

“NOT IN THE HABIT OF SLEEPING WITH MEN”:
POLITICS AND MASCULINITY IN ANTEBELLUM MISSOURI

Zachary Dowdle
University of Missouri

Sixteen-year-old James Hickman Rollins had a problem in the summer of 1857. The young man had recently matriculated to the United States Military Academy at West Point and was starting to realize that he might be out of his league. Writing to his father, James Sidney Rollins, the fresh cadet felt discouraged “to see most all my classmates so much farther advanced than I am both in age and books.” James’s anxiety over his perceived deficiencies came after he had spent just a few days at the demanding institute. In fact, on the day he arrived, one of his professors subjected the uprooted adolescent to an oral examination to see if James had the proper preparation for the coursework. Though he passed that initial test, James expressed to his father his concern that he would be “found out at the January examination” and expelled from the school.¹ As the eldest son of a successful man, James expected that his father would hold him to high standards based on their shared understanding of masculinity. In his initial letter to Rollins, the teenager hoped to soften his father’s expectations as well as illicit some encouragement on how to navigate his competitive new environment successfully.

The elder Rollins understood pressure quite well. In the months leading to his son’s letter, Rollins had been conducting his campaign to be the governor of Missouri in a special election forced by the recently elected governor, Trusten Polk, accepting a call to represent Missouri in the United States Senate. By the age of forty-five Rollins had already served three times in the Missouri House of Representatives, once in the Missouri Senate, and had an unsuccessful bid for the governorship in 1848, each time running as a Whig.² Within his adopted hometown, Rollins enjoyed tremendous esteem having spearheaded the campaign to have the state university located

¹ James H. Rollins to James S. Rollins, July 5, 1857. *James S. Rollins Papers (C1026)*; The State Historical Society of Missouri-Columbia (SHSMC).

² John Vollmer Mering, “Political Transition of James S. Rollins,” *Missouri Historical Review* 53, no. 3 (1959): 217.

in Columbia. Additionally, the man commanded extraordinary wealth. In 1858 Rollins found himself listed as having paid the second most property taxes in Boone County.³ Considering his political success, active role as an economic booster for his community, and financial acumen, Rollins served as an ideal role model for his son.

As the two Rollinses worked to succeed in their chosen roles, their conceptions of the requirements of masculinity informed their decisions. Historian Amy S. Greenberg argues that in the years between the Mexican American War and the Civil War, men in the United States prescribed to a variety of understandings of masculinity, however, two largely encompassing versions began to dominate. Restrained manhood privileged family life, material success, competence, intelligence, and a solid work ethic. Conversely, adherents of martial manhood looked to physical dominance, aggressiveness, and often cited their ability to drink excessively as a point of pride. Neither sectional nor economic boundaries defined these two types of masculinity, but an individual's understanding of manhood, in many cases, did inform his choice of political party identification. The reform aspects of first the Whig, then Know-Nothing and Republican parties appealed to restrained men, whereas martial men overwhelmingly supported aggressive expansionist policies of the Democratic Party.⁴

During the course of the gubernatorial campaign in the summer of 1857, Rollins worked to live up to his ideal of masculinity in his personal correspondence and his behavior while canvassing the state. Though not always openly discussed, indeed individuals rarely acknowledge the importance of gender systems in their daily lives, masculinity served as an important element of antebellum political culture. Some notions of the manly politician

³ William F. Switzler, *History of Boone County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Western Historical Company, 1882), 392.

