry among adult beneficiaries of city relief, the Whigs supported a program called the Long Island Farms that brought orphans and children from poor working families to a nursery in present day Queens. From the time the Common Council established the program in 1836 to its closing in 1847, around 600 children lived at the Farms at

any one time. The Public School Society, a largely Protestant school organization that would develop into New York's public school system, offered classes at the farm for the children. In addition to indigent youth, a smaller number of adult almshouse dependents worked the 230-acre tract to provide food for the almshouse and to "absorb the benefits of hard labor."<sup>106</sup> The Farms was far from a model institution. The organization rarely had enough supplies, and, in 1846, a dangerous eye infection spread through the quarters. Tellingly, when the program closed in 1847, its neighbors burned it to the ground.<sup>107</sup>

Despite the poor condition of the Long Island Farms, the Whigs hoped that the program would be an effective means of reducing poverty because it would teach children the value of Christian and republican virtues. Comparing the Long Island Farms to other relief programs, the committee wrote that the program, "rightly administered, will contribute more than any other to ameliorate and improve the condition of the poor, and it will be incumbent on us to provide the necessary supplies." Allegedly, the program represented effective public policy because it taught children religious and moral values. Whig ideology reserved a prominent place for the importance of moral principles and religious duty, and they interpreted Christian values as a remedy for poverty. The commissioners claimed that, "the strongest barrier for youth against the moral degradation consequent upon pauperism or bad example are the principles implanted in a course of education, attended with the inculcation of moral and religious principles as the basis of all action." Without the moral training that children would receive at the Farms, indigent youth were liable to suffer from "persons who evade the obligations of moral and mental instruction and leave them at a majority prey to the consequences of ignorance." Although poverty could lead people to devalue the importance of labor, the Whigs hoped to dispel the

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<sup>106</sup> Julie Miller, *Abandoned: Foundlings in Nineteenth-Century New York City* (NYU Press, 2008), 71.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 71–76.

moral perils of poverty by inculcating children with a devotion to independence, which would place the children on a road towards financial wellbeing.

In addition to promoting Christian values among children, the Whigs supported programs to rehabilitate criminals based on the conviction that moral education could prevent crime and diminish poverty. According to the commission, “A high estimate of the ordinances of Christianity will induce them to continue a course, which if it should not happily produce reform among individuals, tends, in a very great degree, to the preservation of order and discipline, and discharges the imperative duty of using the means of teaching the only path to happiness and heaven.” For the Whig commissioners, Christian virtues were indispensable to a life of disciplined hard work. By promoting Christian values among the recipients of city aid, the commissioners hoped that, “the foundation of much good may be laid, which followed up by counsel in private will leave the hope of a reformation, and a return to the proper duties of life.” Whig ideology encouraged Americans to espouse traditional values in the midst of the emerging market economy, and they insisted that a Christian dedication to labor was an effective antidote to poverty.

### **Private Charities and Donations**

The Whig’s emphasis on labor made them reluctant to support private charities whose work supposedly weakened individuals’ incentive to earn their own living. In 1838, the Common Council reexamined its long-standing tradition of donating to private charities because they feared that the benevolence of many organizations encouraged people to survive by accepting alms. According to the Committee on the Almshouse, “These charitable societies diminish the industry and economy of the poor. The great stimulus of the fear of want and suffering is taken

away, or lessened by the knowledge such societies exist, and have made provision for their relief.”<sup>108</sup> With the knowledge that a charity will care for them regardless of their exertions, “they soon find it more agreeable to trust to the assistance of these societies than to rely upon irksome measure of labor and prudently built self-denying economy. The large number of such societies affords them a facility of practicing what may be fairly denominated frauds.”<sup>109</sup>

According to the Whigs, a person could attain success through hard work and financial prudence. These attributes required a person to follow a disciplined lifestyle. If someone had the physical ability to work but chose not to, the Whigs would consider him a degenerate unworthy of support. The report concluded, “that the Common Council should discontinue their donations to charitable societies,” and, instead, the Council encouraged people to attain independence through industry and economy.

