



The Watershed Election: Cornelius Peter Van Ness, Horatio Seymour, and the United States Senate Campaign of 1826

Despite the fact that two clear choices had emerged for the Senate seat early on, and that the wirepullers and thimblerriggers for both candidates were already hard at work, Vermonters should hardly have anticipated the spirited campaign that was to follow.

By KENNETH A. DEGREE

The year of 1826 marked a milestone in the brief history of the United States. The young republic celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence amid a continuous pomp and ballyhoo culminating on July 4, when a proud citizenry justly honored their unique accomplishments. When word spread that both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had died at their homes on this special day, most Americans agreed with their president, John Quincy Adams, son of the late John, that this occurrence should be seen as a “visible and palpable” sign of divine favor.¹

For many, the deaths of these two patriotic giants symbolized a severing of the last links with the Revolutionary era. The torch had now been passed. The eager populace that composed the next generation had

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been bequeathed a land rich in promise and resources. Its unprecedented republican government had been tested by two wars against the mother country and by considerable internal strife, yet had reached the half-century mark of its existence intact. The great question that now stood before the present generation of Americans was deciding the direction that the new republic should take next.²

The debate over the future course of the country ran as a troubling undercurrent amidst the steady stream of platitudes celebrating the Jubilee Year. The nation had been briefly buoyed by the wave of nationalism that rose due to the successful culmination of the War of 1812. However, the Panic of 1819 and the Missouri Crisis of 1819–1821 cut short the so-called “era of good feelings.” The panic exposed the danger inherent in the speculative new market economy, while the dispute over the Missouri Territory revealed the growing sectionalism infecting the nation. The once-united Republican Party began to split into factions over these vexing problems. Four candidates vied for the presidential nomination in 1824. When Andrew Jackson gained a plurality of the votes but lost the presidency in the Congressional tally, new alignments took shape among politicians and voters. The second American party system was born. The followers of John Quincy Adams represented the Madisonian nationalist wing, while the Jackson coalition drew support from states’-rights adherents, slave owners, and Old Republicans suspicious of the rising capitalist economy.³

The majority of Vermonters saw the return of party politics as an unwelcome turn of events. No state in the Union saw more partisan strife during the War of 1812. With Republicans and Federalists nearly equal in power, the very fabric of communities had been torn asunder and only recently had it begun to heal. Vermonters had little taste for a return to political infighting. The end of hostilities saw former foes putting aside their philosophical differences and uniting to tackle a common problem, for the close of the conflict with Great Britain revealed a state in grave economic crisis. The turbulent decade provided Vermont with a series of shocks that left its population size at a virtual standstill. The early settlers had set the stage for hard times by plundering the hillsides of fish, game, and marketable timber, and exhausting the soil with poor farming practices. The embargo on Canadian trade precipitated a backward slide that was exacerbated by war, the collapse of the Vermont State Bank, a devastating run of disease brought to the Green Mountains by soldiers, and crowned by the slow but sure demise of the vital wheat crop. By 1817, emigration from the state had become so alarming that it drew an anxious comment from Governor Jonas Galusha in his annual address.⁴

These dire days helped transform all but the most stubborn Old

Republican Cassandras into followers of National Republicanism, preaching that aggressive public policy was crucial to ensure prosperity. When leading citizens began the transition from raising wheat to raising sheep, and the completion of the Champlain Canal illustrated how successfully such transportation breakthroughs could facilitate trade, the majority of Vermonters thereafter worshipped at the altar of high tariffs, internal improvements, and a stable currency.⁵ With the emergence of a new faction supporting Andrew Jackson, however, leading men throughout the state seemed to rise with one voice of indignation at the prospect of returning to the days of political parties. For they saw any resistance to the tenets of the American System as not only detrimental, but disastrous, to their future.

The prospect of a Jackson presidency had the effect of an emetic on the constitutions of Vermont's political leaders, and they found it hard to hold back. In 1826, George Washington Hill, brother of ardent New Hampshire Jacksonian Isaac Hill, moved to Montpelier to set up a newspaper, the *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, favorable to Old Hickory. Anxious National Republicans closely tracked his movements. His attempt to rekindle old animosities by charging the Adams administration with Federalist leanings drew angry responses. One writer, who took the name "Philo Republicus," chided Hill for his mischief making by asking, "And what would you think of that stranger, who upon his first introduction into this cradle of repose, should make it his only endeavor to scatter the seeds of discord[?]"⁶

Philo Republicus saw the rise of this opposition party as something far more insidious. He believed, as did the majority of Vermonters, that their future depended upon the continuation of the policies of the present administration. Anyone who felt otherwise, he concluded, could only be branded a traitor.

I believe in the freedom of the press, as the safeguard of national liberty; but I do not believe in an open virulent propensity to excite sedition; and that man who possesses this, as his most prominent trait and character is not a friend to republican, nor even moral institutions! He is a violator of the laws of his country; he excites rebellion and treason; he corrupts a sober-minded and peaceful community from whom he deserves that indignation and contempt so justly due him as the price of his labor.⁷

Judah Spooner, the editor of the St. Albans newspaper, the *Repertory*, recognized that a faction had already taken root in Vermont opposed to the national administration. Although at this juncture few appeared willing to be as visible advance scouts as G. W. Hill, the St. Albans scribe reported confidently that "It will ere long appear that other characters

are engaged with them.”⁸ One man above all generated the greatest suspicion, the former governor of the state and now announced senatorial candidate, Cornelius Peter Van Ness.

At first blush, it seems curious that so many Vermonters would accuse the state’s most powerful and prominent politician of plotting to defy their interests. Van Ness’s twenty-year residence in the state had been nothing less than a breathtaking ascent through elective and appointed political positions. Blessed with powerful personal attributes, he was charming, charismatic, handsome, and an incomparable orator. He was also relentlessly ambitious, and not above using his keen political instincts and family connections to gain advancement.⁹

This New York native’s brisk climb up the ladder of political preference began with his appointment as United States district attorney for Vermont in 1809, just three years after moving to the state. He gained the post through his willingness, as a young St. Albans lawyer, to incur the enmity of his Franklin County neighbors by zealously prosecuting smuggling cases during Jefferson’s embargo, and with the aid of a recommendation by Brockholst Livingston, United States Supreme Court justice and his brother’s legal mentor.¹⁰ Once the war with Britain commenced, Van Ness bridled his prosecutorial zeal after being chosen to replace Samuel Buel as collector of the port of Burlington, which had become his hometown in 1809. He excelled in this delicate new role, where he was expected to “observe the letter of the law” while devising ingenious methods to allow importation of needed foreign goods, war materiel, and federal revenue.¹¹ A grateful administration rewarded his effort with another federal appointment after the conclusion of the war, as a member of the Boundary Commission, charged to work with a British delegation to fix the boundary with Canada as set forth by the Treaty of Ghent. He held the position for four years, and was credited with doing an admirable job in a thankless assignment. However, when Congress, in a cost-cutting mood after the Panic of 1819, slashed the commissioners’ salaries in 1821, Van Ness bitterly left the post.¹² Although he had enjoyed his long wallow in the federal trough, Van Ness knew that in the present climate few new federal appointments would be forthcoming. Therefore, he began to look elsewhere for new opportunities.

His search led him back to the political plums offered by the Vermont government. Van Ness had already revived his law practice and taken on a more active role in the development of his hometown of Burlington. He was an early investor in steamboats and used his influence to wrest the shipyard of the Lake Champlain Steamboat Company from the rival city of Vergennes and place it in nearby Shelburne Bay. Further, he won election as representative for Burlington in the



C. P. Van Ness

Cornelius Peter Van Ness, from Abby Hemenway, Vermont Historical Gazetteer, vol. 1 (1868), opposite page 441.

Vermont legislature for four years beginning in 1818, and overcame the hostility that body still held for banking since the demise of the State Bank in 1813 by successfully ushering through a charter for his town. These two developments, coupled with its fine port, aggressive merchants, and the opening of the Champlain Canal, helped Burlington become the largest town in the state by 1830.¹³

Yet after basking in the limelight that came with such prestigious positions as wartime customs collector, the work involved in being a state legislator or town father seemed like small potatoes to someone so ambitious. His gaze once again turned to Washington. In 1820, Van Ness allowed his friends to float his name in the balloting for United States senator. His successful performance in federal positions, and his work in the legislature and his hometown, should have made Van Ness an appealing choice. However, he received only twelve votes in the House and none from the Council, as Horatio Seymour claimed the prize.¹⁴ This setback convinced Van Ness that he needed to do more political spadework to make himself better known throughout the state.