⁴ Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-13.

transcend the restrained/martial model. All politicians had to exhibit integrity and independence. The public rejected candidates who seemed dishonest or beholden to another man because only true men should hold political office. Newspapers, staking out partisan positions and speaking to their particular audiences, worked to frame the opposition in ways that undercut their masculinity, and hence their acceptability as a candidate. Democratic newspapers, writing for an audience that would largely identify with martial manhood, critiqued Rollins in terms that would appeal to martial men. Accordingly, these commenters depicted Rollins as a cunning trickster, whose remarkable ability as an orator misled the public. Newspapers that supported Rollins described the Democratic candidate as lacking intelligence and eloquence, suggesting the politician did not meet the understood criteria for restrained manhood. As Rollins withstood attacks on his masculinity from the Democratic press, his son, James, questioned his ability to attain manhood at West Point. Both men, by the end of their ordeals, withstood considerable attacks on their masculinity and manage to succeed to some degree through an adherence to restrained manhood.⁵

Newspapers that supported Rollins' campaign attacked his Democratic opponent, Robert Stewart, by arguing he lacked the intelligence and integrity to be an effective governor. Both of these lines of attack suggest that Stewart did not possess the types of masculine qualities valued by the newspapers' audience, many of whom were former Whigs. Intelligence or eloquence serves as one of the markers of a gentleman and a statesman worthy to hold the position of governor of Missouri. During the summer canvass, pro-Rollins newspapers worked to describe Stewart's mental faculties as wholly inadequate. The *Columbia Statesman* described that during

⁵ For an understanding of the ways in which masculinity informed the political culture of the Midwest in the antebellum period see, Nicole Etcheson, *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 27-39.

his stump speeches, Stewart had to rely on a “hired retinue of gridders and clappers” as well as a personal press corps to “announce him victorious when he has been vanquished.” Furthermore, Stewart’s arguments against Rollins came across as “puerile and unsatisfactory” as if the state senator was still “in the morning of his political career.”⁶ Far from exhibiting the intellectual talent and experience required of a man to run the state, Stewart more resembled a boy who has difficulty forming reasonable arguments on the stump. Missourians required a governor who could lead the state competently in vexing times.

More concerning, according to Stewart’s enemies, was the transplanted New Yorker’s lack of integrity and honor. Their general attacks on Stewart from this category fall into two camps. First, the opposition press suggested Stewart’s prime motivation was the acquisition of money rather than public service. The Democrat, as the president of a railroad, served the interest of “a mammoth corporation owning six hundred thousand acres of the best land in the state” and owned by men from Boston, Massachusetts. According to the *Statesman*, Stewart could not possibly lead the state of Missouri while trying to appease shareholders of a Yankee-controlled railroad. One of Stewart’s responsibilities would take precedence over the other, and the author suspected the railroad, which paid Stewart nearly twenty thousand dollars over the last four years, would win that battle. Stewart’s financial conflict of interest as president of the railroad was only half of the problem with his involvement with the Hannibal and St. Joseph Railroad. The native New Yorker working closely with a Boston corporation raised suspicion about Stewart’s true beliefs on the issue of slavery. Ultimately, the *Statesman* predicted, the citizens of Missouri would be “swallowed by this Boston corporation” and be beholden to their agenda.⁷ No

⁶ Columbia *Statesman*, July 3, 1857; *Ibid*, June 19, 1857.

⁷ Columbia *Statesman*, June 26, 1857; Glasgow *Weekly Times*, June 11, 1857.

gentleman statesman would subject his constituents to the dishonor of being led by the interests of an out-of-state corporation.

In addition to Stewart's love of profit over public service, the candidate had found difficulty in choosing which political party to join. Though considered "an Anti of the bitterest type" during the 1857 contest, the *Weekly Times* asserted Stewart started his political career as a Whig, shifted to the Democrats when Benton led the party, and, most curiously, served as a member of the American party for fourteen months. While Major Rollins had changed parties from the Whigs to the American, this shift came only with the disintegration of the Whigs, not from any sort of disloyalty or lack of principle. Stewart, however, abandoned the Whigs prior to its collapse, worked with Benton, then viciously attacked the Colonel and joined the Know Nothing Party in the winter of 1855. In fact, Rollins and his supporters worked hard to tie Stewart to the American Party, hoping to mitigate the weakness that Rollins' own affiliation with the party gave him with immigrant voters. In early July, just a month before the polls opened, J. J. Tucker made a public statement swearing he witnessed the initiation of Stewart into the American Party and "saw him take the two first degrees in that party and receive all the signs and passwords of the two first degrees." Building on the idea of Stewart as a political opportunist, the *Statesman* added that the candidate joined the Know Nothing Party after his constituents elected him to serve as their Democratic state senator.⁸ The opposition newspapers hoped the combination of Stewart's political disloyalty and dishonesty, ties to likely abolitionists in Boston, and lack of eloquence would be enough to dissuade potential supporters of the Democratic candidate.

