

The Cobbler in Congress: A Brief Biography of Henry Wilson

1. Jeremiah Jones Colbath

The boy who would become Henry Wilson was born under the name of Jeremiah Jones Colbath in the small eastern New Hampshire town of Farmington on the 16th of February 1812. Wilson was the eldest child of Winthrop and Abigail Colbath. The Colbath's had immigrated from Ireland early in the 18th century arriving in southern New Hampshire and living there for several generations until the conclusion of the Revolutionary War when Wilson's great grandfather moved to the Farmington area.¹ At the time of Wilson's birth Farmington had a population of roughly twelve hundred individuals most of whom were farmers. Labor was the law of the land and consequently little formal education was available to those who lived there, for what use was a boy in school who could otherwise be helping his father plow the fields?²

The Colbaths had long lived a life of poverty and Wilson's father proved no exception. Winthrop Colbath was primarily a manual laborer who bounced from one job to the next. He spent a good portion of Wilson's childhood employed at a local sawmill. He constructed a house for his family when Wilson was seven.³ Despite being quite capable, Winthrop was never able to provide for his family due in large part to his alcoholism. A source described him as “too much interested in cider,”⁴ a point of frustration for Wilson and one which later influenced his personal support for temperance. In contrast to Wilson's oftentimes strained relationship with his father he maintained a stellar relationship with his mother, Abigail, who was described as handsome, fond of reading, sensible, and industrious.⁵ All of these qualities could easily be attributed to Wilson himself and perhaps represents the special bond the two shared. Although sources differ as to the exact number of Colbath children, general consensus suggests that Abigail birthed eight children, all sons, three of whom would succumb to death before Wilson, or “Jerry” as his friends called him, reached ten years of age.⁶ Wilson put it best with his comment, “I was born in poverty, Want sat by my cradle. I know what it is to ask a mother for bread

when she has none to give.”⁷ Poverty would define Wilson's childhood and much of his adult life. Yet, poverty and adversity were also responsible for instilling in Wilson a sense of perseverance, determination, and resourcefulness, these qualities perhaps more so than any others were responsible for his success as a politician.

Wilson proved to be a bright and driven young man with a strong desire to learn. As a young child Wilson enrolled in a local school overseen by a Mistress Guy who taught him basic reading, spelling and basic arithmetic.⁸ One humorous story about his public schooling shows that Wilson's sense of justice was also well developed at an early age. One cold morning Wilson noticed a group of older boys who had laid claim to the schoolhouse fireplace preventing the younger children from using it. Wilson sought to rectify the situation through that age old method of diplomacy: fist fighting. Wilson challenged one of the larger boys and obtained permission for the younger boys to use the fire. Unfortunately, Mistress Guy failed to see the just nature of Wilson's cause and punished him with a flogging.⁹

Even more important to the growth of Wilson's mind was a chance encounter he had at the age of eight with Mrs. Anstress Eastman the wife of the only lawyer in Farmington, Nehemiah Eastman. Upon seeing the condition of Wilson's clothes Mrs. Eastman generously gave him some to wear and asked him if he knew how to read. When Wilson proved that he could Mrs. Eastman provided him with a copy of the New Testament and told him that if he read it the book would be his. Wilson, excited by the prospect of owning his own book, read the entire New Testament in a week and promptly returned to Mrs. Eastman who could scarcely believe that an eight year old had read the book so quickly. However, as she tested him on its contents, he quickly displayed an excellent understanding of the book from start to end. Amazed at his accomplishment Mrs. Eastman happily gave Wilson his first book. Although not one for sentimentality Wilson held on to the book for the rest of his life. Wilson later credited receiving the book as the starting point of his intellectual growth.¹⁰

Wilson would continue to reap the benefit of his relationship with the Eastmans. Both Anstress and Nehemiah took an active interest in the boy and opened up their substantial library to his inquisitive mind. Over the next several years Wilson would use this opportunity often. He gladly walked the fourteen miles to venture to and from the Eastmans residence to obtain books. Wilson's appetite for books proved great and he soon began borrowing books from: a local judge, a grocer, the deputy sheriff, and a local politician as well. As time passed and his interests broadened he also grew interested in newspapers and magazines, of which the Eastmans had an ample supply. Allegedly, over the course of his childhood Wilson had read over one thousand books not to mention countless newspapers and magazines.¹¹

At ten years of age Wilson was sold by his father into indentured servitude to a Mr. William Knight, a hardworking farmer in Farmington who had need of an extra farmhand. Knight was a hardman and was extremely demanding of Wilson during his servitude. Wilson was expected to work daily except for Sundays and could not depart the farm without Knight's consent. In addition to these basic requirements Wilson was also denied the right to go the local tavern, gamble, drink alcohol, or pursue relations with the opposite sex. If Wilson fulfilled his end of the contract he would receive six sheep and a few oxen for the ten years of his life worked for the farmer. Knight further revealed his frugal character when Wilson was unable to sell his oxen immediately upon receiving them. Wilson asked if he could board the oxen at Knight's farm for the weekend. His master obliged but forced him to pay fifty cents rent for two days.¹²

Despite the difficulty of his life under Knight, Wilson continued to prove an active reader. A remarkable feat when one considers the fact that the only time he was able to read was after he had completed his tasks for Mr. Knight. Wilson would frequently read late into the night by the light of the fire.¹³ These books and works were Wilson's escape from his life as a farmhand, a life which in light of his later decisions, clearly did not suit him. Wilson's dedication to reading granted him many of the

skills that would define him during his political career. His analytical skills, excellent memory, and ability to research and understand a subject were in large part the result of his love of literature.

Wilson proved to be a skilled farmhand, excelling at all tasks he was given and working attentively for his master. For Mr. Knight the young Wilson had proved to be quite valuable. Finally at the age twenty one, having spent more than half of his life in indentured servitude, Wilson completed his service and sold his sheep and oxen for eighty-four dollars. Considering that prior to this point Wilson had never had more than two dollars he likely felt downright rich with his new found wealth.¹⁴ Never one to sit idle, Wilson began to look towards his future and finding work.

Prior to this Wilson had one more task he wanted to complete, to formally change his name from Jeremiah Jones Colbath to Henry Wilson. Little evidence suggests why he chose the name Henry Wilson; most likely he was influenced by an individual of the same name, some biographers point to Reverend Henry Wilson of England.¹⁵ Even less evidence exists to identify his reasons for the name change, although many theories have been concocted in an attempt to explain this action. Perhaps the best interpretation of this action comes from Adelaide Waldron of Rochester who claimed simply that, “all thought that it would be to his advantage.”¹⁶ Perhaps more important than the motivations of his name change was its symbolic nature. Jeremiah Jones Colbath's change to Henry Wilson in the summer of 1833 not only provided him a new identity, it also symbolized the new path upon which the young man from Farmington was about to set foot.

2. The Natick Cobbler

Wilson left Farmington in 1833. He realized that the town held little promise, and having decided that he had no interest in farming, Wilson looked beyond New Hampshire in hopes of finding a steady job for himself. Having heard from some other young men in the area about the expanding shoe

manufacturing market in Natick, Massachusetts Henry Wilson decided that it was time for him to leave his home in search of his future.¹⁷

In the bitter cold of December Henry Wilson packed up his meager belongings and started the hundred mile journey from Farmington to Natick. Determined to make his journey as inexpensive as possible, Wilson opted to make this journey of several days on foot. As usual when Wilson set his mind to a task his resolve could not be shaken and he made great time, completing the hundred miles of winter travel in four days. Wilson even managed to fit a visit to Bunker Hill and the office of *The North American Review* (one of Wilson's favorite publications) into his trip. Upon arriving in Natick around midnight on the fourth day Wilson found that he had managed to make the trip on a mere dollar and five cents. Although the town of Natick was not aware of it at the time the young man who arrived in December of 1833 would go on to become a leader in the community and eventually the nation.