Although the Common Council suspended payments to private charities because most members believed that such organizations diminished the incentive to work, they continued to support organizations that helped individuals unable to provide for themselves. While the Common Council reduced its donations to most charitable societies, it continued to donate funds to the New York Dispensary, which provided medical assistance to the poor. The Council expressed confidence “in the good management of the New York Dispensary,” and praised the “advantages to be derived from well conducted Dispensaries generally, inasmuch as the relief granted by them is confined to the indigent sick and not subjected to the abuses that attach to most other charities.”<sup>110</sup> Support for the Dispensary reflected the Whig defense of aid to the insane: both the physically and mentally ill had some sort of disability that could explain their poor condition. Their poverty did not result from a choice to avoid industry, but was the outcome

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<sup>108</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, January 15, 1838.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, April 22, 1838

of a natural handicap. Rather than diminish the incentive to work by offering handouts, the charity offered medical support to the infirm.

Similar to the exception made for the Dispensary, the Common Council on occasion donated funds to individuals who could not work. In October 1837, the Common Council supported a widow in her request for financial assistance. Her late husband was a firefighter, and he died attempting to extinguish a blaze. Although the Common Council would eventually grant her request, they cautioned that “the Common Council should ever exercise great prudence in the distribution of charity, or the granting of donations,” and that “few cases occur that have any just claim upon the benevolence of the Corporation.” Despite their hesitation, the Council recognized the widow as a model of the deserving poor. Because of her husband’s death, the widow was “perfectly destitute, and without any means to sustain herself and family, other than by needle.” Even though the woman worked hard, “it cannot be long before she, instead of endeavoring by her industry to sustain her little family,” would suffer the hazards “of cold and inclement weather.” In the end, the Committee remarked that the woman deserved aid because she was “a prudent, industrious, and deserving woman, and do believe any donation given her would be economically expended.”<sup>111</sup> For the Whig Common Council, an individual deserved support if he or she espoused the virtues of industry and thrift. Given the woman’s dedication to hard work and her limited means, they offered the widow help.

## **Conclusion**

During the Panic of 1837, the Whig’s response to poverty assumed multiple dimensions. On one hand, their commitment to republicanism made them hesitant to support programs that would diminish people’s incentive to work, and they did not want to support individuals, such as

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<sup>111</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, October 9, 1837.

immigrants, who they considered indolent. Although they distinguished between the deserving and undeserving poor, they offered assistance to those who could not support themselves through hard work, such as the insane and the infirm. They encouraged an expansion of almshouse facilities and hoped that additional aid to the poor would encourage individual improvement as people learned a devotion to industry and thrift. Instead of encouraging an environment that perpetuated dependency, they hoped that government institutions would promote Christian morals and a dedication to labor that would diminish poverty over time.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Vagrants and Lazaroni: Immigrants and the Threat to Virtue**

By the mid 1830's, New York City was fast becoming a multi-ethnic melting pot unlike any metropolis in the world. The *Evening Post* described the immigrant neighborhood of Five Points as “inhabited by a race of beings of all colours, ages, sexes, and nations.”<sup>112</sup> Comprised of mostly Irish, German, and English immigrants, the foreign-born percentage of the population grew from 9.8 percent in 1819 to over a fifth of the city's residents in 1825. Between 1820 and 1839, 501,000 immigrants arrived at the Port of New York, representing 75 percent of all immigrants to the United States. While not all of these newcomers remained residents in Manhattan, those who stayed contributed to the city's phenomenal growth in population. As the rate of immigration tripled, Gotham's population swelled to 270,000 in 1835, and another doubling of annual newcomers led to a total of 313,000 in 1840, making New York the largest city in the New World.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Burrows and Wallace, *Gotham*, 478.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 478, 576, 736.

Nationally, Whigs in rural and urban areas tended to treat foreigners differently. For leaders such as Henry Clay, Thurlow Weed, and William Henry Seward, attacks against immigrants posed significant political hazards. Most Irish and Catholic immigrants tended to vote for Democrats, and English and Protestant immigrants largely joined the ranks of the Whigs. At times, Whigs would attempt to pry from the Democrats the immigrant Catholic vote, and, at the very least, many Whigs feared that attacks against immigrants would lead Irish voters to rush to the polls in support of the Democrats. After Henry Clay lost his bid for the White House in 1844, many Whigs warned against dismantling the party to join the anti-immigrant American Republican Party. Rejecting any hint of support for nativism, Henry Clay warned against “the great tendency amongst the Whigs to unfurl the banner of the *native* American party,” and that nativism by itself could never be the basis “of a great political party.”<sup>114</sup> The Whigs who opposed nativism saw the electoral folly in alienating a large and growing portion of the population, and they urged their party to distance itself from controversial anti-immigrant views.