⁸ Glasgow *Weekly Times*, June 18, 1857; Statement of J. J. Tucker, July 8, 1857, *James S. Rollins Papers (C1026)*; SHSMC; Columbia *Statesman*, June 26, 1857.

While Rollins' supporters held Stewart to standards of restrained masculinity, Democratic newspapers overwhelmingly portrayed Rollins as unreliable on the question of slavery and a cunning trickster. Democratic newspapers enjoyed pointing to the believed close affiliation between Frank Blair and Rollins as an indication that the Major might have ulterior motives regarding the future of slavery in Missouri. One Stewart supporter asked Rollins whether he would comment on the "charge of being Frank Blair's candidate," to which Rollins reportedly "gave anything but a clear and manly denial." In fact, on one occasion when Stewart charged that Rollins had "gone to bed with Blair," the Major blurted out that he "was not in the habit of sleeping with *men*; but to tell the truth, if it was compelled to be done, he would as soon sleep with Frank Blair as with Bob Stewart!" Considering political candidates, indeed any men traveling in groups, were likely to share a bed to save money, Rollins' declaration worked to present him as a wealthy man who was out of touch with the realities that most people faced. Rollins, more frequently, would rebut to these types of charges by reminding the crowd "he was the owner of twenty-five slaves for which he would not take \$20,000." In response to this assertion by Rollins, the Randolph County *Citizen* asked, "If a man of Major Rollins' nativity, ability and aspirations was at the same time dishonest, and at the same time an Abolitionist at heart, determined to destroy the institution... could he not better accomplish his purpose by being the owner of slaves than not?"⁹

While the Major's association with Blair troubled the Democratic newspapers, Rollins' problematic position of fusing three disparate factions together illustrated the candidate's lack of integrity. The Randolph *Citizen* argued that trying to appease political groups who held opposing

⁹ Randolph *Citizen*, May 21, 1857; Glasgow *Weekly Times* July 9, 1857 emphasis in the original; Randolph *Citizen*, June 18, 1857.

points of view meant Rollins necessarily needed to make conflicting promises. As a representative of the Benton Party, a faction of religiously tolerant Democrats, how could Rollins simultaneously appeal to Know Nothing members who discriminate against men based on their religious beliefs? No single candidate could possibly claim to represent the values of the old-line Whigs and the American Party, the latter of which “sold out” the former for being “too corrupt.” Combining those three incompatible constituencies with Blair’s emancipationists was like mixing “arsenic and milk, strychnine and sugar together and get[ing] a sensible man to swallow it.” The coalition was too toxic for any sane man to accept as a reasonable alternative to the familiar National Democrats. Rollins’ fusion of parties meant he had to be dishonest in his appeals to members of those groups of his coalition and had to disregard the future of Missouri by forcing such an “antagonistic political mixture” into the state capitol.¹⁰

Even the staunchest of Stewart supporters admitted “Rollins has sometimes seemed to have the advantage in a verbal battle,” but they suggested his oratory skill resulted from his dishonest character. In fact, newspapers described Rollins as a trickster with a “forked tongue” who could appeal “skillfully to every prejudice.” According to the St. Louis *Leader*, the Major’s “disregard of truth and his political trickery...has made it evident that he is ready to do anything that will advance his interests and place political power in his hands.” Unlike a true statesman who views the common good as the ultimate goal, Rollins selfishly sought to consolidate power using any means necessary. The Southeast *Democrat* in Cape Girardeau claimed to “have no political partiality for either of the candidates” but saw “Rollins as the more scheming, tricky and dangerous” because of his affiliation with Blair. Democrats found it difficult to believe Rollins could reconcile his claimed affinity with the institution of slavery and his partnership with Blair

¹⁰ Randolph *Citizen*, June 18, 1857.

in any candid manner.¹¹ Describing Rollins as a trickster with a forked tongue equated him with the devil, which explained his ability to speak so convincingly to the public.