The Natick which Wilson arrived in was a changing town. When Wilson arrived in Natick the population was around 890, the town had no public high school, no library and not even a single lawyer. Within twenty-five years however the population would boom to nearly 4100 and had established a library and several schools. This transition was thanks to two things. The first was the addition of the Boston and Worcester Railroad line which went directly through Natick making it a center of commerce. The Second event was the growth of shoe making in the town thanks to Edward Walcott. In 1828 Walcott began to produce more shoes than ever before attracting many other cobblers to Natick. This trend would continue resulting in Natick, which had not even bothered to track the value of its shoe manufacturing trade in 1833, to become the eighth biggest manufacturer in the state by 1850. It was this community which Wilson joined, little did he Natick know it had just received its “most famous citizen.”¹⁸

Wilson's first professional relationship in town was formed with Mr. William P. Legro who, for five month's labor, agreed to teach Wilson the trade of making shoes. At this time a single worker

would make the entire shoe or “brogan.” Wilson proved, unsurprisingly, a highly skilled apprentice and within seven weeks had mastered the trade, a task which was supposed to have taken five months. Desiring to work for himself as quickly as possible Wilson offered Mr. Legro fifteen dollars to be freed from his apprenticeship. Hoping to obtain enough money to pay for more education Wilson made shoes at an amazing pace. He would frequently work up to sixteen hours a day. At one point Wilson became determined to make fifty pairs of shoes, a task which would generally take a week, in one sitting. Despite coming just short Wilson was allegedly able to make an unrivaled forty-seven and one-half pairs of shoes before finally submitting to sleep.¹⁹

The shoe manufacturing trade would make a great deal of money for Wilson as he made shoes off and on for the next two decades. The first several years of Wilson's period in Natick he worked primarily with the interest of getting enough money to pursue an education. Over the two years and five months between his arrival in Natick and his departure in 1836 Wilson produced roughly six-thousand pairs of shoes, making a seven-hundred dollar profit for himself.²⁰ After returning to Natick in 1837 Wilson became one of the largest shoe makers, both in the amount of shoes he made and the number of people he employed, in Natick. By the end of 1838, a mere year after his return, Wilson would do an astounding \$17,000 worth of business. Wilson's production continued to expand and, by 1847, he employed one-hundred and ninety employees and manufactured a staggering 122,000 shoes. Wilson produced 664,000 pairs of shoes before leaving the trade for good.²¹

Wilson's first several years in Natick were important as they allowed Wilson to make a name for himself not only financially, but also socially. Wilson quickly made connections with many important citizens in Natick. Fittingly, one of the most important friendships Wilson was to make during his early years in Natick was a result of his need to read. Natick, at the time of Wilson's arrival, had little in the way of a public library. The sole exception was a small collection of about two-hundred volumes overseen by Deacon William Coolidge, a leader in the town and one of Natick's most prominent

citizens. Deacon Coolidge and his wife, much like the Eastmans before them, took an interest in the young man from New Hampshire and offered him a room in which to stay. Wilson built a strong relationship with the Coolidges going with them to church and on social outings. Eventually Wilson would come to be treated as a son to this generous couple.²²

Interestingly, for an individual who never joined the local congregation until much later in life Wilson also built close relationships with the local ministers of the Natick Congregational Church. Erasmus D. Moore was the minister of the Natick Congregation at the time of Wilson's arrival and the two quickly became fast friends sharing common interests. Moore became minister in 1831 and served in that post for seven years during a time of rapid growth in the community. Wilson regularly relied on Moore during his early years in Natick and the two stayed in touch after Moore left the community. Later in life Wilson aided Moore by helping him receive several government posts.²³ Upon Moore's departure from Natick Wilson found another important friend in Moore's successor, Samuel Hunt. Under Hunt's guidance Wilson assumed an active role in church life going so far as to teach a bible class at Sunday School. The bond between the two men is represented the fact that when Hunt left his post it was Wilson who spoke and presented Hunt with a watch which the community had purchased for him.²⁴

Another key event in the growth of the young uneducated farmhand occurred in 1834 with the creation of the Natick Debating Society. Wilson, who had always been fond of debate, met Alexander Thayer who shared Wilson's passion for debate and learning. The two became fast friends as Thayer would frequently visit Wilson to share debates on history and politics. As time went on the two invited more participants, eventually founding the Natick Debating Society. The society met either weekly or biweekly to discuss topics ranging from the merits of fictional writing on broader society to slavery and abolition. The society would become hugely influential to Natick's development over the next several years insofar as the young men who made up its membership would go on to be leaders at national,

state, or local levels. Those involved went on to become lawyers and doctors, newspaper editors and several served on the legislatures of Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut. These young men would in many cases go on to become lifelong friends of Wilson and oftentimes they would be his strongest supporters in his political life. The society would hold roughly one hundred meetings until 1840 at which point it was merged with the Natick Lyceum.²⁵

The obvious question here is: how did this exceptional group of young men accomplish so much in the coming years? The answer is quite simple. The public speaking and analysis which these men would take part in at every meeting clearly prepared them for their future careers. The number of careers in fields such as law and government reveals a great deal about the way in which the debating society was run. The men also benefited from the talents of their fellow members. The talented group of young men who formed the core of the debating society, learned from one another to the advantage of all. At a reunion held in 1860, members of the society supported for this point, claiming that the debating society was in large part responsible for their standing in society.²⁶ Henry Wilson in particular, lacking the formal education of many of his peers, grew from his involvement in the society. Early on Wilson, although intelligent and knowledgeable, had trouble particularly with his speech. His lack of formal schooling showed in his grammar and pronunciation and he would often tremble while speaking. His natural perseverance overcame his shortcomings and he soon became a capable debater in his own right. Wilson's public speaking lacked flair and elegance however this would eventually become one of his greatest assets in public life. Wilson's ability to pull together knowledge and organize it allowed him to simply overwhelm an opponent with facts. As a result Wilson possessed an undeniable need to research and understand a topic prior to his discussion. As a result when Wilson arrived at a stance on a topic he would be immovable in his defense of it.²⁷

It was during these early years in Natick that Wilson also developed his opposition to the institution of slavery. Little is known about the original source of Wilson's hatred of slavery as sources

give credit to many individuals including the influence of abolitionists Lydia Maria Child and George Thompson. Wilson himself claims that he did not publicly share his feelings until he made a trip to the South.²⁸ In the spring of 1836 as a result of his work-ethic and bustling social life Wilson over tired himself and fell very ill. Two years of engaging himself completely in his pursuits had finally taken their toll on the inexhaustible Wilson. Initially he planned to attend a school in hopes of obtaining a law degree, but, his health was so poor that a doctor suggested that before he get his education he should take a trip south and relax. Eager to visit the nation's capital Wilson left Natick in May of 1836.²⁹ Wilson enjoyed his trip until he entered Maryland and for the first time saw slavery. Wilson told a man that slavery was an evil, to which the man responded that Wilson shouldn't express that opinion in the state of Maryland. Wilson despised the idea that slavery could be supported and that his freedom to speak his mind was hindered in a nation built on principle of liberty.³⁰

As his journey continued Wilson was at times amazed, at times disgusted, and at times both. He would go to the capital where he saw legislation regarding the freedoms of blacks discussed. He watched as Southern politicians dominated both the House and the Senate. Wilson was particularly amazed by Senator Thomas Morris of Ohio the lone Senator to voice opposition to the slave power. Wilson later visited a slave market where he saw slaves sold into bondage and exchanged between masters. Wilson couldn't help but notice the contradiction: thousands of men were purchased on a daily basis within the capitol of the nation claiming to be the world's greatest champion of freedom. This moment would in many regards come to define Wilson's political career. As long as Wilson was in public office all of his decisions and actions were focused on destroying the slave trade and creating racial equality within the United States.³¹

At the conclusion of his trip to the nation's capitol Wilson returned north going past Natick on his way to Strafford, New Hampshire where he attended the local academy. Wilson did well in his first term at Strafford and spoke in favor of slavery being abolished in the District of Columbia at the end of

the term.³² Wilson would next move to Wolfesboro, New Hampshire in order to study under Miss Eastman, the daughter of the Mr. and Mrs. Eastman who had played such an important role during his childhood. Wilson did well even going on to be a school teacher at a school in Wolfesboro over the winter. During the spring of 1837 Wilson continued his studies at Concord Academy in New Hampshire. Wilson once again did well showing a particular skill in the field of rhetoric or speaking.³³ After several terms of study Wilson ran out of money and was forced to give up his dream of becoming a lawyer. Wilson had loaned most of his seven hundred dollars savings to a friend. During the “Panic of 1837”¹ Wilson's friend went bankrupt and left Wilson once again without money. Although distraught over the news Wilson was able to finish one more term of schooling thanks to the generosity of Samuel Avery. When this term ended in November of 1837 Wilson returned to Natick, this time for good.³⁴

The next three years would pass with relative quiet. Wilson continued to labor by day at his ever expanding shoe manufacturing venture and spent his free time reading, attending the Debating Society or socializing with peers and associates. This would all change in 1840, a year which would drastically alter both his personal and private life.