In contrast to their national counterparts, Whigs in urban areas with high concentrations of foreigners were more likely to oppose immigration, and the Whigs of New York City were no different. Although in contemporary America rural not urban areas generally oppose immigration, according to Michael Holt, “Whigs who lived in cities near immigrants were much more prone to nativism and openly anti-immigrant political positions than were Whig leaders from rural areas where few if any immigrants or Catholics resided.”<sup>115</sup> Expanding on Whig nativism, Holt adds that, “Many conservative, pro-Compromise, northern Whigs decidedly

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 118.

disliked immigrants, Catholics, and Seward's sympathy for them."<sup>116</sup> Urban Whigs presented their opposition to immigrants within the Whig's larger ideological commitment to republicanism. While the model American was an independent citizen, Whig nativists alleged that aliens were unproductive parasites unfit to participate in the democratic nation. According to historian John Higham, nativists claimed that immigrants were hostile to republicanism because they argued that "perhaps people bred under oppression lack self-reliance and self-restraint; in America they may confuse equal rights with 'voluptuous license.' Perhaps a man discontented in his own country will have no settled principles or loyalties at all."<sup>117</sup> The "voluptuous license" that immigrants supposedly championed conflicted with the Whig's commitment to self-restraint and order. While the Whigs promoted a disciplined lifestyle, many associated foreigners with "pauperism, crime, public drunkenness, and disorder."<sup>118</sup> As the encapsulation of license and overindulgence, immigrants presented to nativists the anathema of the Whig's ideal citizen.

In New York City where people regularly encountered newcomers, many Whigs attacked immigrants as harmful to the American way of life. At a time when the Panic had impoverished many naturalized citizens, Clark and the Common Council lamented that foreigners dominated the city's poorhouses, and they urged reforms that would limit immigration. They viewed foreigners as idle vagrants who detracted from the goal of creating a republican citizenry dedicated to labor and thrift. Rather than work their way towards independence, many of Gotham's Whig politicians and activists claimed that immigrants relied on government charity for survival. While at times their claims may seem insensitive or even bigoted, the Whig's exclusivist views emerged from their republicanism.

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 742.

<sup>117</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* (Rutgers University Press, 2002), 8.

<sup>118</sup> Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party*, 190.



Figure 4: Five Points, 1827.

In 1837, the *Evening Post* described the Five Points neighborhood as home to a diverse group of immigrants.

New York Public Library, Stephen A. Schwarzman Building, General Research Division, Record ID: 1930417

## Poor and Lacking Virtue

In the context of Manhattan, Whig nativists complained that many immigrants were poor and lacked the skills to become productive members of the American economy. In a letter to the Common Council, Clark belittled the “Thousands [who] therefore wander to and fro on the face of the earth- filling every part of our once happy land with squalid poverty and profligacy.”<sup>119</sup> According to Clark, “As soon as they arrive within our limits many of them begin to suffer and to beg,” and “our streets are filled with the wandering crowds of these passengers.”<sup>120</sup> From Clark’s perspective, the overwhelming poverty of immigrants damaged the city’s economy at a time of economic vulnerability. Supposedly, natives had to compete for employment with countless poor immigrants, and Clark argued that immigrants “drive our native workmen into exile.”<sup>121</sup> Because of the influence of foreigners, Clark declared that, “individual enterprise is in a measure paralyzed; business and employment of every kind are almost destroyed.”<sup>122</sup> In a time of financial crisis, Clark claimed that the city could not sustain a massive influx of destitute immigrants since their poverty burdened the city at a time when true Americans were suffering.