Both candidates felt the effects of the persistent barrage against their masculinity presented by the opposing newspapers toward the end of the summer canvass. As Stewart finished his speech at Palmyra in Marion County, United States Senator James Green took the stage and claimed he would prove the Democratic newspapers' assertion that Rollins was a Black Republican. The *Liberty Weekly Times* reported that almost instantly "the manly form of Rollins appeared upon the stand. Turning to Senator Green and, with an eye flashing fire, looked him full in the face" and said, "Sir, were I to characterize the assertion which you have made with the severity which it deserves it would destroy the friendly personal relations which for several years existed between us. I will not say that you have uttered a deliberate falsehood, but I do say that you have grossly and basely misrepresented me." In this outburst, Rollins demonstrated quite clearly the restrained nature of his masculinity. Afterward, Green, a fiercely anti-Benton Democrat, looked as if he wanted to assault Rollins for his manly assertion, but ultimately did nothing. Feeling the adrenaline from the encounter, the Major began his stump speech by pointing his finger at another opponent in the crowd, John Huntington, and denouncing him as a demagogue who had "outrageously misrepresented him [Rollins]" in the July 22 edition of the *Leader*.¹²

On the third day of August, Missourians went to the polls to cast their votes for their next governor. Within just a few days, the early returns began to roll in and Rollins held a commanding majority of four thousand votes over his Democratic rival. These early numbers

¹¹ St. Louis *Leader*, July 22, 1857; *Ibid*, July 18, 1857; Southeast *Democrat* piece presented in Randolph *Citizen*, July 2, 1857.

¹² *Liberty Weekly Times*, August 21, 1857; *Ibid*, August 14, 1857; McCandless, *A History of Missouri*, 268.

included St. Louis, which only gave the Major an advantage of 1,783 votes, far fewer than the five thousand Frank Blair had promised months earlier. Within ten days, his lead had diminished to only 518 with four counties not reporting and another twenty-six presenting only unofficial results.¹³ The news of Rollins' slim majority incited shock on the part of pro-Stewart newspapers. The *Randolph Citizen* admitted that Rollins' apparent success was "entirely unanticipated by the Democratic party."¹⁴ The writer continued by saying that Democrats had enjoyed electoral success for too long in Missouri and had run a sloppy campaign against a well-prepared opponent. Despite the apocalyptic visions of Stewart's supporters, the official results of the election would show that Rollins had lost the governorship to Stewart by the slimmest of margins—only 343 votes.

In the comfort of his large home, Rollins rested following the verbal attacks on his integrity and character as well as the physically demanding summer canvass. As Rollins' electoral fate became clear, his son James discovered the true nature of difficulties he faced at West Point. Writing a few weeks after the election had been called for Stewart, the cadet told his father "it is an utter impossibility for me to pass the January examination." Anticipating the Major's reaction to such a statement, James assured his father that he was "not discouraged at the start...I am not discouraged at all...I am just telling you my candid opinion." Though James had complained earlier in the summer that the academy had focused solely on the physical aspects of military life while ignoring any intellectual pursuits, once they began classes, the rigor of the curriculum overwhelmed the sixteen-year-old boy. More than the basic fear of failure, James worried that his father and mother would love him less if he returned to Columbia without

¹³ Wood, "James Sidney Rollins," 164; *Columbia Statesman*, August 7, 1857; *Ibid*, Extra Edition, August 17, 1857; Rollins to James Hickman Rollins, August 12, 1857, *James S. Rollins Papers (C1026)*; SHSMC.