One of the happiest moments in Wilson's life occurred on the 28th of October 1840, the day that Miss Harriet Howe of Natick became Mrs. Harriet Wilson. The wedding ceremony between the two was presided over by Wilson's good friend Hunt and many of Wilson's good friends from the debating society as well as the Coolidges and likely Wilson's own family. Harriet Wilson was a perfect match for the industrious and hard working Wilson, she was a well-educated and refined woman with a generous heart. She was admired and appreciated by all who knew her and she had a natural ability to make those around her happy. She embodied Wilson's ideal woman: strong, sensitive and loyal. Wilson would become an advocate of woman's suffrage later in his life, thanks in large part to Harriet's influence. She wasn't the type to remain in the background while Wilson became one of Natick's most

1 The Panic of 1837 was an economic depression that struck the nation as a result of the unregulated inflation which took place in the aftermath of President Jackson's closure of the Second National bank. Some banks only began accepting payment in silver or gold (specie) and the fragile system which had been set up on paper currency abruptly collapsed.

prominent citizens. She quickly became involved in the community and played a very public role in the Natick Congregation and, later, frequently accompanied Henry down to Washington for sessions of Senate. Unfortunately Harriet was suffered from poor health and frailty and often needed bed rest. Her ill health kept her from being around Henry as much as she would have liked.³⁵ Six years later on November 11th 1846 Harriet gave birth to Henry Hamilton Wilson, the only child that the couple would have. By most accounts Henry was a family man who, although frequently away from his family, loved them dearly and tried to play the role of father better than his own had.³⁶

On a more public note 1840 was also the year when Henry Wilson became a household name in the greater Natick community by becoming politically aware. Henry's first steps into politics actually occurred in 1839 when some of his peers sought to have him elected to the General Court on a temperance platform. Wilson came a few votes short in his bid and once again focused on his work. Soon fate provided him with another opportunity to become politically involved. The presidential election of 1840 was a highly contested race pitting former Democratic Vice-President Martin Van Buren against William Henry Harrison of the Whig party. Wilson, in opposition to the Democratic policies, decided to publicly support Harrison. His first speech was delivered in the Methodist meeting house in Natick against a Mr. Joseph Fuller who was a supporter of Van Buren and a major democratic figure in that part of the state.³⁷ In this debate Wilson quickly proved his political ability and became a strong supporter of the Whig Party. The success of his initial speech resulted in speaking engagements throughout the greater Boston area. At the end of campaign season Wilson had given over sixty speeches, all of them to large audiences and great effect.³⁸ Such relentless campaigning and dedication to voters would become characteristic of Wilson's political style and by the late 1860s he was one of the most widely recognized politician in the nation.

Wilson's actions in the election of 1840, helped Harrison carry the region, and lifted Wilson from an unknown to one of the most celebrated citizens of Natick. Not surprisingly, Natick's citizens

recognized the promise in the young man and voted for him as Natick's representative to the General Court of Massachusetts.³⁹ At the age of twenty-eight Wilson won election to the General Court and became a leader in Natick. This accomplishment had been a great achievement for Mr. Wilson, however, he was at this point merely beginning a long political career.

3. Wilson the Whig

Wilson would serve as a representative of Natick for the next two and although he was not overtly active at this early point in his career he took his responsibilities seriously. Upon his election Wilson found that by the luck of the draw he had been placed in the back corner of the assembly and thus was far from the action. In typical Wilsonian fashion, rather than accept his position, Wilson noticed an older representative who had been placed in a closer location. Wilson offered the man three dollars to switch seats. The former gladly consented but later claimed that it was somewhat arrogant of Wilson to do such a thing, to which another representative who knew Wilson responded by saying that Wilson's actions actually revealed a fierce desire to be able to take an active role in the House.⁴⁰ Wilson's hardworking nature had once again pushed him to become the most successful politician that he could be. During these first sessions Wilson did not speak often, preferring to observe and understand the way in which the legislative body worked, preparing himself for an eventual active role. His attendance at every meeting symbolizes his devotion to the office.⁴¹

Despite the relative quiet of his first term Wilson did stay true to his values and consistently supported the causes of abolition, temperance, and the working man. Wilson's own background undoubtedly pushed him to support labor issues and passed legislation to that end. For example, Wilson voted to lower or abolish taxes which would be particularly hard on the working class.⁴² Wilson likewise continued to vote for legislation which would benefit the status of African-Americans and slaves. Wilson voted in favor of the law to permit bi-racial marriage in Massachusetts consistently. His

continued support of the abolitionist cause is represented by his proposal to allow the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery society to hold a meeting in the hall of the House. This was considered highly radical at this point in time.⁴³

Unfortunately for Wilson his political career experienced a brief, albeit not unforeseen, lull in 1842 as he decided not to run for a third term in the House. Wilson sought a State Senate position as one of the five representatives of Middlesex County, but was defeated when the Democratic party won the county. Wilson briefly returned to his shoe manufacturing workshop with the intention of eventually returning to politics.⁴⁴

In addition to Wilson's rise up the political ladder Henry also took an active role in military affairs throughout his life. Wilson would become famous for his role as the Chairman of the Senate Military Committee, a role he served with distinction. Wilson saw war as an evil but had long possessed an interest in the military and militia and was well aware of its necessity for defensive purposes. It was with this in mind that Wilson joined the militia in Farmington before his move to Natick. His rise to prominence within the Massachusetts Militia largely coincided with his political ascendance. In 1843, unbeknownst to Wilson, he was elected Major of a local artillery regiment. Wilson was not even aware of his own election to the post until he read about it in the local newspaper. Three years hence in 1846 Wilson would be elected to the post of Colonel of the same regiment and Brigadier-General of the Third Brigade of the Massachusetts Volunteer Militia a mere six weeks later. In typical fashion Wilson dedicated himself to expanding his understanding of military tactics and affairs and thus becoming a proficient military officer. Wilson would never lead men in combat during the five years he held this post, but he was able to instill pride and discipline in his men. Wilson was said to have drilled his brigade to a higher degree than any other in the state and he was well liked by the men he commanded. Wilson's service would lead others to regularly refer to him as "General Wilson" for the remainder of his life.⁴⁵

Wilson ran successfully for one of the Senatorial positions in Middlesex County in 1843. He stayed true to his roots speaking once again in favor not only of halting the spread of slavery but also protecting the rights of freedmen throughout the North. Wilson delivered an impassioned speech in support of a law which protected the rights of all children, including African-Americans, to attend public schools. Thanks in large part to Wilson's efforts a bill based off of this one would be passed by the senate.⁴⁶ Wilson also continually pursued his agenda of temperance not only at the state level, but within the Natick community. He joined numerous temperance societies throughout his career in Massachusetts and the nation's capital.⁴⁷

During Wilson's first stint on the state senate the crucial issue on both the national and state level was the proposed annexation of Texas. For years American farmers had been moving to the region and as early as the late 1830s the issue of annexation had been present in the state of Massachusetts.⁴⁸ The admission of Texas was extremely complex primarily because of its implications on the spread of the slave states and consequently the already strained relations between the North and the South. Admission of Texas would have provided Southern Democrats with several more votes in both the Senate and House granting them a political coup over their Northern and Western counterparts. Meanwhile calls for expansion under the pretext of Manifest Destiny were running rampant throughout the nation. By the time of Wilson's election to the state senate in 1843 the issue had come to a head and the time had come for Massachusetts to take a stand on the issue. Wilson, joined with a group of young Whigs who joined together to promote their anti-slavery views. With Charles Francis Adams, son of Massachusetts Congressman John Quincy Adams, as their leader they pushed legislation instructing their national representatives to block annexation.⁴⁹

The "Young Whigs" quickly revealed their strength by getting the resolution passed. On the national level Northern politicians were temporarily able to prevent the passage of annexation. But the Whig victory proved short lived. Within a few months Democrat James Polk was voted into office and

outgoing President John Tyler, in a show of brilliant statesmanship, had a treaty for annexation passed by a joint resolution of both houses of Congress. While a Senate resolution would have required a two-thirds majority the joint resolution required only a simple majority and during the last days of session the treaty was approved by a single vote. Polk, upon taking up office, acted on the passage of the treaty and within two years Texas entered as the 28th state in the Union.⁵⁰

The Whigs had not only lost in their attempt to stop the annexation of Texas, but also split as a party. The party platform had not changed with the times and its members could no longer agree on issues. Texas and the election of 1844 drove a wedge between the factions of the party. Although the Whig party would survive for several years but, in a decade it would be all but irrelevant.⁵¹ In response to the passage of the treaty to annex Texas many of the younger Whigs took a strong position on the issue and held a convention in January of 1845 to oppose the admittance of Texas as a state. As a member of the Young Whigs, Wilson was a part of the five man committee which planned and organized the event. The young Whigs invited members of other political parties to attend the convention, a tactic that Wilson would use again to confront the Whig party five years later. The convention was a huge success attracting over six hundred delegates from 141 towns and signifying a new public position on the issue of slavery within Massachusetts. Speakers such as William Lloyd Garrison, one of America's most outspoken abolitionists, enthralled audiences and symbolized the monumental shift the party had undergone. Wilson claimed that this event led to the subsequent fracturing of the Whigs into the Conscience or anti-slavery and Cotton or pro-slavery Whigs.⁵² Wilson played an active role in countering Texas legislation over the course of 1845 in public forums, speaking to audiences in Waltham in August. In October Wilson organized a meeting at Concord which brought back much of the anti-annexation fervor that had died out in the preceding months.⁵³ Despite the best efforts of Conscience Whigs annexation could not be stopped which led directly to war with Mexico. Despite these setbacks Wilson proved that he was prepared for a leadership role politically and, that the

anti-slavery movement had a new and courageous champion.