Because of the immigrants’ poverty, Clark claimed that aliens placed a disproportional burden on the public welfare system, an assertion that was not fully unfounded. Clark alleged that nearly every arrival of immigrants brought an increase in the city’s pauper population. According to Clark, “Scarcely a vessel arrives from certain ports of Europe, with steerage passengers, which does not increase the applications for admission into our Alms House.”<sup>123</sup> Remarking that immigrants had subordinated the rights of genuine Americans, Clark wrote that,

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<sup>119</sup> Edith Abbott, *Immigration: Select Documents and Case Records* (The University of Chicago Press, 1924), 125.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*. May 22, 1837

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.* May 22, 1837

“preference in the distribution of charities as well as place and employment is due to the descendents of the soldiers of the Revolution, and to the heroes and sufferers of the Second War of Independence.”<sup>124</sup> Because the city was inundated with immigrants, “Our whole Alms House department is so full that no more can be received there without manifest hazard to the health of every inmate.”<sup>125</sup> The Panic of 1837 had left many New Yorkers on the verge of economic ruin, and Clark claimed that naturalized Americans deserved priority over the supposedly indolent immigrants swamping New York’s shores.

Clark’s claim that immigrants had overrun the almshouse was not entirely hyperbolic. Many departments in the city’s public welfare system contained greater numbers of foreigners than natives. Mayor Clark documented the rise in immigrant poverty in a letter to the Common Council. Between 1836 and 1837, there were 1,005 additional inmates in the almshouse, and 887 of these individuals were foreigners. At the Lunatic Hall, 100 of the 179 new inmates were foreigners, and 105 of 135 new patients at the hospital were immigrants.<sup>126</sup> In a metropolis struggling to stay afloat amidst economic crisis, Clark claimed that these immigrants did not deserve taxpayers’ assistance. The government’s limited financial resources should help established American citizens whose hard work and virtuous character made them worthy of aid. According to nativist Whigs, immigrants who came to the country expecting to survive on the alms of others did not deserve support.

Poor immigrants created a potential contradiction for the Whigs because many of the most impoverished immigrants were part of groups that the Whigs normally tried to help. Many of the immigrants that found their way to the almshouse were poor women or infirm. According to Clark, among the population of immigrants, “A large portion of these people generally consist

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<sup>124</sup> Abbott, *Immigration*, 126.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>126</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, May 14, 1838.

of women and infants, and many of them sickly or crippled persons.”<sup>127</sup> Given that many of the newcomers endured a journey in which they were, “Crowded together, poorly clad, lodged and fed,” Clark wrote that, “they must be sickly and miserable on arrival.”<sup>128</sup> When it came to natives, Clark was willing to support those without the ability to gain financial independence, such as the insane and the infirm. Why, then, did Clark disapprove of government aid to sickly immigrants?

For Clark, the allegedly low character of foreigners made them ineligible for government aid. In contrast to the lethargy of immigrants, Clark upheld the industrious nature of supposedly true American citizens. Attacking immigrants as indolent, Clark wrote that, “I cannot doubt that all our citizens both native and those we have adopted, must abhor to see this blood-bought land of liberty and hope, forcibly made the common resort and finally the general residence, of the drones, lazzaroni, conspirators, agrarians, revolutionaries, incendiaries, and fugitives from justice of various parts of the world.”<sup>129</sup> For Clark and the Common Council, the immigrants flooding the streets of New York represented a quality of Europeans below the standards of an upstanding American citizen. As a group of conspirators, they did not pursue democratic values, and Clark claimed that, “many of them seem not to hold opinions in harmony with the true spirit of our government.”<sup>130</sup> Without the democratic and industrious virtues that respectable Americans upheld, according to Clark, immigrants did not present a case of deserving poor.

Reflecting Clark’s hostility towards newcomers, the Common Council’s investigation into the affairs of the Almshouse claimed that poor immigrants did not deserve government benefits because they did not value labor. In a general audit of the almshouse, they reported that,

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<sup>127</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, May 22, 1837

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.* May 22, 1837

<sup>129</sup> Abbott, *Immigration*, 126.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

“Of the number who become a city charge, more than two thirds are foreigners; and by a recent weekly report, we find that this proportion is greatly increasing.”<sup>131</sup> According to the committee’s investigation, immigrants did not deserve government aid because they lacked a dedication to labor and instead assumed that others would support them. Documenting the immigrants’ sense of entitlement, the report observed an “unprecedented influx of foreign immigrants; many of whom from habit or inability are incapable of labor; and manifest by their conduct that they have lived on pariah support at home.”<sup>132</sup> In contrast to earlier generations of immigrants who exhibited a willingness to work, “the emigrants that have landed here for a few months pass are in the aggregate far below the class of those who formerly came among us; and positive proof is not wanting that Europe is casting on us the refuse of her Alms Houses and Prisons.”<sup>133</sup> The Whigs accused European countries of sending to New York the habitual dependents of their poorhouses, a supposedly deprave group of people that preferred to survive on alms than engage in productive labor.