Acknowledging his experience as ranking member on the judiciary committee, the legislature selected Van Ness in 1821 as chief justice of the Vermont Supreme Court. From here, he could hold down his duties while waiting for another federal appointment, perhaps to the District Court bench. Concurrently, he could acquaint himself with voters as he made his judicial rounds. Yet Washington was never far from his thoughts. When his old family benefactor, Brockholst Livingston, died in 1823, Van Ness briefly tried to drum up support for himself to be nominated for the vacant seat on the nation's high court, but it went nowhere.¹⁵

With opportunities for advancement dwindling, Van Ness grew weary of life on the bench. Although his friends argued that his popularity grew during his stint as a judge,¹⁶ he was, above all, a political animal. Therefore, Van Ness was relieved to be considered during the search for a replacement for Governor Richard Skinner, who declined a third term. The former chief justice readily accepted the new challenge and, in 1823, won the post by an overwhelming margin. Van Ness served as Vermont's chief executive for three years. Although his personal attributes made him a fine head of state (he personally took charge of Lafayette's tour through the Green Mountains in 1825, even using his own mansion for the reception), Van Ness demonstrated a curiously cautious, yet consistent support for National Republican policies. Then, in the closing days of the 1825 legislative session, Cornelius Peter Van Ness notified the few straggling lawmakers left that he had served his last term as chief executive.¹⁷ Few doubted that he already had his eyes on the United States Senate seat that was to be filled the following year

by a vote of the legislature. Even fewer would argue that he didn't have the skills or experience for the post. Yet a growing concern was fomenting among political leaders in Vermont that his quest must be thwarted for the good of the state.

The ambition of Cornelius Van Ness was hobbled by his reputation as a political gamester. As one editor put it, he had an "aptness for intrigue and political management by which he has continued the State in a perpetual broil ever since his appearance within its limits." Now Vermonters were certainly no strangers to pitched political battles, such as occurred during the rise of the Jeffersonian Republicans from 1798 to 1801, or during the turbulent years surrounding the War of 1812. They also had their share of shrewd operators, from the Allen brothers to Bennington's Isaac Tichenor, whose maneuvers earned him the nickname "Jersey Slick." However, beneath the harsh rhetoric and underhanded maneuvering of these earlier times lay genuine skirmishes over principle. The same cannot be said of the era of Van Ness. His rise in Vermont came after the war, during a period of political calm, when most Vermonters displayed a notable distaste for politics as usual.¹⁸

Cornelius Peter Van Ness had been weaned on the byzantine New York style of politics and brought the art with him to the Green Mountains. During his youth, he learned the technique of building an interest. Men like Van Ness and Martin Van Buren had been taught to erect a coalition quickly around a significant, even if fleeting, issue in hopes of garnering a victory. They played politics for enjoyment, as a struggle waged to capture patronage and power. Coming to St. Albans as a young attorney on the eve of conflict with Great Britain, Van Ness was quick to side with the Republican administration, for he had large ambitions and they held the patronage. He did whatever was necessary to gain attention, from winning the hatred of his neighbors by prosecuting smuggling cases as district attorney, to evading the law to bring in federal revenue as customs collector. After his federal appointments ended and he turned his efforts to winning state office, he sagely focused his attention on the growing significance of the political will of the people, attempting to curry their favor as key to his advancement. This explains why he became an early and staunch advocate for the abolition of imprisonment for debt, for greater government involvement in education, and for temperance.¹⁹ These were issues that moved the common man. Van Ness stopped short of supporting other reform measures that would grant him no great advantage in his quest for office.

However, in his desire to get ahead of the masses on issues, Van Ness frequently acted as impetuously as a weathervane, infuriating allies and opponents alike. His intrigues during the congressional election of 1818

are one example. When the state Republican caucus met in the fall of 1817 to put together a slate of candidates, they inexplicably ignored regional caucus winner Ezra Meech of Shelburne and passed over freshmen incumbents Samuel Crafts of Craftsbury and Orsamus Merrill of Bennington. Instead, the candidates included General John Peck of Waterbury, William Griswold of Danville, and Rollin Mallory of Poultney. When a widespread outcry followed the announcement of these congressional hopefuls, Van Ness was quick to ride the wave of public opinion. Leading the opposition to “King Caucus,” he helped promote a second ticket that backed Meech, Crafts, and Merrill as the “people’s choice.” When the legislature counted the ballots in October, the candidates backed by Van Ness received the highest number of votes.²⁰

During the height of the Missouri Crisis, Vermont Senator William Palmer demonstrated sympathy toward the plight of Missouri in gaining statehood. He cast several votes that clearly showed his dismay at holding the state hostage over the slavery issue. Palmer believed that what went on within the borders of a state was their business. At first, Van Ness voiced his support for this stand. However, when a general clamor throughout the Green Mountains made it plain that voters wanted a hard line drawn against slavery, he quickly changed his mind. Or, as another scribe so fittingly stated, “this wily demagogue, carefully watching, as he has ever done, the course of public sentiment, chopped round and got into its wake.” Van Ness took up his pen and wrote a scathing article in Burlington’s *Northern Sentinel* condemning Palmer, and joined the Colonization Society.²¹

In 1823, during his first term as governor, Van Ness engaged in yet another political dalliance, one that would have graver long-term consequences. Like his brothers, he appeared to support Georgia Jeffersonian William Crawford’s bid for the presidency. Although much too astute to make a public pronouncement of the fact, in personal letters he clearly expressed his distaste for John Quincy Adams. He aligned with other Crawford supporters who pressed for the selection of presidential electors to be taken from the legislature and placed in the hands of the people. This group hoped that the electors would be chosen by districts, whereby they might be able to deprive New Englander John Quincy Adams of a sweep of Vermont’s electoral votes. However, the proposal went nowhere in the legislature that year.²²

By the next legislative session, seeing that Adams was the overwhelming choice in the state, the cagey Van Ness left the crusade. In his annual address of 1824, he now espoused his support for a statewide canvass of electors. The best he could do for Crawford supporters was to caution people not to automatically discount the Georgian just because

he was the candidate of the congressional caucus, which, of course, represented a complete about-face on his views of the caucus since 1818. This public pronouncement left his former comrades dumbfounded, and although they pushed the district idea during the session, it was soundly defeated.²³

Many Crawford supporters were left slack-jawed by Van Ness's reversal. Yet none reached the level of betrayal felt by St. Albans editor Judah Spooner. Van Ness was not a popular figure in St. Albans, yet Spooner's feelings were even more personal. It appears that Alden Spooner, a cousin of the editor, had married a niece of Mr. Crawford. Alden returned to Vermont in 1824, hoping to drum up support in the Green Mountains. When Judah Spooner saw the wily Van Ness wavering, he attacked the governor in his sheet with unbridled fury. Although momentarily taken aback, Van Ness persuaded the "respectable people" of St. Albans to leash the hotheaded scribe, then chuckled privately to a friend that "I suppose however he will come round rather moderately, as the little dog has come out so violently, that he can not all at once be *warm* on the other side, without too great disgrace." However proud of himself he was at the moment, he had made a bitter enemy of Judah Spooner, and it would come back to haunt him.²⁴

During his stint as governor, Van Ness displayed a caution generally observed by a candidate for national office. He stood for a vigorous national government and took a dim view toward any attempt to degrade it. The new governor argued for protecting the nation's manufacturing interests with a sufficient increase in duties, but was mindful of the "rights of the other great interests of the nation." He supported improving old roads and building new ones, and exempting fledgling industries from taxation, all the while preaching frugality in governance. After the opening of the Champlain Canal, which Van Ness correctly surmised "will soon be exclusively felt in the different branches of business" throughout the state, he endorsed investigating other canal possibilities in places lacking natural navigation. Yet he warned against wasting money on doubtful schemes and unfeasible projects. He was in the vanguard in his advocacy of social issues such as education and ending imprisonment for debt, but cautioned more zealous reformers that "the stability of laws is next in importance to their wisdom."²⁵ In other words, he had earned his sobriquet as an artful politician.