Wilson declined to run for another term as a state senator in 1846 instead opting to return to the House of Representatives as a constant supporter of the anti-slavery movement. Wilson, invigorated by the new leadership position continued to lead the Conscience Whig party during this session. In early February Wilson gave a speech proclaiming, “the unalterable hostility of Massachusetts to the further extension and longer existence of slavery in America and her fixed determination to use all constitutional and legal means for its extinction.”⁵⁴ Wilson took this stance throughout that session but it garnered heavy opposition from some of the more senior members of the Whig party. To Wilson such opposition was meaningless for, although the Whig party was in power in Massachusetts, Wilson was beginning to feel substantial misgivings about the party's policies as a whole.

Business problems and Harriet's poor health forced Wilson to take a year off from politics in 1847. On a more positive note, Wilson was able to spend time with his newly-born son, Henry.⁵⁵ This break did not halt Wilson's political career however and he was once again thrust into the political limelight in February of 1848 when, after decades of service to the state of Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams died, leaving a vacant seat in the House of Representatives. Wilson, after only seven years in politics, was one of three candidates proposed to fill the position. Wilson voluntarily withdrew in support of Horace Mann, and was consequently appointed as a delegate to the Whig National Convention for the upcoming fall presidential election.⁵⁶ Ironically it was Wilson's appointment to this position that allowed him to eventually destroy the Whig party. Had Whig strategists had any idea what was to transpire they surely would not have sent the charismatic cobbler from Natick. Wilson's appointment thrust him into the next stage in his career.

4. The Birth of Free-Soil

As the presidential election of 1848 approached the Whigs sought to recover from the election

of Polk four years prior. This election forced the Whigs to set a direction for the party for the coming years. Would they establish themselves firmly as the opponents to slavery, or would plod a course of appeasement and inactivity? The conflict was particularly fierce in Massachusetts, once the seat of the Whig Party's political power. The main source of contention was the Wilmot Proviso which would have banned slavery in any lands or territories acquired from Mexico, hence Texas. Despite ultimately being defeated, The Wilmot Proviso created a rift in the Democratic Party. The Van Buren Democrats offered to work with any party willing to oppose the Democrats and Whigs while simultaneously supporting the Wilmot Proviso.⁵⁷ Meanwhile Whig leaders, in an attempt to garner wide public approval, looked to Mexican War hero, Zachary Taylor as a presidential candidate. Many Whigs including Wilson expressed hostility towards Taylor's nomination because he did not support the Wilmot Proviso. The dissenters were nevertheless outvoted as it was believed that Taylor would attract the most votes and consequently, he won the Whig's nomination for the Presidency. Upset over his party's direction Wilson called for all of those who did not support Taylor to meet later that evening. Although Wilson's call only produced fifteen participants, those involved quickly pledged to invite others from minor factions and splinter parties to a new convention held in Buffalo in August of that year.⁵⁸ The Free-Soil party was born.

Prior to the National convention in Buffalo the foundation for what was to become the Free Soil Party was laid in Worcester on June 28, 1848. In response to what had occurred at the Whig Party convention Wilson and his associates called for a convention to discuss the issues manifesting themselves politically at the time, in particular the dominance of Southern interests and politicians over their Northern counterparts. The convention exceeded even the most optimistic hopes of its coordinators as over five thousand individuals, the majority of them Conscience Whigs, attended the convention and pledged their support. The platform of the newly formed party focused on their unshakeable dedication to prevent the extension of slavery while subsequently combating the growing

influence of Southern politicians. Over the next several months the Free Soilers sought to attract other parties to their growing ranks, primarily the Liberty Party and Van Buren Democrats. Their efforts paid off as they attracted the better part of twenty thousand people to the national convention in Buffalo. Despite the fact that Taylor was eventually elected to the presidency the establishment of the Free-soil party held monumental implications for both state and national political climates.⁵⁹ First and foremost it directly combated the exceedingly ambitious agendas being pursued by Southern Politicians. Secondly, the formation of the party demonstrated the influence which an adeptly managed alliance of parties could have, an important lesson over the next few years. Finally, and perhaps most importantly the formation of the Free-Soil party symbolized that slavery was a significant enough issue in and of itself to be the central focus of a political party. Wilson had played a crucial role in the formation of this new party yet, he was just getting started.

Throughout the early existence of the Free-Soil party Wilson had neglected to serve in the state legislature, opting instead to help nurture the newly formed party. To aid himself in this task Wilson in the fall of 1848 purchased the “Boston Republican” newspaper which became an invaluable asset to the advancement of Free-Soil interests. Wilson wrote many of its articles, and served as editor from 1848-1851. Wilson lost a total of seven thousand dollars in support of the paper, yet for Wilson this was a price he was willing to pay for the voice which the little newspaper had provided the fledgeling party.⁶⁰

Wilson was recognized for his dedication to the birth of the Free-Soil party by being named the chairman of the Free-Soil State Committee in Massachusetts. Wilson served in this capacity for the next four years, laboring tirelessly to set and attain the objectives of the Free Soil party while also striving to ensure the success of the Massachusetts Free Soil Party and its coalition. Of all the responsibilities Wilson bore during the time none was more arduous than ensuring amicable relations between the different parties. During these four years Wilson championed the anti-slavery cause and the rights of the workingman while simultaneously increasing the exposure of the Free-Soil party

through pamphlets and issues of "The Republican." It would be during these four years that Wilson learned much of his leadership skills as well as the ability to preside over committees and organizations. Wilson used many of the skills he learned during this period later in his political career. It seems that as much as Wilson's efforts benefited the Free Soil Party they also paid dividends for Wilson himself.⁶¹

Confident that the Free-Soil party could stand on its own Wilson once again ran for office. In 1849, he was voted into the Massachusetts House of Representatives as the representative from Natick for two terms. Wilson played a far more active role in the political machine this time around and was even nominated for the position of Speaker of the House by the Free Soilers, however, the Whigs defeated him. During his time in the House, Wilson was a progressive, voting to defend the needs of African-Americans, workers and the common man while seeking to end practices such as capital punishment and flogging in the Navy. To some, even members of his own party, Wilson's policies were highly radical, but Wilson was merely following his own values.⁶²

Wilson was returned to the Massachusetts Senate in an election which represented the changing nature of Massachusetts politics. Mobilized by Daniel Webster's support of the Compromise of 1850, legislation which sought to manage the growing discontent over the slave issue, the Free Soilers and Democrats were vying to take the state from the Whig party. In the elections in the fall of 1850 coalition representatives outnumbered the Whigs in both the House and the Senate. This disastrous blow to the already reeling Whigs symbolized the end of their dominance in Massachusetts politics. Wilson's coalition would be the dominant force in the state for the next three years.⁶³ Fresh off their victory in the state elections the coalition now had the difficult task of maintaining their shaky alliance in the selection of state offices and a senator from the state. A compromise was reached in which the Democrats would select state officers so long as a Free Soiler was elected to the national Senate seat. It took all of Henry Wilson's skills to keep both factions in line and he more so than anyone else was

responsible for the coalition's success during this period and throughout its existence. Both factions would stay true to their word, and after several months of hard work Free Soiler Charles Sumner was named the long term Senator from Massachusetts.⁶⁴ Sumner would go on to be widely praised as a champion of the abolitionist cause and one of the most famous senators of the time. It is ironic that Sumner, who has become more well-known than Wilson in recent times, owes his senate seat to the Natick Cobbler.

Wilson's management of the coalition government was acknowledged and rewarded when he was elected to Senate in 1850 and named Senate President. Wilson would be responsible for the selection of state offices and senators as well as overseeing the day to day workings of the state senate during this period. He did well in this post and received praise from his peers at the conclusion of his first term. Wilson was reelected to this post again and served with distinction until the spring of 1852 at which time he had concluded his career in the state legislature.⁶⁵ Nearly twenty years before Wilson had arrived in the community of Natick with the clothes on his back and eighty dollars to his name. During this time Wilson had made himself one of the most influential politicians in the state of Massachusetts.

Upon the conclusion of his duties in the state legislature Wilson continued to work tirelessly as chairman of the Free-Soil Committee in the state. As 1852 was a Presidential election year there was much to do to prepare for elections in the state and beyond. Wilson was selected as chairman of the convention, a high and well deserved honor for the man who had been integral to the formation of the party four years prior. The convention went extremely well and Wilson played a role both publicly and behind the scenes. The convention nominated John Hale for the presidency and Samuel Lewis for the Vice-Presidency.⁶⁶ Despite Wilson's best efforts in the elections the Free Soilers lost much of the momentum they held over the previous years at the national level of government as support on the had fallen. Yet the coalition had fared extremely well throughout the state as many communities elected coalition candidates. Wilson was thrilled with the results of the election claiming the downfall of the

Whig party.⁶⁷ Excited by the success of his party in the elections, Wilson was preparing another of the Free-Soil party's major operations in the state of Massachusetts as they prepared to hold the state constitution committee over the summer of 1853.