Although the Common Council’s investigation into the almshouse documented the high population of foreigners in the almshouse and their allegedly low character, it still maintained that America offered opportunity to anyone who was willing to work hard and exhibit virtue. The report did not dispute the cherished conviction that America offers opportunity to all who seek success. Urging immigrants to emigrate from New York to other parts of the country where opportunity abounded, they wrote that, “we feel well assured our noble country can and does well afford to all, who are willing to earn their bread by sweat of their brow, sufficient opportunities to do so.”<sup>134</sup> Continuing to lavish praise on America’s opportunities, they wrote,

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<sup>131</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, September 11, 1837.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

“She is full of resources in her own bosom; affording to labor a rich reward for cultivating her soil; and she presents a field for the exercise of physical energies, always ripe to the harvest for those who have health and strength, and will exert their faculties.”<sup>135</sup> To reap the benefits of American opportunity, they suggested that immigrants move to “such parts of the interior as need their labor,” so that they would “add to the wealth of our country by their industry.”<sup>136</sup> Here, in a sense, the Common Council summarized the Whig agenda: anyone can succeed in America as long as they work hard and exhibit republican virtue. The Common Council reinforced the Whig’s commitment to industry in two ways. They denigrated the immigrants for their failure to exhibit productiveness, and they fortified their commitment to the notion that America offered success to anyone willing to labor.

Even when the Common Council took a more moderate view of immigrants, they continued to support restraints on immigration. In 1837, the Common Council sent an envoy to Perth Amboy, New Jersey to coordinate the enforcement of immigration laws. Rejecting the notion that all immigrants were impoverished, the report indicated that, “The Committee do not wish to be understood as giving any currency to the opinion that all or any very large proportion of the aliens are paupers; many of them are on the contrary men of some property and likely in time to become useful citizens.”<sup>137</sup> Although the report rejected the claim that all immigrants were poor, it nonetheless cautioned against immigration. Despite the potential benefits foreigners might bring, “In the present condition of the country, however, their arrival is to be deplored for their own sake as well as that of our own native population, who in vain solicit employment at a very low rate of wages.”<sup>138</sup> Once again, the Common Council denounced immigrants as unfair

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, June 19, 1837

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

competitors to natural Americans. While the report did not denounce newcomers as overwhelmingly impoverished, it nonetheless voiced apprehension that the weak economic climate could support large numbers of immigrants. With thousands of New Yorkers looking for work, the Common Council did not see room in New York for unemployed aliens.

New York City worked with other major metropolitan areas to counter the supposedly dangerous effects of immigration. The Common Council signed a letter to Congress authored by the mayors of Boston and other major cities urging the federal government to limit immigration. According to the letter, although prior generations of immigrants had “increased the number of industrious and honest inhabitants” of America, among the current class of immigrants, “a considerable portion have been of that infirm and necessitous class, which having been brought up under the blighting influence of poor laws, are of no benefit to either country.”<sup>139</sup> Echoing the claim that immigrants disdain work, the letter’s authors feared that, “It is scarcely to be expected that those who have acquired the habit of parish paupers who have been supported in whole or in part at the expense of others, can speedily become the active, industrious laborers, who alone add to the resources of a free country.”<sup>140</sup> Because the group of mayors imagined newcomers as lifelong beggars, they could not envision immigrants suddenly embracing industry in America. Similar to Clark’s claim that the foreigners were indolent, the mayors in this letter shared a doubt that immigrants could become productive citizens.