By 1825, at the age of forty-three, Cornelius Peter Van Ness had already carved out a fine political career, sometimes because of, sometimes in spite of, his penchant for living by his wits, of coloring outside of the accepted political lines. Vermonters, in the main, were satisfied with his performance in office. They admired the prestige and talent that he lent

to the state's high court during his tenure as chief justice and the glamour he brought to the governor's chair as chief executive. Yet they were wary enough of his flights of opportunism and high ambitions to grant him only offices with one-year terms. His first attempt at a Senate seat ended in defeat. Would the second time be the charm? Despite his talents and resumé, the change of Vermont's economic landscape and the change in the nation's political landscape boded ill for the governor. The denizens of the Green Mountains had cast their lot with the nationalist agenda of the American System. They considered it absolutely crucial that this new and unknown party rising up around Andrew Jackson be beaten back. As the emissaries of Old Hickory made their way to Vermont looking for adherents, supporters of the Adams administration now made loyalty the new watchword. The criteria for the U.S. Senate seat from Vermont had been cast in an entirely different light. As the editor of Middlebury's *National Standard*, J. W. Copeland, put it,

A crisis is attained in our affairs awfully momentous. The administration is about to be assailed by a desperate faction who are waging an interminable war upon measures upon which the great interests of our country materially depend . . . The fate of the country may be poised upon the election of a Senator in this state. Under these urgent circumstances, the people ought to be able to calculate with certainty upon the man they depute and the principles he espouses. A wavering politician will not do. He should be of no doubtful stamp in an emergency.²⁶

To the great many Vermont leaders who held this opinion, Cornelius Peter Van Ness was just the kind of ambitious fellow who could be lured over to the dark side of Jacksonianism. Many members of his family and close New York friends had already publicly come out in support of Old Hickory. Although the governor repeatedly pledged his allegiance to Adams, Vermont politicians fretted whether such a man could be trusted with the independence that six years in the Senate provided. However, the pool of available candidates who could match up with the talents of Van Ness was terribly shallow. Not surprisingly, those who were suspicious of the governor urged Horatio Seymour to seek reelection. Seymour's supporters argued that they would only be comfortable with someone who had been placed in this position of trust and had proven himself "of no doubtful stamp" when it came to following the nationalist agenda so vital to Vermont's future. Even the handlers of Van Ness saw the incumbent as their most formidable possible opponent. It appears that in early November, they approached the senator with the proposition that Van Ness would recommend Seymour for governor should he step down. Seymour refused, setting the stage for one of Vermont's most memorable political contests.²⁷



J. Grosche, Lith. Boston.

Horatio Seymour

Horatio Seymour, from Samuel Swift, History of the Town of Middlebury (1859), at page 254.

As for Horatio Seymour, he could easily be viewed as Van Ness's polar opposite. A careful man, he shunned political conflict and was troubled by partisan squabbling. He came to Middlebury in 1799, after beginning the study of law under Judge Tapping Reeve. This newly christened shire town of Addison County was beginning to develop into a bustling village, just the place for an ambitious young man on the make. Seymour completed his legal studies with the esteemed Daniel Chipman and became a member of the bar in 1800. Middlebury had become a hotbed of capable lawyers, yet the new attorney quickly acquired an extensive practice. Although Seymour would not accept work outside of his home county, word of his ability spread throughout the state. Yet it would be unfair to say that his success in political circles was due only to his reputation at the bar. Even though his legal skills were indeed formidable, his advancement could also be attributed to an extraordinary demeanor. Despite his success, Seymour remained humble and unassuming, treating all men equally no matter their station. It had been said that no man had more friends or fewer enemies.²⁸

Seymour's demeanor may explain his reluctance to jump into any of the vicious political squabbles of the era. Although nominally a Republican, he joined party politics only with great reluctance, refusing to be a rabid partisan. Therefore, his counsel was generally held in high regard on both sides of the aisle and he avoided making political enemies. Due to his great personal integrity, he was continually thrust into positions of public trust at the local level, and also served five years on the Executive Council during the turbulent period from 1809 through 1813. From 1809 to 1813 and from 1815 to 1819, he held the post of Addison County state's attorney. In 1820, he was chosen by the legislature to serve in the United States Senate.²⁹ While serving in Washington, he displayed his most egregious character flaw, a fear of public speaking. This trait had first manifested itself during graduation exercises at Yale, when he offered to be dismissed from the school rather than undertake an oration assigned him by the faculty. Seymour had no trouble with his phobia in his role as an advocate during his legal duties. Here, in his unassuming way, he would make the necessary discourse to the court and jury in his usual persuasive manner. Yet to rise in the halls of the Senate seemed so much an exercise in vanity that he rarely made public addresses to his colleagues.³⁰ His supporters argued that he overcame this shyness with his influence behind the scenes and by his steady adherence to principle.

Abraham Lincoln once remarked, "I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me." Horatio Seymour could have made the same statement in 1826. It is doubtful

that, had the Jackson party not arisen, had Cornelius Van Ness not thrown his hat into the Senate race, the incumbent would have been offered a second term. Seymour was an excellent lawyer, a man of humility and wisdom, but a man of average political ability. He did not cut the polished and charismatic figure that Van Ness had spent a lifetime honing; no one in Vermont did. Yet he was doggedly loyal to his state, and had a solid record of support for the American System. Could Vermonters be persuaded that this loyalty to the state's interests was more valuable than the prestige that Van Ness could bring to a Senate seat?

Despite the fact that two clear choices had emerged for the Senate seat early on, and that the wirepullers and thimblerriggers for both candidates were already hard at work, Vermonters should hardly have anticipated the spirited campaign that was to follow. After all, the next United States senator was not to be selected by the people, but by the vote of the legislature and executive council that were to be chosen in September. Instead, discussion as usual turned to local and congressional races and in Vermont, such talk didn't usually begin until after the Fourth of July. However, the year of 1826, the country's fiftieth anniversary, would prove to be a most unusual year. The reverberations surrounding the rise of Old Hickory were enough to break this tradition. Political early birds, nervous over the vacuum left in the governor's chair by the inaction of the legislative caucus, had already convened at the Orange County courthouse and in Montpelier to nominate Ezra Butler for chief executive.³¹ Therefore, as soon as the last speech was made, after the last eulogy of Adams and Jefferson was uttered, the political season was set to begin in earnest.

In northwestern Vermont, the race for the congressional seat had sparked the most interest. Ezra Meech, who was the incumbent in the Fourth District consisting of Chittenden, Franklin, Grand Isle, and Orleans counties, had declined to run again. This district, more than any other region in Vermont, had been energized by the opening of the Champlain Canal in 1823. Yet this electrifying transportation breakthrough did more than enhance the region's economic prospects. It also touched off a bitter regional rivalry between Franklin and Chittenden counties that was to last for almost twenty years. When the *Northern Sentinel* backed Heman Allen of Milton to succeed Meech, many Franklin County residents could hardly mask their displeasure, for no resident of their county had ever been a member of Congress. Their population was equal to Chittenden County, and they also had prospered after the opening of the canal, and they felt that, in fairness, it was their turn. They offered up an equally attractive candidate in Benjamin Swift, a St. Albans attorney, yet the *Northern Sentinel*, mouthpiece for Chittenden

County, scoffed at their plea. “Counties have no such claims,” responded the editor. “The Representative is to represent the District, and the electors must do violence to their consciences should they elect an inferior man, merely on the score of his living in a particular county.” To many Franklin County citizens, this callous statement amounted to a declaration of war.³²

No one was more pleased with this turn of events than Judah Spooner. The editor of the *Repertory* still seethed over being muzzled by Van Ness during the presidential campaign of 1824. With the acrimony arising between Franklin and Chittenden counties over the selection of a congressional candidate, and with Van Ness openly seeking a Senate seat, Spooner felt he might have the opportunity to exact some revenge. The plot began with a veiled warning. On July 28, the *Northern Sentinel* printed a letter from a correspondent by the name of “Franklin.” Although most likely not Spooner, it was clear that the writer was an associate. Franklin once again forwarded the argument that fairness dictated that Benjamin Swift should be chosen to represent the Fourth District. However, this letter included more than previous communications. For it not only offered Chittenden County residents the carrot of persuasive justification, it was quick to brandish a threatening stick in its closing passage.

It will also be recollected that a Senator is to be chosen at the next session of the Legislature, and that office is claimed for a gentleman residing in the county of Chittenden. When these things are taken into consideration by the intelligent freemen of the Fourth District, I am confident they cannot long hesitate between the two candidates who have been named—that they will readily yield to the claims of Franklin County, and cheerfully give their support to Mr. Swift.