One of Wilson's major goals was to hold a constitutional convention in order to amend and rectify the state constitution. The Massachusetts' Constitution had already been amended twice, once in 1780 as a result of the Revolutionary War and again in 1820 when Maine broke from Massachusetts and became an independent state.⁶⁸ Delegates picked by each community came together in May of 1853 to form the convention. Wilson was so eager to be picked that he put his name in for consideration in both his native Natick and the town of Berlin and was elected in both.⁶⁹ Thanks to his renown within the state and the fact that Coalitionists outnumbered Whig's Wilson was selected as the chair of the Ways and Means Committee. He was the floor organizer and would preside over the convention should the presiding officer be unable to fulfill his duties.⁷⁰ Wilson spoke frequently and forcefully during the sessions, and focused on reform in the areas of equality, the working man, and race-based legislation. One of the central issues focused on the status of African-Americans in the state militia, an issue which foreshadowed Wilson's later efforts to promote equal treatment of such soldiers during the Civil War.⁷¹

Wilson played a crucial role in the convention and served as a party leader and one of the chief Free Soil strategist during the formation of the new constitution. After the convention concluded all that remained was for the people of Massachusetts to ratify the constitution. Wilson worked to ensure ratification by distributing pamphlets and delivering numerous speeches throughout the late summer and fall.⁷² Wilson was in for another pleasant surprise at the 1853 Free-Soil state convention when he was nominated for the position of Governor by his peers. Wilson was thrilled, the shoe maker from Natick was now nominated for the highest political office in the state.⁷³ Not only had Wilson been nominated, he was expecting great success. As the election grew nearer political theorists expected both

the ratification of the new constitution and victory for Henry Wilson. Wilson was about to be elected to the state's highest elected office and see the convention he had worked so hard to reexamine receive the support and blessing of his constituents. Unfortunately for Wilson the political scene quickly changed. Thanks in large part to Whig offensives and abandonment by several key Free Soilers, Wilson found himself defeated. The ratification of the constitution failed by a mere five-thousand votes but the vote for governor was far more decisive and Wilson was nowhere to be seen in the final results. For all extensive purposes Coalition was dead in the state of Massachusetts, defeated by the remnants of the Whig party and dissent within its own ranks.⁷⁴ And so as 1853 drew to a close Wilson's political career seemed all but over. His grandest piece of legislation to date had been rejected by voters and he had no tangible means of support other than returning to shoe-manufacturing. Opponents rejoiced. The upstart Natick Cobbler who had been a thorn in their side for the better part of a decade had met his demise. The triumphs of these opponents would prove to be short lived. Henry Wilson had faced adversity before and each time had returned with unwavering resolve. Henry Wilson was once again to prove that when his back was against the wall rather than give he would knock the wall down.

5. Senator Elect

From the ashes of his state political career Henry Wilson would return on the national level with the aid of an unlikely ally. As early as the 1830s objections to the increasing stream of immigrants entering the nation began to surface. By the 1850s the number of immigrants had increased even more and the number of Americans opposed to the immigrants increased just as rapidly. These nativists mobilized and formed their own organization called the "Know-Nothings". Also known as the American Party this order had been in existence for several years prior to its role as a major political force, primarily as secret societies. The party truly mobilized nationally in 1854 with the formation of

the Grand-Council.⁷⁵ This body would serve as a national political unifying force for the party and helped direct its course. Wilson was working with the fledgling Republican Party at the time, but he quickly realized that they had neither the resources nor the manpower to be a major force at the moment and hence he reached out to the Know Nothings, becoming a member of the Order in 1854.⁷⁶ Wilson did not cut his ties with the Republican Party and was nominated as the Gubernatorial Candidate for the Republic Party in 1854, an honor which he accepted even though he was aware of the fact he would be defeated. Perhaps, Wilson recognized of the power which this party would wield in the coming years and sought to stay involved, or maybe it was merely to prevent himself from alienating many of his supporters. Regardless of his reasons he would eventually become a Republican candidate, but for the time being he was tied with the Know Nothings. When a spot in the Senate opened up by the resignation of Edward Everett in 1854 Know-Nothing rallied around Wilson and on February 10th 1855 he was voted into the senate.⁷⁷ Four days before his forty-third birthday Wilson, the self-educated farmhand and shoe maker who had spent ten years in indentured servitude, joined Charles Sumner as the Senator from Massachusetts to form one the most radical challenges to slavery the nation had seen.

Wilson's ties with the Know-Nothing party drew criticism from many of those who knew him, both allies and opponents alike. It seemed completely out of place for Wilson, the champion of equality to ally himself with a party born of anti-immigrant sentiment. However, many misunderstood the motivation behind Wilson's decision. Wilson was in no way hostile to foreigners or bigoted in his views on immigration. In fact, Wilson actively opposed legislation that would deny or hinder the vote to those who had been naturalized and claimed that, "he had no sympathy with the bigoted spirits who would reject those who sought admittance into the United States."⁷⁸ These comments were even made while Wilson was seeking Know Nothing support. Wilson's course in siding with these questionable allies was, as always, determined by his desire to destroy the institution of slavery in the quickest way

possible. As one contemporary put it, “He did evil so that good might come.”⁷⁹ One cannot argue at the logic behind Wilson's actions. The Coalition was destroyed by the defeats of the previous year and the Republican Party was not strong enough to stand on its own. The Know Nothings had a stance towards slavery which Wilson could support and, more importantly, they served the role of combating the power of the Cotton Whigs. For Wilson the Know Nothing party was a means to an end and when in 1855 the party took a stance that supported the survival of slavery Wilson promptly abandoned them.⁸⁰

Tensions had reached the boiling point on the national level by the time Wilson had reached the Senate. Although relations between the North and South had been less than friendly for years the issue of the Kansas-Nebraska Act raised hostilities to a new level. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was a piece of legislation authored by Stephen Douglas which would create the territories of Kansas and Nebraska. More importantly Douglas' legislation would also repeal the Missouri Compromise, which said that slavery could not exist in any territories north of Missouri. Instead the Kansas-Nebraska act promoted popular sovereignty which meant that rather than the status of a state being decided by location, it would instead be determined by a vote of its citizens.⁸¹ The passage of this legislation angered many Northerners who saw the power of the South expanding. The admission of these territories and the following battle over their admission as either free or slave states would place the nation on a powder keg prone to explode at any moment. Violence, extortion, and bribery would become present not only in the territories but around the nation. It was into this situation that Henry Wilson would be thrust.

As was the case with the majority of Wilson's political life he quickly proved himself to be a proponent of the working man as well as abolition. Throughout his first short session and much of his early political career Wilson formed a block with his fellow Northerners, most notably Sumner, William Fessenden of Maine, and Benjamin Wade of Ohio. These four would later form the core of the abolitionist Radical Republicans, one the most significant political forces over the next two decades. Wilson would make his first address on slavery towards the conclusion of the short session, in which he

stated his purpose of attacking the institution of slavery wherever Congress convened on the issue.⁸²

At the end of his first term the issue of slavery was already driving a wedge in the Know Nothing Party just as it had with the Whigs years before. Once again it Wilson took a leading role in the attempt to radicalize the party. Nominated as a delegate to the Know Nothing National Committee Wilson delivered a fiery speech in defense of his views, adopting a position behind which many Northerners would rally. When it became apparent that the party's national platform would become tolerant of slavery Wilson quickly held a separate meeting for Northerners who opposed this stance. At the conclusion of this meeting several northern states, including Massachusetts, left the national party and adopted a platform opposed to slavery and less strict in their nativist views.⁸³ Once again Wilson proved unstoppable in his pursuit of the death of slavery. This step would in many ways signify the end of Wilson's ties with the Know Nothings as later in the summer of 1855 he along with many ex-Know Nothings, Whigs and Free Soilers would throw their support behind the Republican Party, revitalizing it and making it a major political force.⁸⁴

While the chaos changed the political landscape in Washington and beyond the situation in Kansas continued to become increasingly unstable. Led by extremists like John Brown, clashes between pro-slavery and anti-slavery forces within the territory were becoming more frequent and simultaneously more violent. The birth of the conflict stemmed in large part over which faction would have control of the state and hence the ability to elect their men to positions of influence within the territory and also determine whether it was a free or slave state. Elections witnessed a great deal of fraud as many of those who voted in these elections did not reside in Kansas but in the surrounding territories. These false voters cast their ballots in hopes that they would elect either a Free or Slave state government into power. This angered both groups and violence frequently ensued.⁸⁵ Back in Washington politicians realized the seriousness of the conflict and attempted to address it throughout the year of 1856. Unfortunately, the senators proved just as inept at resolving the issue as their

constituents and soon the conflict spilled into Congress.