### **Anti-Immigrant Policy Initiatives**

In response to the rush immigrants, the Whigs proposed concrete measures that would curb immigration. Similar to their response to other crises, the Whigs responded to a perceived

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<sup>139</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, September 11, 1837.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

social dilemma with government action. Clark and the Common proposed increasing the commutation fees that the government demanded from individuals and shipping companies. In a letter to the Common Council, he reminded the board that “the Mayor is directed *to require bonds with ample and satisfactory*” guarantees from the owner of a ship that the “city shall be indemnified from any charge of expense whatever in the care of and maintenance of any alien passenger.”<sup>141</sup> In an attempt to ensure that the city would not incur costs due to immigration, the Mayor instructed the almshouse to inspect all immigrants and require the ship owners to pay up to \$10 on security for each passenger. In response to the Mayor’s proposal, on July 17, the Common Council approved “the decision of the Mayor in raising the amount of commutation money heretofore paid by foreign passengers.”<sup>142</sup> A laissez-faire approach to immigration would have allowed newcomers to arrive undisturbed by government regulation. Yet, Clark had a certain vision for what New York’s citizenry should look like and the values that Americans should espouse. By increasing commutation fees, Clark attempted to quell the supposedly dangerous flow of immigrants and their threat to America’s cultural and social ideals.

In addition to increasing commutation fees, the Common Council suggested several other measures to suppress immigration. In the report investigating Perth Amboy, the Common Council proposed and approved a measure to “contract for the transshipment back to their own country, with their consent, of such alien paupers as may now or are likely to become a public charge at the establishment at Bellevue or elsewhere.”<sup>143</sup> By removing potential paupers from New York, the Whig Common Council hoped to alleviate the city of irresponsible foreigners. Moreover, the letter that the Common Council signed in solidarity with other major cities urged action that would the flow of newcomers. According to the letter, shipping companies lured

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<sup>141</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, May 14, 1838.

<sup>142</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, July 17, 1837.

<sup>143</sup> *Minutes of the Common Council, Board of Aldermen*, June 19, 1837.

foreigners with deceptive promises about America. In response, the letter proposed, “appointing a Government agent in foreign ports” and to give “directions to the Consuls already residing there, to prevent circulation of the false and tempting statements.” By returning foreigners back to Europe and empowering consuls to prevent immigrants from leaving Europe, the Common Council hoped to use the tools of government to diminish immigration.

Once foreigners had already arrived, Manhattan’s Whigs proposed measures to prevent limit their allegedly insidious influence, including a ban on immigrant suffrage. The *Courier* supported measures that would prevent aliens from voting, and they editorialized that, “There is only one way of putting a stop to illegal voting, and that is the passage of a registration act.”<sup>144</sup> In the 1838 municipal elections, the paper alleged that a “Loco Foco Patriot” who was “arrested a few days since for stealing boots was one of forty other aliens brought to this city from the Croton Water Works, and carried to the polls in the seventh and fourteenth wards, where they voted for the Loco Focos.”<sup>145</sup> To prevent future abuses, the *Courier* supported “applying to the Legislature for the passage of an act requiring the registration of voters.”<sup>146</sup> If such a registration law existed, the *Courier* speculated that, “we venture to say that the majority for Mr. Clark instead of being 500 would have been 5000.”<sup>147</sup> By excluding aliens from the franchise, the Whigs claimed that immigrants were not fit for citizenship. Their apathy for labor and lack of democratic mores prevented them from becoming productive American citizens. If immigrants disturbed the Whig’s vision for America, then Whigs urged government programs that would protect America’s social and cultural values. Nativists among Manhattan’s Whigs considered restrictive voting measures a key means of protecting the American way of life.

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<sup>144</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, May 2, 1838

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *The Courier and New York Enquirer*, April 17, 1838

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Conclusion**

Whig opposition to immigration in New York City relied on tropes familiar to the Whig ideology. Although the ideal citizen attached great importance to labor and thrift, irresponsible immigrants supposedly did not value work and expected to survive on the charity of the government. While foreigners filled New York City and the Almshouse, Whigs grew resentful that allegedly indolent immigrants competed for sparse jobs and diverted public aid away from natives. To curtail immigration, Clark and the Common Council increased commutation fees and encouraged the federal government to pursue measures that would prevent foreigners from entering the United States. In the eyes of the local party, the power of government was multifaceted. It could extend America's largess to those Americans most in need, and it could keep out undesirable foreigners who the Whigs saw as a threat to the authentic values of American society.