The missive made it quite plain that a Chittenden County endorsement of Benjamin Swift was the going price for Franklin County support of the Senate bid of Cornelius Peter Van Ness. To Judah Spooner, this letter was also an ingenious trap that could not produce a bad result. Either Franklin County would receive its first congressman, or Chittenden County residents would reject the offer, insult Franklin County, and hand the St. Albans editor a reason to attack his old enemy. The choice was not long in coming. Spurred by the growing uncertainty surrounding most statewide offices, Chittenden County freemen were urged to meet at Dan Arnold’s hotel in Williston on August 8 to make their nominations. The gathering convened only briefly, to outline another meeting to take place a week later, where they would make their choices for governor, lieutenant governor, and councilor from Chittenden County. That the office of congressman was omitted from this list

sent a message as unmistakable as the bold endorsement of Heman Allen that appeared every week on the pages of the *Northern Sentinel*. Chittenden County had made their choice for congressman, and there would be no *quid pro quo*. Judah Spooner received the answer he was looking for, and immediately began his assault on the character of Cornelius Peter Van Ness.³³

The next issue of the *Repertory* came off the press just two days later. It was no coincidence that the senatorial candidate from Burlington was its focus. Writing about the current race for governor, a correspondent who styled himself “A Farmer” pondered, “Why is it that the political musket scatters shot from every direction more in this campaign than at any former period?” He feared that with the number of candidates in the field, the office would end up bartered in the horse sheds “where offices are frequently sold, and where political bargains are made.” Judah Spooner was only too willing to answer this query in his editorial. It was Cornelius Peter Van Ness who had caused this confusion by defying political convention. For the past few years, the sitting governor customarily notified the legislature early in the session if he wished to be considered for reelection. If he declined, the solons would then nominate another candidate. Van Ness, Spooner charged, had waited until the close of the session before signaling “his intention of retiring from the chair, or, in other words, of *being Senator*.” Van Ness, he continued, knew full well that with the lateness of the hour, with many members already on their way home, no choice could be made, throwing the system into chaos. Spooner speculated that this was a deliberate ploy on the part of the incumbent. For if no candidate was able to secure a majority, the election of chief executive would be thrown into the House, where Van Ness would be able “to exercise all the powers of intrigue and corruption of which he is master.” In the same issue, another writer who called himself “An Old Republican” offered up a far more serious accusation. He reported that Van Ness had met in Burlington with known Jackson ally Martin Van Buren and was now certain that the candidate was among the opposition.³⁴

Such accusations merit a swift reply, and it came in the pages of the *Northern Sentinel* the very next day. The correspondent “Hampden,” who would be Van Ness’s most zealous defender, attacked the St. Albans paper, arguing that the issue of the 10th demonstrated “the want of consistency, the perverseness of mind, and the profligate disregard of truth, which have uniformly marked the course of its venal editor, and his malignant coadjutors.” To accuse Van Ness of political artifice was old hat, so he ignored the charge that Van Ness had tampered with the gubernatorial selection process, and devoted his reply to the allegation that he

had become a member of the opposition party. Hampden began by identifying An Old Republican as Burlington resident and Van Ness nemesis Luman Foote, whose “little *workshop of calumny*” was instrumental in funneling information to St. Albans. Hampden did not deny that Van Ness met Van Buren a few days earlier. Rather, he explained that the old Bucktail had been traveling through New York, but had missed the regular steamboat to Whitehall when his party arrived at Plattsburgh. Van Buren therefore chose to go by land to Port Kent and take the ferry over to Burlington. He arrived around four or five o’clock and took the steamboat the following afternoon. While laying over in town, Van Buren decided to call on Van Ness. How, his defender concluded, could this chance encounter be employed as justification for the charge that Van Ness was an enemy of the administration?³⁵

Spooner was far from finished, and the offensive took a nasty turn over the next two weeks. The St. Albans *Repertory* filled its columns with an unpleasant political biography of Cornelius Peter Van Ness. The editor and his Burlington ally reexamined all of the governor’s alleged sins, from his shameless profiteering as customs collector, to his dual officeholding as boundary commissioner and state representative, to his purported Crawfordism. At this crucial juncture in our history, Vermonters needed to send a man they could rely on to the United States Senate. Spooner asked, could the character described in these pages over the past few weeks possibly be that man? The frenetic scribe turned the attention of his readers to New Hampshire, where Levi Woodbury currently held a Senate seat. Woodbury, like Van Ness, had held many offices of public trust; he was chosen governor, representative, and judge. His nomination for the Senate broke a deadlock that had endured for three legislative sessions. Woodbury, like Van Ness, had maintained a curiously lukewarm allegiance for Adams. Yet, within a month of taking his seat, the freshman senator began complaining about the administration. Although in the spring of 1826, Daniel Webster still considered Woodbury an Adams man, by June he was certain that he had gone over to Jackson. What assurances did Vermont have that Van Ness wouldn’t follow the path of Levi Woodbury?³⁶

Van Ness’s allies clearly worked through the night fashioning responses to be ready for the next day’s edition of the *Northern Sentinel*. “Chatham” turned the reliability issue onto Judah Spooner. He maintained that the ink-stained scold was a hypocrite, now arguing in defense of the Adams administration when in 1824, he, too, was a Crawford sympathizer, offering a few quotes from the issues of the *Repertory* from that year as proof. It was clear that the Van Buren visit was still troubling subalterns of Van Ness, because Hampden made another

attempt to set the record straight. Van Buren, he contended, was, as a United States senator, compelled by common courtesy to call on Mr. Van Ness, the state's chief executive, and this obligation was "strengthened" by the fact that they had known each other since boyhood and had even studied in the same law office.³⁷

Yet Hampden's response contained a more notable passage than his strained explanation of Van Buren's presence in Burlington. It was the first attack on the character of Horatio Seymour in the pages of the *Sentinel*. When the editor of the *Repertory* suggested that the incumbent senator was "entitled to the highest degree of confidence for his incorruptible integrity and valuable services," Hampden replied with incredulity.

No prudent friend of Mr. Seymour will ever venture, I imagine, upon a comparison of his talents and qualifications with those of Mr. Van Ness for the responsible station which he, by peculiar good fortune, has occupied for the last five years. On what occasion or question, during five sessions in the senate, has he stood up as an able debater, or a powerful advocate of the great interests of agriculture, commerce, and manufacturing? When has his voice been raised to give a fearless and efficient support to any leading measure of Mr. Adams or Mr. Monroe's administration? Or even to vindicate the character and policy of Mr. Adams from the violent abuse of the opposition?³⁸

It was, indeed, a time of urgent need, Hampden agreed. Therefore, Vermont's next senator should combine "the rare intellectual endowments, the knowledge, habits and character which fit him for the successful execution of so sacred and momentous a trust."³⁹

This remonstrance caught the attention of Seymour's friends in his hometown of Middlebury. Up to this time, a mere ten days before statewide elections would take place, the only newspaper debate on the choice for senator had been isolated to the snit taking place in the Fourth District, where the vengeful Judah Spooner labored to ruin the chances of his bitter enemy. However, when the assault was leveled at their favorite son, particularly at his Achilles' heel, Middlebury's newspaper, the *National Standard*, was quick to join the fray and rebut the charges. How ludicrous it was, argued editor J. W. Copeland, to suggest that Seymour was unqualified to be senator simply because he wasn't in the habit of making long speeches, for which purpose Copeland found "Mr. Van Ness is admirably fitted." Copeland pondered, what was the value of a six-hour address?