Clear lines separated Northerners, the majority of whom pledged to prevent the spread of slavery, and the Southerners who were just as dedicated to enabling the spread of slavery. Although debates were held on the topic of Kansas the subject was merely a disguise for the overt sectionalism present in the Thirty-Fourth Congress. Northerners and Southerners debated and argued, insulting one another and their positions on issues. Quickly the situation escalated out of hand and threats of violence became a part of senate life.⁸⁶ Such threats became realities when Charles Sumner gave his famous speech “The Crime against Kansas” On May 19th 1856. Sumner's speech brutally attacked Southerners to such an extent that he upset many members of his own party. Southerners also disapproved and sought to strike back for such an attack on their honor. On May 22nd Senator Preston Brooks of South Carolina attacked Sumner and beat him unconscious with his cane at Sumner's own desk in the Senate building. The beating was so brutal that Sumner was unable to return to his seat for nearly three and a half years and experienced the lingering side effects of insomnia, headaches, and psychosomatic shock for the rest of his life. Sumner would become a martyr for the abolition movement and a symbol for the oppressive tactics used by southern politicians over their northern counterparts.⁸⁷

Wilson addressed the senate asking for some sort of response. A committee was formed to investigate the issue and on the 27th of May, Wilson testified in front of the Senate criticizing the conduct of Brooks as “brutal, murderous, and cowardly.” Wilson’s comments angered Senator Andrew Butler who was Brooks' uncle. Butler responded by challenging Wilson to a duel. Wilson intelligently responded in a letter in which he respectfully, yet sternly declined Butler's challenge while also denouncing the practice of dueling as outdated and barbaric. His response received great praise from the Northern press and overnight made Henry Wilson a household name. As a result Wilson was targeted by southern senators and others who threatened to use violence against him. Wilson, determined to represent the north with civility, preferred to fight his battles in the senate chamber and

called the South to task, gaining a great amount of sentiment for the Northern cause around the nation.⁸⁸ He thus emerged as one of the most outspoken republicans and a leader within the party. Moreover, Wilson was also fulfilling the duties of two senators until Sumner would return to the Senate three years later.

After the Brooks-Sumner Affair the senate grew far more partisan, sectionalized and explosive than ever before. In this climate Henry Wilson became one of the most outspoken but also influential senators in the nation. Wilson shared his opinions freely; perhaps his most famous speech during this session was his response to Senator James Hammond's "King Cotton" Speech. Wilson defended the economic and social practices of the North.⁸⁹ Wilson again attracted the ire of fellow senators as Senator William Gwin of California challenged Wilson to another duel. Wilson responded in the same manner as he had with Butler and the crisis was averted.⁹⁰ In the midst of sectional conflict Wilson sought reelection in the fall of 1858. Despite the efforts of the Know-Nothing and Democratic parties to block his reelection Wilson won easily, obtaining thirty-five out of forty votes from the Massachusetts State Senate and 190 out of 226 from the state House of Representatives.⁹¹ Wilson's victory was representative of the growing Republican power not only in Massachusetts but throughout the North.

During the early part of this session Wilson and the senate as a whole focused on the creation of the Pacific railroad. By 1859 Western expansion was no longer a dream, but a reality. Gold had been found in California and the rolling plains of the Mid-West were being eyed by pioneers and politicians alike. The creation of a railway to join this new land with the civilization of the East would be instrumental to the success of western expansion. By 1859 most of the senate was in agreement that a railway line should be created, the only issue stood over the location. Southerners called for a line that would run through Arizona. This line was known as the "Disunion route" as it would fall into the hands of Southerners in a Civil War. Wilson instead opted for a central route through Nebraska and Nevada.⁹²

Although legislation on the act would not be passed for another three years it marked the beginning of a new era and greatly aided the progress of American expansion.

War and disunion continued to loom menacingly on the horizon as sectionalism grew over time. Perhaps no one contributed more to the growth of hostilities in the region than John Brown, an abolitionist from New York. Brown had made a name for himself during “Bleeding Kansas” as a guerrilla fighter. He raided homes with the objective of freeing slaves and often took overly militant actions to achieve his ends. In 1859 Brown would stage his most famous raid, on the town of Harper's Ferry, in what was at the time Virginia. Brown seized the armory in hopes of arming local slaves and starting a revolt but he only had 21 men and his plan was eventually stopped by local farmers, state troops and US marines. Brown was captured, put on trial and hung. To Northerners John Brown would become a martyr in the name of freedom. To Southerners Brown would become infamous for his brutal and cowardly assault against an undefended and innocent town. Several Southern senators implicated Wilson in the plot, however evidence was stacked firmly in Wilson's favor and it's doubtful that he had any knowledge of Brown's plan.⁹³ The nation was the closest it had even been so splitting, yet it had not reached its breaking point. It would take the election of 1860 to push things over the edge and lead to the most violent and brutal conflict the United States had seen.

John Brown's raid and the associations of the event with the Republican Party made the election of 1860 an important one. The Republicans had the chance to take the White House from a Democratic President, and for the first time in their existence serve as the majority party. This election was more important because of the sectionalism present in the election. A Republican victory was a Northern victory and a Democratic victory was a Southern victory. Wilson, although speaking in favor of the party as a whole, did not support a particular candidate. As the time of the election grew near, numerous candidates expected to take the presidential nomination. Chief among the contenders was Henry Seward, but for much of the fall next to nothing was mentioned about Illinois Senator Abraham

Lincoln. Nevertheless, when the votes were cast and the convention had spoken it was Lincoln who was nominated as the Republican candidate for President with Henry Hamlin as his Vice-President. Although some individuals such as Seward were opposed the selection, Wilson noted Lincoln's ability to carry the West in the coming election.⁹⁴ Wilson's prediction proved accurate, and with 180 electoral votes, Abraham Lincoln was elected as the 16th President of the United States.⁹⁵

Although it is believed that secession was an instantaneous response to the election of Lincoln the truth is far more complex. In fact the first meeting of the senate after the election was amicable compared to earlier sessions. Under the surface however, tensions loomed and despite the best efforts of those in the Senate to prevent it several southern states began holding conventions. South Carolina would be the first to leave the Union on December 20th 1860 and six weeks later on February 4th 1861 delegates from Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Louisiana and Alabama and Georgia would meet to form the Confederate States of America.⁹⁶ From this point on the situation expanded quickly and outgoing President Buchanan lacked the means to halt the crisis already underway. Although attempts were made by the Senate to compromise with the South even Republicans could not agree on what steps would be taken. Ultimately, little was done and slowly senators from those states that had seceded began to leave Congress. Wilson and Jefferson Davis, the future President of the Confederacy had served together on the military committee for some time and had adopted a mutual respect for one another during those years. Before leaving Davis walked across the Senate Chamber, shook Wilson's hand and claimed that he hoped the two could meet in calmer times.⁹⁷ Although there was no way of knowing it at the time calmer times would prove to be four years and hundreds of thousands of deaths away. On April 12th 1861 after Major Robert Anderson refused to yield to Southern demands to evacuate Fort Sumter, South Carolina Southern forces fired off the opening shots of the Civil War. After a day and half of shelling Major Anderson finally surrendered. Ironically during the opening fire fight of the most violent war in US history not a single person was killed.⁹⁸ And so one of the most important conflicts in

American history had commenced; it lasted four years, took the lives of over 600,000 men and forever change the course of our nation.

6. The Civil War Senator

The Union struggled to respond to the attack on Fort Sumter. Union leaders underestimated the rebellion in both its size and significance and failed to adequately prepare themselves for the coming hostilities. Wilson was among the few in the Senate to realize the seriousness of the rebellion. When the President requested seventy-five thousand volunteers for service Wilson suggested a total of three-hundred thousand, but neither the President nor the Secretary of War took his idea seriously. On that same day Wilson wrote a letter to Massachusetts Governor John Andrew asking him to raise two regiments of troops.⁹⁹ Wilson involved himself closely with the formation of these regiments and often times traveled to and from the nation's capital to check on their progress. Over the next few weeks Wilson traveled throughout the Northeast delivering goods and supplies, giving speeches or meeting with officials about the war effort. As the rebellion grew President Lincoln realized that this was not merely a minor revolt and attempted to prepare the Union for the battle ahead. In early July when a special session of Congress was to assemble Wilson finally ceased his traveling and only then to do his senatorial duties.¹⁰⁰

The special session of the Senate convened on July 4th 1861, with the task of converting the Union into a military machine. During this session of Senate, Wilson would undertake one of the most important roles of his career, the chairmanship of the Senate Military Affairs Committee. Wilson had long served on this committee, which had been chaired by Jefferson Davis until his departure from Congress. The next two months were some of the most productive of his career. Over this time he revolutionized the armed forces of the nation. Wilson began this process by passing legislation which

called for five hundred thousand volunteers to serve for three years. Not content solely to recruit troops, Wilson also engineered legislation to provide for the placement of these volunteers into organized units and provided state governments with the ability to appoint officers for various posts within these units. Wilson also sought to modernize the Regular Army by adding eleven additional regiments.¹⁰¹ Wilson would also reorganize the Union's armed forces to maximize their effectiveness. He added aides to the staffs of officers and purchased arms and ammunition for these new troops. Wilson also earned the respect of the troops themselves by increasing the pay of privates and abolishing the practice of flogging, actions that earned him the nickname, "The Soldier's Friend".¹⁰² Wilson was able to create and implement such monumental changes in a scant month. The highest praise came from General Winfield Scott, who claimed that "Senator Wilson had done more work in that short session than all the chairmen of the military committees had done for the past twenty years".¹⁰³ Wilson's efforts during the short session proved essential in the modernizing of the Union army and improving its preparedness for the coming conflict.