## **Conclusion**

### **What Was Whig Ideology?**

A sweeping worldview united the various policies of Gotham's Whigs. Their desire to foster economic recovery, finance infrastructure programs, reduce poverty, and limit immigration reflected their commitment to republicanism and social and economic improvement. They were committed to the values of productivity and discipline, and they encouraged individuals and society to engage in a process of self-improvement. However, their desire for reform did not extend to every American, and they excluded the dependent poor and foreigners from their vision of reformative government. These populations allegedly did not exemplify republican characteristics, so Manhattan's Whigs did not consider them worthy of the city's assistance. Alongside this important restriction, New York's Whigs reacted to the Panic of 1837 with a vigorous government response, hoping that their reforms would bring society closer to economic and republican flourishing.

The Whig's vision of the state directly influenced their economic answer to the Panic. From their perspective, the government had a responsibility to change the direction of the economy and to promote economic wellbeing for the masses. Manhattan's Whigs alleged that

Van Buren's Specie Circular would reward Democratic partisans while abandoning the countless Americans on the verge of financial ruin. By pulling federal deposits from private banks and demanding specie for all government transactions, the President's plan would devalue bank notes in comparison to metallic currency, greatly limiting the spending power of ordinary Americans. In contrast, the Whigs believed that society was interconnected and that government should promote programs that benefitted all Americans. They encouraged reforms in Albany allowing greater circulation of paper currency and advanced state efforts to expand banking. By augmenting the distribution of paper notes and developing the finance industry, Whigs hoped to increase the availability of credit and to spur a recovery.

In addition to financial reform, infrastructure programs were essential to the Whig's forceful reply to the recession. Whig journalists and activists endorsed the state's proposal to expand railroads and canals, and they supported the city's plan to build the Croton Aqueduct. They directed the construction of Croton with an eye towards increasing employment and hoped that statewide infrastructure programs would similarly enhance opportunities for jobseekers. Not only would internal improvements increase employment at a time when thousands of New Yorkers needed jobs, public works would create the foundation for future economic development. Although the recession limited the funds available to the city for infrastructure programs and government hiring, the Whigs were committed to expanding railroad and transportation projects as a means of curtailing unemployment and developing the long-term economic interests of New York.

The Whiggish commitment to republican improvement also influenced the local party's support for new almshouse facilities. As thousands of New Yorkers struggled amidst financial uncertainty, the Common Council urged the city to build an additional almshouse, hospital, and

insane asylum. Although the Long Island Farms would largely fail, they hoped the program would instill a devotion to frugality and industry among impoverished youth. Reflecting a similar dedication to labor, they supported workhouses for the poor where the underprivileged could learn skills necessary for financial independence. While Manhattan's Whigs advocated expanding the almshouse, they recognized the limits of state action. For the Whigs, a certain amount of poverty was unavoidable, and they accused some poor people of being responsible for their own misery. The Common Council eliminated funding for the majority of private charities because they considered most beneficiaries of benevolent societies frauds who voluntarily abstained from labor. Instead of supporting the allegedly indolent poor, the Whigs hoped to assist the infirm and those without the ability to gain self-reliance. With what they considered a balanced approach, the Whigs looked to help the meritorious poor and to avoid programs that diminished the incentive to work.

Similar to their views on public welfare, the local party's immigration policies reflected a nuanced understanding of the role of government. In response to the thousands of foreigners annually arriving in Manhattan, nativist Whigs urged Congress to restrict immigration, and they coordinated with Perth Amboy, New Jersey to regulate the number of newcomers. Mayor Clark and the Common Council disdained New York's newest arrivals because immigrants supposedly threatened American virtues. They lamented that many foreigners sought the aid of the almshouse at a time when naturalized Americans were out of work, and nativists among them attributed immigrant poverty to foreigners' inherent shortcomings. Echoing their attacks against private charities, they accused aliens of being lifelong degenerates incapable of the discipline that financial self-reliance required. While Whig criticism of immigrants may seem heartless or xenophobic, they reflected the central role of republicanism in Whig ideology.