Most certainly not to convince empty benches or nodding Senators, who are perhaps laughing in their sleeves at the farce being played before them, but to canvass votes, five hundred miles distant, and to show their constituents through the columns of the *Journal*

and *Intelligencer*, how little they were mistaken in placing them as ornaments and pillars in the government.⁴⁰

Rather, firmness and integrity were the most important qualities necessary in the next United States senator. The Middlebury scribe assured his readers that when it came to supporting the administration, Seymour “has never wavered for a moment.” For the past five years, the incumbent had “acted with a fearlessness, promptitude, and decision which entitles him to the continued confidence and esteem of the citizens of Vermont.”⁴¹

Although Judah Spooner continued to roast Van Ness slowly over his editorial spit, the real newspaper debate now shifted to Burlington and Middlebury. Editors Copeland of the *Standard* and Samuel Mills of the *Sentinel* spent the next few weeks leading up to the sitting of the next legislature outlining the qualifications of their favorites and the weaknesses of their opponents. Remarkably, outside of the Champlain Valley, very little ink was wasted on the Senate race before the statewide elections on September 5. Of course, this isn’t to suggest that the rest of the state hadn’t felt its impact. For, as Montpelier’s *Vermont Patriot* admitted about the campaign, “we doubt whether that election has ever before had an influence upon the election of representatives to the General Assembly, anything equal to what has been exerted this year.” The *Rutland Herald* charged that some aspirants “were required to pledge themselves to support one or the other candidate.” An intense lobbying campaign had been going on for some time throughout the state unannounced by the papers. Copeland warned that the agents of Cornelius Peter Van Ness were “incessantly active and indefatigable in every quarter of the state.” The pen wielders at the *Sentinel* were quick to counter that Horatio Seymour himself had shed his shy demeanor, and was also actively canvassing the state, not, they mocked, “by any means, to solicit the suffrages of the freemen, face to face, but doubtless, to make a fuller exhibition of those rare and amiable qualities, which, his eulogists say, he possesses in such abundance.”⁴² Although lamenting the destruction of harmony that this unique race had engendered, the editor of the Windsor’s *Vermont Journal* remained composed.

For ourselves, we deem it wholly unnecessary, at present, to say anything more on the subject. The claims of the respective candidates have been warmly canvassed in the papers west of the mountain[s], where much interest has been manifested, and we shrewdly suspect a closer scrutiny will be instituted when they are brought upon the carpet in Montpelier.⁴³

Friends of the two combatants were not willing to wait that long to apply their own brand of scrutiny. Each week until the election was

to take place, the *Standard* and the *Sentinel* bristled with assault and re-
crimination. By then, the options of the voters would be made clear.
They would either accept the overwhelming talents of Van Ness or select
Seymour's integrity and virtue.

Editor Mills and his stable of allies stressed their favorite's record as
a testimony to his talents. As state's attorney, as collector of customs, as a
member of the boundary commission, as legislator, as chief justice and
as governor, hadn't Van Ness faithfully discharged the duties of these
so-called "stepping stones?" As Hampden so painfully pointed out, Mr.
Copeland himself had nothing but kind words for the governor when
he was unanimously reelected in 1825. Now he labeled him an intriguer.
What had changed? Only one thing, suggested his defender. Van Ness
stood in the way of Seymour's reelection.⁴⁴

The aspirations of Mr. Seymour did not cause this change of heart,
Copeland replied, for "we have hitherto sustained Mr. Van Ness in all
the various stations which he has occupied in the State," a trust "we
hoped we should never have found reason to regret." However, ambi-
tion had consumed him. "He has been so long treated with deference
and pampered with office, that he seems to entertain a belief that every
station he thinks fit to ask for, no matter who is the occupant, must be
instantly surrendered to his accommodation." Furthermore, the situa-
tion had indeed changed since August of 1825. A new party, quite pos-
sibly at odds with Vermont's interests, had emerged behind General
Jackson. Van Ness's reputation for intrigue had been curbed somewhat
while in statewide office by the prospect of annual reelection. Cope-
land wondered, "should he eventually succeed, and firmly fix himself
for six years in the Senate, who will answer for his future moderation?
What assurance have we that the man who now seeks our favor with such
supple arts and importunities will not be inclined to indemnify himself in
his office for the humiliations which he forced himself to endure?"⁴⁵

To this charge that Van Ness was really a Jacksonian wolf in Adams
clothing, his handlers demanded, where is the proof? In issue after issue
of the *Sentinel*, they urged his attackers to furnish them with any shred
of evidence that linked him to "the unprincipled junto of Van Buren
and McDuffie." None would be forthcoming, Hampden sniffed, because
"the 'doubts' of Mr. Seymour's partisans and bosom-friends, whose
whole political salvation depends upon his reelection, are the only evi-
dence which it is pretended to be found."⁴⁶

The argument that Seymour was a man of great integrity was but a
smokescreen, Hampden continued, to camouflage a "timid, rear-rank
sort of man." It was part of a political strategy of the incumbent's friends
"to stifle all inquiry into his qualifications, to decline and discourage all

open discussion of the comparative merits and abilities of the two candidates.”⁴⁷ Copeland was quick to respond.

Who that has met Mr. Seymour at the bar, at which he ever held a high rank in this county, ever doubted the fertility of his mind or the power of his argumentation? Who that had conversed with him upon political *topics*, or noted his public course so perfectly consonant to the views and interests of the people of this state, will deny him an intelligence and understanding fully adequate and comprehensive for the discussion of those great questions of national policy which demand his investigation?⁴⁸

Hampden replied with a yawn. It wasn't enough that Seymour is “an honest man,” “a faithful man,” “the people’s friend,” “the watchful sentinel,” “as if *mere moral honesty* . . . qualifies a man for the complicated and arduous duties of this most responsible station.” Examining the senatorial record of the incumbent, the governor’s chief defender saw nothing that would suggest the respect reputedly accorded him by his colleagues. Seymour usually found himself on committees of minor importance, and when he landed a plum assignment, such as his stint on the Judiciary Committee, he was the least senior member. Although he was chairman of the Committee on the Contingent Expenses of the Senate, this was a position that Hampden likened to being in charge of “the disbursement of the Pin Money of the President’s Lady.” Therefore, he argued that it was clear that Cornelius Peter Van Ness was “not only worthy of a seat in the Senate of the United States, but better qualified from his commanding talents and well-earned reputation as an able, honest, and influential politician, to promote the high and important interests of this State and of the Union, than the present incumbent, or any other man in the section of the state from which a Senator is to be chosen.”⁴⁹

To this Copeland shot back,

Grant us your promises, and it is not enough that the man to whom the destinies of the Union are to be entrusted [is] great. He must be a man of integrity. Greatness without goodness in public as well as private life, is often the source of the worst evils. We want men of abilities. But in the present crisis of the affairs of this nation, men of steadfast virtue as well as talents are *absolutely* indispensable to our safety.”⁵⁰

As the legislature convened on Thursday, October 12, supporters of both candidates believed that Seymour had enough votes to win the election. Friends of the incumbent felt he held a thirty-vote majority. Therefore, as one observer noted, “Van Ness is for delay to work his magic.” With Friday’s legislative calendar full with the business of organizing the house and receiving the governor’s address, and with Monday

set aside for the reports of the state treasurer, the treasurer of the University of Vermont, and the superintendent of the Vermont state prison, Tuesday the 16th would be the earliest possible date for the senatorial election. During an abbreviated Saturday session, Joseph Ingalls of Sheffield offered a resolution that the House and Executive Council meet in county conventions on Tuesday for the purpose of making nominations for county officers. This would not only buy Van Ness more time, but had the added benefit of allowing the trading of offices for votes. The Seymour forces succeeded in getting this resolution tabled. However, when General William Cahoon of Lyndon moved that the Senate vote take place on that day instead, they also were rebuffed, setting the stage for a weekend of vigorous electioneering.⁵¹ A Seymour partisan reported the activities to Middlebury postmaster George Cleveland,

You can hardly form an idea of the exertions made by V. N. and his friends—expresses sent to different parts of the state for third House members—who have any influence. V. N. takes a stand on the common—And when at his lodgings—has a crowd about him to receive their orders. Hostlers, stage drivers—Barbers and Peddlars—are singing the song of persecution for him.—But we cannot learn that they have made much impression—And although I must confess I have at times felt a little alarm'd—It originated more from their great exertions than from any serious impressions they made. I stop at Cottrell's where the Ex. Gov'r and friends put up—And most of the Chittenden County members—I wish the Question was decided. For we have great anxiety. And very little pleasure.⁵²

As the new legislative week began, with the solons having had a couple of days to weigh the myriad offers, promises, and arguments of both sides, the Cahoon resolution was called up again and passed. The election was set for Tuesday morning at eleven o'clock. The House and Council met separately to vote, then convened in a joint assembly to combine their tallies. The House brought a ten-vote majority for the incumbent into the assembly, while Van Ness garnered a three-vote lead in the Council. Therefore, the joint ballots provided Horatio Seymour with a narrow reelection victory.⁵³