¹⁴ *Randolph Citizen*, August 6, 1857; Dubin, *United States Gubernatorial Elections, 1776-1860*, 143-44.

completing the program. James pleaded with his father to allow him to resign so he can end the anxiety and shame he had been suffering for months.¹⁵

Rollins' response to his troubled son illustrates his understanding of masculinity and the way both he and his son should endure in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. The Major, who never actually saw combat during his brief military career, opened his letter by reminding his son that the "motto of every true soldier should be 'Never give up.'" Rollins acknowledged the course his son undertook would be difficult; in fact, he believed the instructors at West Point made life particularly unbearable for each new cadet to "see what is in him." Stressing the absolute importance of perfect conduct, diligence, study, and acting "manly and independent," Rollins outlined for his son eleven detailed steps to help the young man succeed. Rollins reminded James of the anxiety the cadet felt as his initial exam approached. The January examination was no different in that regard. Ultimately, the Major wanted his son to give the exam his best effort. If he did not pass, Rollins assured his son that both he and his mother "will receive you with all the warmth of affection which we both so deeply feel for you and...I will not cease my efforts to give you a thorough and complete education." Following his father's advice on crossing this first significant threshold of manhood, James passed his January examination, eventually graduating from the storied academy in the midst of the Civil War.¹⁶

Though separated by nearly a thousand miles and a generation, both men had to withstand the challenges presented by antebellum conceptions of manhood. Rollins, benefiting from a life of public tests of his masculinity, successfully navigated the summer canvass. Despite

¹⁵ James Hickman Rollins to James Sidney Rollins, September 13, 1857, *James S. Rollins Papers (C1026)*; SHSMC.

¹⁶ James S. Rollins to James Hickman Rollins, September 20, 1857, *James S. Rollins Papers (C1026)*; SHSMC; Switzler, *History of Boone County*, 935.

losing the election, Rollins and his colleagues framed the loss as a victory because the Major was able to garner the support of a disparate coalition. For a former Whig in Missouri, losing a statewide election to Democratic candidate by less than four hundred votes constituted a victory. Rollins believed his conduct during the campaign conformed to his understanding of manhood, which meant he stayed true to himself under the pressure to succeed in electoral politics. Young James expressed concern to his father that he would be unable to endure the rite of passage that tested his masculinity. Rollins, in instructing his son, provided a clear path that would lead the cadet to the respectable realm of restrained manhood. Having always been a member of the minority party in Missouri, Rollins hoped his son would recognize hard work, integrity, and perseverance could lead to better outcomes than just near victories.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

James Sidney Rollins Papers (C1026), State Historical Society of Missouri-Columbia

Saint Louis *Leader*

Columbia *Statesman*

Randolph *Citizen*

Liberty *Weekly Tribune*

Glasgow *Weekly Times*

Secondary Sources

Anbinder, Tyler. *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

Dubin, Michael J. *United States Gubernatorial Elections 1776-1860: The Official Results by State and County*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2003.

Etcheson, Nicole. *The Emerging Midwest: Upland Southerners and the Political Culture of the Old Northwest, 1787-1861*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.

Greenberg, Amy S. *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

Harding, Samuel Bannister. *Life of George R. Smith: Founder of Sedalia, MO*. Sedalia, MO: Privately Printed, 1904.

Holt, Michael F. *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Leopard, Buel and Floyd C. Shoemaker, eds, *The Messages and Proclamations of the Governors of the State of Missouri, Volume III*. Columbia: State Historical Society of Missouri, 1922.

McCandless, Perry. *A History of Missouri, Volume II 1820 to 1860*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1972.

Mering, John Vollmer. "Political Transition of James S. Rollins," *Missouri Historical Review* 53, no. 3 (1959): 217-226.

———. *The Whig Party in Missouri*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1967.

Parrish, William. *Frank Blair: Lincoln's Conservative*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998.

Scharf, John Thomas. *History of Saint Louis City and County Volume I*. Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1883.

Switzler, William F. *History of Boone County, Missouri* (St. Louis: Western Historical Company, 1882), 392.

Wood, James Madison. "James Sidney Rollins of Missouri: A Political Biography." PhD diss., Stanford University, 1951.