One of the more interesting and highly contested points in Wilson's life involves his alleged affair with Rose Greenhow, a Washington socialite and Confederate spy. Greenhow supposedly romanced Wilson and obtained information from him on the Union's military actions, particularly information regarding the battle of Bull Run. There are three apparent sources of information which point to Wilson, yet none of them provide substantial evidence. The first source is an example of hearsay recorded by a Republican politician. The second source is a publication of Mrs. Greenhow's which was written after her house arrest and subsequent banishment to the Confederacy. The final source is a series of letters to Mrs. Greenhow signed by "H." None of these sources bear much weight. The first lacks substance due to the absence of a credible source. The second is written at a time when Mrs. Greenhow was attempting to discredit many prominent Republican senators. Finally hand writing analysts conclude that the handwriting on the "H" letters did not match Wilson's handwriting on other

documents.¹⁰⁴ However, Mrs. Greenhow did obtain information about the Union Army and their troop movements and this would have substantial implications on the battle of Bull Run, a battle in which Wilson himself would play a part.

Not content to sit by in Washington Wilson excused himself from his senatorial duties during the short session long enough to follow troops to Manassas to aid troops there and observe the battle. Wilson was at General McDowell's personal tent for some of the battle and some witnesses claim that Wilson attempted to rally troops. Confederate forces quickly proved their prowess on the battlefield as they easily defeated Union forces. Wilson was forced to retreat unceremoniously from the battle, which led him to receive substantial ribbing from many other politicians.¹⁰⁵ Wilson was never one to be easily shaken from his ideals and as the short session of Senate ended he sought to play a more direct role in the military machinations of the Union. Wilson was offered the position Brigadier-General by President Lincoln, but declined the offer as it would remove him from his Senatorial duties. He opted instead to recruit his own unit in Massachusetts. Thanks in large part to his popularity; Wilson was able to raise nearly two-thousand three-hundred men in a mere forty days. These men were divided into several different units including the 22nd Massachusetts in which Wilson was commissioned as Colonel. Wilson would take his unit down to Washington where, after presenting them to General Meade, he resigned from his post. Wilson remained in close contact with the regiment for the rest of the war, taking special interest in its well-being and often times going out of his way to deliver mail and provide goods for the troops.¹⁰⁶ Wilson would continue his involvement with Union forces by linking up with George McClellan's Army of the Potomac and serving as an aide. His service was brief but he was well liked by McClellan who responded to Wilson's resignation by saying he was sad to see Wilson go and would have loved to keep him longer were it not for his senatorial duties.¹⁰⁷

Wilson returned to Washington in the fall of 1861 with an ambitious agenda. Despite making great progress in the special session earlier in year the Republicans realized there was still work to be

done if they were to combat the growing strength of the Confederacy. In his role as Chairman of the Military Affairs Committee Wilson focused heavily on the continued restructuring of the Union's Military. With a flurry of legislation Wilson addressed issues in all aspects of military affairs: reorganizing the Signal Corps, adjusting pay for soldiers and modernizing disciplinary practices, amongst other things. Many of Wilson's changes held long term implications. Firstly, Wilson created the Congressional Medal of Honor to raise moral amongst Union forces, this citation remains the highest honor that a member of the US Armed Forces can receive. Secondly, Wilson passed the first act to allow persons of African descent to be eligible for military service. It was the first piece of legislation to authorize the drafting and induction of African-American troops into the armed forces.¹⁰⁸

Chief among Wilson's military goals was to provide the Union with the basis of her armed forces, the rank and file foot soldier. Calls to the states to supply troops were at first met with patriotic fervor. Yet, by late 1862 enthusiasm had reached its peak and volunteering had provided all that it could. The war was nowhere near an end and the Union had suffered serious losses in the previous months. Wilson initially sought to address this need with the passage of a bill calling for more volunteers and giving the President the power to call forth state militias if necessary.¹⁰⁹ This legislation proved to be ineffective. In response Wilson passed one of his most famous pieces of legislation, the Enrollment Act of 1863. This act was integral to the eventual victory of Union forces by providing them with the sheer manpower necessary to triumph. Wilson's 36 section bill provided numerous changes in the recruitment and structuring of the armed forces. One of the great triumphs of this legislation lay in the creation of a National Guard, a standing force of reserves which could be called upon for national defense. The legislation also provided for conscription of troops in regions that did not provide the necessary amount of volunteers. The draft targeted men aged 18-45 and prioritized them by age and marital status. If a man was drafted and didn't wish to fight he could defer his service by providing a \$300 dollar payment or a substitute to stand in his place. Wilson's act received criticism,

particularly from Democrats, but it was revised, amended, and subsequently approved and put into law. In addition to providing troops to combat the spread of the Confederacy the Enrollment Act provided union forces with a massive morale boost and played a role in the eventual victory of Union forces.

Wilson was also active outside the military realm. During the Civil War Wilson's dedication to the Union pushed him to seek humanitarian and technological reforms as well. He was in large part responsible for the creation of the National Science Foundation. Wilson worked with some of the greatest scientists in the nation including Louis Agassiz, the regent of the Smithsonian as well as Alexander Bache of the Coastal Survey and Charles Davis of the Bureau of Navigation. The scientists were responsible for the charter of the organization and its vision but it was Wilson who presented the bill and used his political influence to get it passed. Wilson was fiercely proud of the organization and would attend many of its meetings. In a painting of the founders both Lincoln and Wilson can be seen standing with the scientists.¹¹⁰ Wilson also sought humanitarian reform through his support of, Clara Barton, the founder of the Red Cross. Upon Barton's arrival to Washington she found a fast and loyal friend in Wilson whom she would come to rely on throughout the War. Wilson would become Barton's chief supporter sharing her reports on the status of the medical treatment the troops were receiving and pushing strongly for more humane treatment of soldiers and a more proficient ambulance corp to treat wounded soldiers. This alliance between these two individuals would result in some of the greatest humanitarian efforts of the entire war.¹¹¹

Wilson's chief concern during the Civil War was the advancement of rights for slaves and freedmen in both the Union and Confederacy. Wilson worked closely with Republican Senate leaders, Charles Sumner, Benjamin Wade, and Thaddeus Stevens to advocate abolition. These so called “radicals” recognized the promise that the Civil War held for destroying slavery, but they also realized that they needed to promote their cause once step at a time. The string of legislation leading to Emancipation was a well thought out and directed attack against the institution of slavery. This process

began with an act which made the capture and/or return of fugitive slaves to their masters a penal offense. This meant that those slaves who fled their masters and made it to Union lines were free.¹¹² Wilson then directly addressed the issue of slavery within the nation's capital. On December 16th 1861, twenty-five years after his first journey to Washington, Wilson introduced a bill to abolish slavery within the District of Columbia. Initially this legislation met with fierce opposition, but Wilson and other senators finally got the bill passed in the spring of the following year. Although it changed several times the idea behind the legislation was clear and in many ways began the end of slavery.¹¹³ Wilson's goal was not only to free slaves, but to provide them with a tangible sense of equality. The District of Columbia served as a testing ground for laws which could ensure equality. Initial legislation in the District included the repealing of race based laws and the introduction of laws to make legal codes relevant to all citizens, not just white citizens. One of the greatest accomplishments was an act to provide public education for the freedmen. Wilson also added a section repealing previous discriminatory acts. Equality, at least in a legal sense, had become a reality in Washington.¹¹⁴