The election post-mortems varied. The *St. Albans Repertory* was naturally delirious, exulting; “THE VICTORY IS OURS! VERMONT IS FREE!” In Middlebury, the elated *National Standard* saw the result “as the triumph of the people over the political intriguers, and unholy combinations, by which their will was sought to be defeated.” It was left to the *Rutland Herald*, which was further from the fray, to provide more telling analysis. The editor noted that all but one member of the Addison County delegation voted for Seymour and that Rutland County gave him unanimous support. We may also be safe in assuming that Franklin

County voted overwhelmingly for the incumbent, given their deep-seated animosity toward Van Ness. Further, the editor offered, “It is well known that Mr. S’s strength lay in the most populous parts of the state; and I hazard nothing in saying, that although his majority was but ten in the House, the Representatives of at least two-thirds of the people voted for him.” If *Herald* editor William Fay’s examination of the results can be believed, it is powerful evidence that, in the end, the beneficiaries and proponents of the American System, towns along the Champlain Valley (away from the governor’s home base of Chittenden County), and the more populous market towns in the interior could not, despite his many talents, bring themselves to depend upon Cornelius Peter Van Ness.⁵⁴

The mood in Burlington was understandably bitter. Reporting the disappointing results, the *Northern Sentinel* suggested that “an influence FROM WITHOUT THE STATE was brought to bear upon the question, which no individual could have withstood.” As the following weeks would reveal, Van Ness accused the Adams administration of working behind the scenes to get Seymour elected. The initial evidence for the charge was thin. A friend of the president had written a letter to a member of the Vermont legislature suggesting that Adams preferred the incumbent. Editor Mills charged that on the basis of this letter, many honest representatives were misled into voting for Seymour as being in the best interests of the administration. From this humble beginning, the forces behind the former governor used the winter months to fashion a web of conspiracy and betrayal against the current régime so insidious that by the spring of 1827, Van Ness announced that he had no choice but to side with Andrew Jackson.⁵⁵

Was there something to this accusation? Did the Adams administration attempt to influence this election? By 1826, they surely needed every friend they could get and Seymour was indeed a loyal friend. However, they made no strenuous effort to defeat Van Ness and their influence was no secret. Bennington’s *Vermont Gazette* edition of October 24 carried the typical recommendation, copied from the *National Journal*, Adams’s organ in Washington, which flattered Seymour and suggested “should he be re-elected, we shall rejoice in his return.” “A Member of the Legislature” confessed that Seymour and his friends used this tactic because they “found themselves under the necessity” of showing that their candidate was held in high esteem in Washington, but nothing more. Editor Fay of the *Rutland Herald* mocked the loser’s theory, arguing that Rutland County’s delegation was unanimously against Van Ness, and “we do not believe that one of them were swerved in the least, by any undue feelings or domestic influence.”⁵⁶

Instead, the quickness and the severity of the charge suggested another attempt by Van Ness to cultivate political opportunity. The narrow loss of the Senate seat left his thirst for the limelight of Washington unslaked. It seems more likely that Van Ness attacked Adams because he now found his only remaining option for fulfilling his quest to be siding with Jackson, carrying Vermont for Old Hickory, and being compensated with a position should Jackson's presidential campaign be victorious. Therefore, he needed the accusation of meddling as an excuse to make the switch. Yet after a contentious Senate race in which he steadfastly argued his loyalty to Adams, Van Ness seriously underestimated how this apostasy would play in the Green Mountains. Daniel Pierce Thompson of Montpelier made the most accurate prediction when he stated that by siding with Jackson, "Van Ness has signed his political death warrant from this state."⁵⁷ Although Van Ness and his followers worked tirelessly in the time leading up to Jackson's election in 1828, they made few converts, as his betrayal hung like a millstone on his quixotic attempt to transform Vermont. Adams easily carried the state, and Cornelius Peter Van Ness was well on his way to becoming a political pariah.

Though Van Ness failed to capture Vermont for Jackson, he still expected to be rewarded for his valiant efforts. Many believed that his talents would earn him a cabinet post. Yet, in the end, he brought too little to the table to garner such a plum. New Hampshire political chieftain Isaac Hill, and the new secretary of state, old friend Martin Van Buren, would come to his rescue. These architects of the new political alignment rewarded loyalty, therefore they were able to secure for Van Ness the ambassadorship to Spain, and helped sate his appetite for revenge by ruthlessly employing the "spoils system" to expunge many of his Vermont enemies who held government positions. State Department clerk William Slade, accused of being a behind-the-scenes player in the campaign, U.S. District Attorney William Griswold, and a myriad other postmasters, marshals, and federal officials were swept out. The former governor may have been gratified to see his tormentors brought to heel as he sailed for Madrid, but this purge drew predictable outrage, destroyed forever his political prospects in Vermont, and set back the cause of the Democratic Party in the Green Mountains for almost a decade.⁵⁸

The senatorial campaign of 1826 between Horatio Seymour and Cornelius Peter Van Ness was, indeed, a watershed election. Before this year, the embers of partisan rancor in Vermont had been dying, only to combust spontaneously into the politics of personality. It was a unique campaign, one waged totally over character. One of the candidates, Horatio Seymour, was touted by his friends as a loyal, trustworthy ally

of the administration. His opponents charged that he was at best a man of average talents unfit for the awesome responsibility of the post he held. The other, Cornelius Peter Van Ness, was a man of unquestioned ability, but whose ambition and penchant for political intrigue left many uneasy when the dark cloud of Jacksonianism began to pass over the state. Even though the election was not to be decided by the people, but by the vote of the joint assembly of the legislature and the council, it quickly caught the attention of the electorate, either through the virulent battles taking place in the newspapers on the west side of the mountains, or by the solicitations of the candidates or their minions circulating throughout the state. In more than a few towns, the choice for representative was solely determined by which Senate candidate they would vote for. When Van Ness narrowly lost the vote in the state house that October, he responded by ushering Vermont into the second American party system.

However, partially due to the fallout from this unique political campaign, the return to party politics in Vermont would be far different from what occurred in other states. For Van Ness's switch to the Democratic Party and the subsequent political purge that took place in the Green Mountains after Andrew Jackson took office seriously undermined the appeal of that party in Vermont, already repelled by Old Hickory's reputation as a military chieftain and slaveholder. This weakness paved the way for the insurgent Anti-Masonic Party to become the chief competition of the National Republicans. They would draw from the Van Ness-Seymour campaign the debate over character. For like these two candidates, the two largest Vermont parties would not differ from each other on national issues. Rather, they would differ on character, and Anti-Masons used membership in the lodge as their litmus test.

That the Green Mountains would become a fertile field for the new party should have come as no surprise after the gubernatorial race of 1826. When Van Ness left the governor's chair without giving the legislature time to nominate another choice, it was left to the people to draft a candidate. Instead of choosing someone who befit the spirit of the age, Vermonters selected Ezra Butler, a farmer, Baptist elder, and Revolutionary War veteran, over the reservations of the pundits and politicians. This choice of a virtuous, religious yeoman anticipated the antimasonic persuasion that would get its impetus nine days later, when William Morgan disappeared in upstate New York. Therefore, this campaign not only ushered in the return of partisan politics, it also played a small but significant role in the rise of the Anti-Masonic Party.

NOTES

¹ Daniel Feller, *The Jacksonian Promise: America, 1815–1840* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 2–4.

² David Ludlum, *Social Ferment in Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 86–87; Feller, *Jacksonian Promise*, 3–13.

³ Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2–11; Charles Sellers, *The Market Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815–1846* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 103–171.

⁴ Lewis Stillwell, *Migration from Vermont* (Montpelier: Vermont Historical Society, 1948), 124–151; Walter Hill Crockett, *Vermont, The Green Mountain State* (New York: Century Publishing, 1921), 3:69–74; Edward Brynn, “Patterns of Dissent: Vermont’s Opposition to the War of 1812,” *Vermont History* 40 (Winter 1972), 10–27; *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1817), 15.

⁵ Randolph Roth, *The Democratic Dilemma: Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 117–130; P. Jeffrey Potash, *Vermont’s Burned-Over District: Patterns of Community Development and Religious Activity 1761–1850* (Brooklyn, N.Y.: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 86–105; Edward Chase Kirkland, *Men, Cities, and Transportation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948), 1:84–90.