Manhattan's Whigs hoped that government would be an effective vehicle for social change. They supported banking reform, internal improvements, an expanded almshouse, and immigration restrictions with the hope of inspiring a republican renaissance. Their social programs aimed to foster the moral attributes demanded by the emerging market economy, and they expected their economic reforms would allow all Americans to benefit from the advantages of general prosperity. Yet, immigrants and the supposedly permanent poor had a circumscribed role in this vision of America since their alleged lack of virtue made them ineligible for government support. Whigs expected that their economic agenda would create the basis of opportunity for anyone that worked hard, and they attributed poverty among immigrants and the perpetual poor to a lack of self-control. While these views present tensions, they reflect the Whig's commitment to cultivating economic and social progress through republican ideals.

### **The Whigs and Today**

By the 1850's, the Whig Party would dissolve under the pressures of slavery. The Second Party System, which describes this era's politics, relied on the suppression of the slavery issue. Both Whigs and Democrats formed national coalitions that united supporters from the North, South, and West. Politicians rightfully feared that controversy over the South's peculiar institution would disturb the delicate alliances they had forged. Once anti-slavery voices began to dominate politics, the question of slavery forced the two factions to take sides. Many Whigs and Democrats abandoned their old allegiances to form the Republican Party, whose primary unifying principle was opposition to slavery. Several former Whigs, such as Abraham Lincoln, would come to play critical functions in the Republican Party, and Republican control of

Congress and the Executive during the Civil War would allow Lincoln to implement several Whig policies, such as support for railroads.<sup>148</sup>

Despite the Republican Party's early connections to Whiggery, important differences distinguish today's Republicans from the 19<sup>th</sup> century Whigs. Comparing the two eras, one question in particular seems to arise: were the Whigs liberal or conservative?

Measured against our own time, the Whigs seem to combine aspects of both major ideological spectrums. On one hand, Whigs favored government spending that would lift the economy, create jobs, and direct the country's resources to industries that politicians believed deserved our attention, such as railroads and canals. They supported welfare programs that would help the most vulnerable Americans, especially those with physical and mental disabilities. Today, we could imagine Whig politicians sitting comfortably on the aisle with those urging a vigorous response to the Great Recession, a network of high-speed train lines, or additional public assistance to the handicapped and infirm. From this perspective, the Whigs may seem progressive. They considered themselves on a crusade to improve society and wanted the government to be a dynamic force for social change.

Despite these liberal tendencies, Whiggery entailed a conservative agenda. Whigs supported a rigid interpretation of Christian ethics, and they encouraged state programs that nurtured their particular religious and ethical stance. Like some Republicans today, they feared that people could become dependent on charity and worried that excessive aid to the poor would diminish people's incentive to work. Reflecting contemporary immigration debates, they declared that newcomers did not share a commitment to traditional American principles. In today's Washington, many Whigs would likely join opposition to bans on school prayer, the

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<sup>148</sup> Eric Foner. *The Fiery Trial: Abraham Lincoln and American Slavery*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011.) 204.

naturalization of illegal immigrants, and welfare dependency. In supporting traditional values and state efforts to uphold public morality, the Whigs seem decisively conservative.

How could these contemporary conservative and liberal positions cohere within the Whig ideology? Why did ideas that today seem contradictory form the basis of the Whig platform?

Republicanism is the unifying force that makes the Whigs seem at once conservative and liberal. According to the Whigs, government should be a guiding force for improving society, and their progressive and traditional tendencies were both essential to transforming society into a realization of their social ideals. Public schools, insane asylums, and almshouses would equip people with the tools and virtues needed to exploit the emerging market economy. Whig opposition to supposedly indolent poor people and immigrants reflects their commitment to the same republican values that they hoped public schools and other social institutions would promote- industry, discipline, and self-improvement. While their hostility to foreigners and the unworthy poor may seem insensitive from today's perspective, it reflects the Whig's commitment to republican virtues. The difficulty in comparing the Whigs to our own time may reflect internal tensions within the Whig worldview, but understanding their unique republican perspective only further helps to illuminate their ideology.

Despite the diverse themes that comprise the Whig's worldview, their proposals and the questions they suggest continue to resonate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We continue to debate Washington's proper role in promoting economic growth, helping the poor, and welcoming immigrants. If anything, the Whigs should offer a sense of perspective, reminding us that we live in a fluid society and that the policies that foster divisiveness now will remain problematic a hundred years from our time. The Whigs advise thoughtful answers to perpetual American dilemmas, and their robust ideology continues to deserve our attention today.

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