⁶ Ludlum, *Social Ferment*, 95; Robert O. Rupp, “Social Tension and Political Mobilization in Jacksonian Society: A Case Study of the Antimasonic Party in New York, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, 1827–1840” (Ph. D. dissertation, Syracuse University, 1983), 218–220; Donald B. Cole, *Jacksonian Democracy in New Hampshire* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 168. This newspaper was owned by Isaac Hill. The rhetoric of labeling all National Republicans “Federalists,” was a ploy of Hill’s that worked far better in the Granite State. *Repertory*, 1 June 1826.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Repertory*, 8 June 1826. Judah Spooner’s full name was Colonel Jeduthan Spooner. He had commenced his newspaper in Burlington in 1821 and moved his press to St. Albans after receiving an invitation from leading businessmen to relocate in that Franklin County town. See Hamilton Child, comp., *Gazetteer and Business Directory of Franklin and Grand Isle Counties for 1882–1883* (Syracuse: Journal Office, 1883), 34. His newspaper was titled the *American Repertory* until May 18, 1826, when it became just the *Repertory*.

⁹ I rely heavily on two sources for biographical information on Cornelius Peter Van Ness. The first is the treatment by the Hon. David Smalley found in Abby Maria Hemenway, ed., *Vermont Quarterly Gazetteer* (Burlington, Vt.: A. M. Hemenway, 1868), 1:608–614. The other is T. D. Seymour Bassett, “The Rise of Cornelius Peter Van Ness, 1782–1826,” *Proceedings of the Vermont Historical Society* 10 (1942): 3–20.

¹⁰ Bassett, “Van Ness,” 4–6.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6; Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, 1:601–611. In no other instance in his life leading up to the Senate race did Van Ness incur as much wrath as for his conduct as customs collector. He is accused of being instrumental in the sacking of former collector Buel, breaking the law by allowing trade with the enemy, and profiting from the egregious violations. However, this is, for the most part, unfair. For Van Ness was chosen to handle a ticklish situation: to prevent open trade with Canada while at the same time allowing enough to provide needed war materiel and revenue. Since the Vermont border was one of the few places where trade was possible, it is no wonder that Van Ness made out so handsomely. The ambiguous nature of Van Ness’s responsibilities and trade relations between Vermont and Canada is described in H. N. Muller, III, “A ‘Traitorous and Diabolical Traffic’: The Commerce of the Champlain-Richelieu Corridor During the War of 1812,” *Vermont History* 44 (Spring 1976): 78–96. The one charge leveled against Van Ness during his term as collector having real merit was that he had collected the moiety on seizures that had been made by his predecessor, Buel, before he was replaced. See Samuel Buel, *The Book, or Fragments of Modern Chronicles . . .* (Burlington, Vt.: Samuel Buel, 1819).

¹² Crockett, *Vermont*, 3:147–152; Bassett, “Van Ness,” 8; Merrill D. Peterson, *The Great Triumvirate* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 92–95.

¹³ Bassett, “Van Ness,” 8–16; W. S. Rann, ed., *History of Chittenden County, Vermont* (Syracuse, N.Y.: D. Mason and Co., 1886), 316, 452–453. Van Ness was named the first president of the Burlington bank.

¹⁴ “Statement, Votes for Senator, 1820,” *Vermont State Papers*, 76; 77. The Council was the precursor of the Senate, which was established in 1836.

¹⁵ Bassett, “Van Ness,” 16–18; C. P. Van Ness to Col. F. J. Austin, 5 May 1823, Van Ness MSS, Bailey-Howe Library, University of Vermont; G. Edward White, *The Marshall Court and Cultural Change 1815–1835* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 331–332.

¹⁶ Bassett, “Van Ness,” 18. Even Wyman Spooner, editor of the *Vermont Journal* in 1823, a long-time nemesis of Van Ness, lamented his nomination as governor not only because he thought he was

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a political huckster, but due to his fine performance on the Vermont Supreme Court. Spooner complained that the constant turnover of judges damaged the reputation of the state's high court, and that if someone of Van Ness's ability remained on the bench, he would not only provide it with prestige but with much-needed stability. See the *Vermont Journal*, 14 July, 28 July, and 4 August 1823. Van Ness won the caucus vote for governor 64–48.

¹⁷ Crockett, *Vermont*, 3:201–208; Bassett, "Van Ness," 20.

¹⁸ *National Standard*, 19 September 1826. For evidence of the political calm in Vermont during the era of good feelings see Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 102–116; Ludlum, *Social Ferment*, 50–55; Paul S. Gillies and D. Gregory Sanford, eds., *Records of the Council of Censors of the State of Vermont* (Essex: Offset House, 1991), 233.

¹⁹ Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 146; Bassett, "Van Ness," 15–20. For an example of New York-style politics, see Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 227–235. Many thought Van Ness's attempts at reform were nothing more than political grandstanding. The correspondent "Hamilton" argued that his efforts "give 'some' evidence of cunning, 'much' of popularity-hunting, 'little' of talents, and 'none' of a knowledge of constitutional . . . law." *Repertory*, 5 October 1826.

²⁰ J. Kevin Graffagnino, " 'I saw the ruin all around' and 'A comical spot you may depend:' Orasmus C. Merrill, Rollin Mallory and the Disputed Congressional Election of 1818," *Vermont History* 49 (Summer 1981), 159–168; Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, 1:622. Although the candidates backed by Van Ness received the most votes, Rollin Mallory went to Washington, contested the election, and ultimately was awarded Merrill's seat.

²¹ Chester Ralph Palmer, "A Political Biography of William Adam Palmer, 1781–1860" (M.A. Thesis, University of Illinois, 1953), 31–42; *Repertory*, 5 October 1826; *North Star* 3 October 1826. *Records of the Governor and Council* (Montpelier, Vt.: J. & J. M. Poland, 1879), 6:539–543. The Vermont Colonization Society was formed in 1819 after the Missouri controversy began. Van Ness joined and became second vice president in 1820. *Northern Sentinel*, 11 August 1820; *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1820), 239–242.

²² Donald B. Cole, *The Presidency of Andrew Jackson* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 17; Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 356:n5; Bassett, "Van Ness," 20; *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1823), 123, 159. *Repertory* editor Spooner argued that Van Ness supported Crawford throughout the 1826 Senate campaign. See *Repertory*, 24 August, 31 August, and 28 September 1826. After the election, during his campaign to explain his conversion to Jacksonianism, Van Ness argued that he declared his intention to support Adams to friends in April of 1823. *Northern Sentinel*, 16 March 1827. However, John Bailey countered that Van Ness's alleged support for Adams in the spring of 1823 was quietly targeted at only a few influential individuals during his unsuccessful attempt to secure Brockholst Livingston's seat on the nation's high court. Livingston had died in March. Bailey reasoned that Van Ness was well aware that all recommendations for the vacant position had to be submitted to the secretary of state, who in 1823 happened to be John Quincy Adams. Bailey, who served as a clerk at the state department at this time, found it curious that Van Ness never made a public pronouncement of his support for Adams. See the *Northern Sentinel*, 4 May and 11 May 1827.

²³ *Governor and Council* (Montpelier., Vt. J. & J. M. Poland, 1879), 7:445–447. Van Ness may have been persuaded to support Adams after the *Northern Spectator*, Rollin Mallory's newspaper based in Poultney and no friend of Van Ness, asked all candidates for high office to declare their presidential preference. See *Rutland Herald*, 31 August 1824. Crawfordites, led by Robert Temple of Rutland, still attempted to get their districting plan through the legislature in time for the presidential election. However, their proposal was crushed. Instead, electors were to be chosen on a general ticket and the electoral act would not take effect until 1828. A joint committee of the House and Council chose the presidential electors of 1824. *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1824), 6, 18–20. The House debate on the issue can be followed in the *Rutland Herald*, 26 October and 2 November 1824.

²⁴ As an example of how the bitterness over Van Ness still simmered, it was St. Albans representative Silas Hathaway who, in 1820, offered the resolution to oust the Burlington solon for dual officeholding, which was dismissed. *Northern Sentinel*, 25 August 1826; *Repertory*, 13 August 1826; C. P. Van Ness to Judge [Charles K.] Williams, 1 August 1824, Van Ness MSS, Bailey/Howe Library.

²⁵ *Governor and Council*, 7:438–452.

²⁶ *National Standard*, 5 September 1826. Editor Copeland's warning that the fate of the country could depend upon the election of a single senator came to fruition when the "Woolens Bill," a tariff bill in 1827, was defeated by Vice President Calhoun's tie-breaking vote in the Senate. Calhoun's vote defeated several other proposals as well. Sellers, *Market Revolution*, 289–290.

²⁷ Seymour being persuaded to run for reelection can be found in Hemenway, *Gazetteer*, 1:612. The handlers of Van Ness approaching Seymour was in the *Rutland Herald*, 23 November 1825. Van Ness's brother John was chair of the Washington central committee in charge of Jackson's 1828 presidential campaign. See Cole, *Presidency of Andrew Jackson*, 17.

²⁸ Samuel Swift, *History of the Town of Middlebury* (Middlebury, Vt.: A. H. Copeland, 1859), 254–255; L. E. Chittenden, *Personal Reminiscences* (New York: Richmond, Croscup and Co., 1893), 206.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255. Seymour received 118 votes in the House with all other candidates gathering 75 votes. In the Council he received 11 out of 13 votes. “Statement, Votes for Senator, 1820,” *Vermont State Papers*, 76:77.

³⁰ Swift, *History of Middlebury*, 255–257. I examined the *Annals of Congress* for the years 1821–1826, and Seymour never gave a speech in the full Senate.

³¹ *Repertory*, 6 July 1826; *Vermont Gazette*, 4 July 1826.

³² *Northern Sentinel*, 21 July, 28 July 1826; Kenneth A. Degree, *Deadlock, Deceit and Divine Intervention* (Vergennes, Vt.: The author, 1997), 7–13.

³³ *Northern Sentinel*, 11 August 1826. The *Sentinel* endorsed Heman Allen on the 21st of July. At the August 15 meeting, Heman Allen was nominated by the Chittenden County caucus, who found him “honest, capable, and faithful to the constitution.” *Northern Sentinel*, 18 August 1826. If there was any doubt about Spooner’s motives, the writer “Civis” corroborated that the editor’s crusade against Van Ness was “wholly prompted by personal pique.” See *Northern Sentinel*, 6 October 1826.

³⁴ *Repertory*, 10 August 1826. Van Ness gave his notice that he would step down on November 14. The legislature in 1825 commenced on October 13 and ended on November 18. *Rutland Herald*, 23 November 1825. One has to wonder whether the negotiations with Seymour at this time may have led to Van Ness announcing his retirement so late. The demise of the Federalist Party after 1817 left the choice of governor in the hands of Republicans in the legislature. Therefore, it is not surprising that their choice received over eighty percent of the vote from 1818 through 1825. After the failure of the 1826 legislature to select a candidate, the governor was again chosen by the legislature in 1827 and 1828.

³⁵ *Northern Sentinel*, 11 August 1826. Although Foote wasn’t identified by name, when he is referred to as “our doughty little Squire of twelve inches,” there is little doubt about whom they are talking. He would go on to become the editor of the *Burlington Free Press*, which started up three months after Van Ness publicly came out for Jackson. It would be my guess that Hampden was Van Ness ally Benjamin Bailey. See Degree, *Deadlock*, 4–7.

³⁶ *Repertory*, 24 August 1826. The travails of Levi Woodbury are chronicled in Donald B. Cole, *Jacksonian Democracy in New Hampshire*, 47–69.

³⁷ *Northern Sentinel*, 25 August 1826. Equally troubling as the shifting explanations for Van Buren’s presence in Vermont in the *Sentinel*, is the fact that they bear little resemblance to the reasons given in the New York papers. The *Northern Spectator* reprinted an article from the *New York Spectator* on September 13, 1826 containing the following passage:

They talk darkly of a visit from Mr. Van Buren among the Green Mountains, which was considered as political. Now we protest against casting such imputations upon gentlemen traveling for health or pleasure, unless they commit such overt political acts as may fully fix upon them the character of political missionaries . . . Much of the scenery of Vermont is bold and striking, romantic and wild; and cannot Mr. Van Buren ramble among mountains and cataracts, crags and glens, with as much innocence and delight as other lovers of the beauties and glories of nature?

Such inconsistencies could hardly have helped the credibility of the Van Ness campaign.

³⁸ *Northern Sentinel*, 25 August 1826.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *National Standard*, 29 August 1826.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Vermont Patriot and State Gazette*, as quoted in the *National Standard*, 26 September; *National Standard* 3 October 1826; *Rutland Herald*, 19 September 1826; *Northern Sentinel*, 6 October 1826.

⁴³ *Vermont Journal*, 7 October 1826. It is important to note the impact of the Mountain Rule on the silence of eastern papers. Since 1791, when Vermont entered the Union, one Senate seat was designated eastern, and contestants for that seat came from the eastern side of the mountains. Conversely, the western seat was filled by candidates from the western side of the mountains. The seat that Van Ness and Seymour vied for was, of course, the western seat. Therefore, many eastern papers perhaps felt that they should leave the newspaper fight to the editors on the western side. For more on the Mountain Rule, see Lyman Jay Gould and Samuel Hand, “A View from the Mountain: Perspectives in Vermont’s Political Geography,” *Growth and Development of Government in Vermont*, Reginald L. Cook, ed., The Vermont Academy of Arts and Sciences, Occasional Paper 5 (1970), 19–24; Samuel B. Hand, Jeffrey D. Marshall, and D. Gregory Sanford, “Little Republics: The Structure of State Politics in Vermont, 1854–1920,” *Vermont History* 53 (Summer 1985): 141–166 and Samuel B. Hand, “Mountain Rule Revisited,” pages 139–151 in this issue of *Vermont History*.

⁴⁴ *Northern Sentinel*, 15 September, 22 September 1826.

⁴⁵ *National Standard*, 5 September, 3 October 1826.

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⁴⁶ *Northern Sentinel*, 22 September 1826.

⁴⁷ *Northern Sentinel*, 8 September, 22 September 1826.

⁴⁸ *National Standard*, 5 September 1826.

⁴⁹ *Northern Sentinel*, 1 September, 22 September, and 29 September 1826. As for Seymour's committee assignments, he began in 1821 on the committees on Militia and Pensions, the same held by his predecessor, Isaac Tichenor. Thereafter, Seymour was assigned variously to committees on Accounts, Judiciary, Naval Affairs, and Contingent Expenses of the Senate. He was chairman of the committee on Accounts in 1823, and Contingent Expenses in 1825. See Crockett, *Vermont*, 3:178, 180, 194, 201, 212.

⁵⁰ *National Standard*, 19 September 1826.

⁵¹ *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1826), 6–8, 13–19; Jonathan Hagar to George Cleveland, 15 October 1826, George Cleveland Papers, Sheldon Museum; *Rutland Herald*, 17 October 1826. In the spring of 1827, Van Ness was still bitterly complaining about how quickly the joint assembly took the vote for senator. He felt he should have had two more days to lobby for votes, as he believed was customary. *Northern Sentinel*, 16 March 1827.

⁵² Jonathan Hagar to George Cleveland, 15 October 1826. I believe that the term “third House members” refers to members of the press.

⁵³ *Vermont General Assembly Journal* (1826), 16–21.

⁵⁴ *Repertory*, 19 October, 1826; *National Standard*, 24 October 1826; *Rutland Herald*, 7 November 1826. Another reason to believe that Franklin County would have voted overwhelmingly against Van Ness can be divined from the results of the first Heman Allen-Samuel Swift congressional race in the Fourth District. Swift received 73 percent of the Franklin County vote against Allen. There is little reason to believe that Van Ness would have done better in Franklin County than Allen. See Degree, *Deadlock*, 7–13. Walter Hill Crockett mistakenly assumed that small towns voted against Van Ness, put off by his polish and brilliance. See Crockett, *Vermont*, 3:216.

⁵⁵ The letter was from John Bailey, who had clerked for Adams when he served as secretary of state, to Azro Buck, who had served as Speaker of the House during the previous legislative session and was congressman-elect. See the *Northern Sentinel*, 20 October, 27 October 1826 and Roth, *Democratic Dilemma*, 144–146.

⁵⁶ *Vermont Gazette*, 24 October 1826; *Rutland Herald*, 7 November 1826.

⁵⁷ Daniel P. Thompson to [? his cousin], 24 August 1827, Rugg Collection, Vermont Historical Society.

⁵⁸ Cole, *Andrew Jackson*, 123. As Cole points out, Van Ness only obtained the post after Levi Woodbury of New Hampshire refused it. Degree, *Deadlock*, 4–7.