In the aftermath of emancipation within the capitol Wilson and his allies began a steady push to expand abolition by appealing directly to the President. Wilson, Sumner, and Thaddeus Stevens pestered Lincoln to make a public announcement expanding the Emancipation order on a nationwide scale. The three were so driven in their views that the President actually complained about their protests. Lincoln initially believed that the timing was not right delayed the issue. Finally, in July of 1862, Lincoln began discussing the proclamation with his cabinet and drafted a document. Lincoln was a patient man and was convinced that he should not deliver the proclamation until a major military victory. He waited until September 22nd 1862, five days after the bloody battle of Antietam to issue his preliminary proclamation. This document stated that the goal of the war was to salvage the Union and that emancipation would be paid for, however, any slaves living in states which had failed to yield to the Union by January 1st 1863 were forever free. By the time January 1st arrived the slave states were

still in open rebellion meaning that all slaves in these states were now recognized as freedmen by the Union. It took more than two years and the death of the Confederacy for the Emancipation Proclamation to be fully realized and even then freedom took time. The Emancipation Proclamation committed the Union to the cause of abolishing slavery, a task which Henry Wilson had been trying to accomplish for nearly three decades. This moment was the realization of his life's work but Wilson knew there was still work to be done in defending the rights of freedmen.¹¹⁵

The years between 1861 and 1865 were the bloodiest in US history. Almost as many men died in the Civil War than in all other American wars combined. The sectional differences of the past several decades had come to a head and it took the major battles of Gettysburg, Antietam, Chancellorsville, and Grant's bloody march to the Appomattox courthouse to finally end the bloodshed. Even after this point the established peace was an uneasy one and the nation struggled to find its way. Over the course of those four years Wilson saw many of his goals realized, most notably the destruction of slavery, but his work was far from over. Reconstruction was to be one of the most trying eras in American history and Wilson, as a senior Senator for the majority party, was sure to be a central figure. Wilson's career as a Civil War politician was over. Now he looked forward to the last and final era in his life as a Reconstruction politician.

7. End of an Era

Although bands of loyalists fought on for months afterward, the Civil War was all but over on April 9th 1865 with the surrender of Robert Lee at Appomattox Courthouse. The Union was victorious and the nation salvaged thanks in large part to the efforts of Wilson, Lincoln, and other leading Republicans. These senior republicans stood poised to reconstruct the nation and the re-election of Lincoln just a few months prior heralded the support of the masses. On April 14th Wilson had the honor of being present to witness the raising of the Union flag over Fort Sumter, which had been in

Confederate hands since the beginning of the war. It was here that Wilson received that grave news that the President had been assassinated at Ford's Theater in Washington DC. Although the attack failed in its goal of evoking further Confederate resistance it succeeded in significantly changing the political climate in Washington. Republicans were taken aback by the loss of their leader, yet confident in the abilities of his successor, Vice-President Andrew Johnson. But confidence soon turned to conflict as Johnson's presidency came to be defined by clashes between the executive and legislative branches leading to unforeseen obstacles in what was expected to be a smooth Reconstruction.¹¹⁶

The problems between Congress and the Presidency stemmed from Johnson's disregard for the separation of powers. Johnson has been praised for his defense of the poor southern man but his methods and motives were controversial and led to the return of pre-Civil War sectional tensions. The years immediately following the Civil War were filled with conflict about the direction in which the nation should be heading, particularly in regards to the reconstruction and re-admittance of the seceding states. Congress, led by the likes of Wilson and other radical Republicans, sought to admit states only if they agree to the emancipation of slaves and equal voting rights for all men. Johnson disagreed fearing that this stance would result in a race war. These opposing beliefs defined the Johnson presidency. Johnson consistently vetoed legislation including the Civil Rights Act of 1866 as well as the Freedmen Bureau reauthorization.¹¹⁷

Wilson remained a leader in the Senate during this time. Having seen his dream of emancipation realized at the end of the war Wilson now sought voting rights, equality, and protection for the millions of freedmen who had just become citizens. The Freedmen's Bureau was created in order to ensure that these objectives were met. The Bureau was a source of conflict throughout its existence. Many Southern Whites felt that the Bureau protected the rights of the freedmen in a manner which ran against the norms of the south. The Bureau led to conflict between Johnson, who adopted a more sympathetic stance towards Southern interests and other Republicans who felt that if Southerners were given any

degree of freedom they would oppress the freedmen. As a result Wilson was involved in Bureau affairs and often times voted to enlarge the Bureau so that it might better meet the needs of the nation.¹¹⁸

Wilson delivered one of the most powerful speeches of his career in defense of the Freedmen's Bureau. Senator Edgar Cowan challenged Wilson asking, what he meant by saying, “all men in this country must be equal?” Wilson's response revealed a great amount about the development of his beliefs as both a citizen and a politician. Wilson claimed that even the poorest man, regardless of color or background had the same right to equal protection by law as the most well off and elite man in the nation. Wilson's speech was well received by his constituents and fellow Republicans.¹¹⁹

At the same time as the creation of the Freedmen's Bureau, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1866. This document was authored by Wilson and sought to make a legislative precedent for the 13th Amendment which had outlawed slavery. The document voided any acts that discriminated on the basis of race, color or descent and ensured equal treatment for all males of voting age so long as they were citizens. This was one of Wilson's crowning achievements and he strongly defended it. It too became a cause of conflict between Congress and the President who vetoed the bill. Congress, recognizing the importance of the legislation, overruled the President's veto and brought the Civil Rights Act into law.¹²⁰ After the passage of the Civil Rights Act, Congress sought more immediate means of addressing the issue of blacks who were not viewed as citizens. The Reconstruction Committee authored what would become the basis of the 14th amendment. This document was designed to protect freedmen throughout the nation. It has three major clauses. One which overruled interpretations laid down by the Dred Scott decision; another which ensured the protection of rights on the state level; and a third which ensured equal protection within a governing body.¹²¹ Although at the time these clauses seemed vague they would form the basis of Civil Rights legislation for the better part of the next century.

The status of the seceding states was also a major issue. There were two competing schools of

thought, once again represented in the clash between Johnson and Congress. Many felt that seceding states should be readmitted to the Union as soon as possible to ensure fair representation during the process of Reconstruction. This perspective was the most forgiving towards the Southerners and was heavily advocated by Southerners and Democrats as well as Johnson. The majority of Congress, including Wilson, pursued a more strict policy for readmission requiring the Southern states to agree to certain terms. These terms included the ratification of the 13th amendment, the legislation which prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude. Wilson sought to allow states' readmission to the Union to be a quick process, however, he was not willing to back down on the issue of the 13th amendment fearing that progress during the Civil War would be lost should slavery be allowed to linger.¹²² Wilson regularly claimed that only "loyal men" should be elected into office and was critical of the Johnson administration's approval of men who held "rebel sentiments." The stances of both the executive and legislative branches would lead to a continual deterioration of relations.

Despite his stance on the issue of re-admittance Wilson was very reasonable when it came to forgiving individuals for their role in the rebellion. One of Wilson's strongest qualities as a politician was his ability to form friendships and partnerships with individuals who had been political opponents. His relationship with Charles Francis Adams perfectly embodies this quality Wilson and Adams had a falling out in the 1850s but were again close friends by Wilson's later career. In the aftermath of the Civil War, Wilson tried to bridge the gaps between Southerners and Northerners by reaching out to many Southern leaders. Wilson advocated for the release of Confederate General William Jackson back into civilian life. Wilson secured better conditions for Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens who was being held at Fort Warren in Boston Harbor along with Postmaster General John Reagan. Wilson maintained close relationships with both men and Alexander Stephens went as far as to say that Wilson's intervention had saved his life. Reagan, after returning to Texas, claimed that he received a prompt and courteous response from Wilson whenever Texas needed aid from Washington.¹²³

Sometime during this period Wilson also found the time to author a book, “History of the Anti-slavery Measures of the Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth Congresses, 1861-1865.” Wilson's book was about the legislative acts of the Civil War and the ending of slavery. Wilson's work was received with great praise by many critics including the *Atlantic Monthly*. As someone who was deeply involved in the Congresses Wilson had an insider’s perspective. He included the speeches of many of his colleagues and at the time of its release “Anti-slavery Measures” was the definitive account of the period.¹²⁴ Less than a year later Wilson provided a similarly structured account on the military legislation of the Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth Congresses in his work, “Military Measures of the United States Congress 1861-1865.” Similar to “Anti-Slavery Measures,” “Military Measures” detailed the proceedings of the period and Wilson, as Chairman of the Military Committee, was able to provide excellent information.¹²⁵

1865 and 1866 had been productive years for Wilson yet they also had their share of loss. On December 24th, 1866 the Wilson's only child, Henry Hamilton, passed away, a result of an unknown sickness which killed him in only two days. Hamilton had been highly influenced by his father, joining the military as an officer and serving in several colored units before his final posting as a Lieutenant Colonel in the 6th Cavalry. He had just turned twenty in November of that year and his unexpected death left Henry and Harriet in shock. In a testament to the popularity of the Wilson family in Natick local businesses were closed on the day of young Hamilton's funeral so that people might attend.¹²⁶

Despite the difficulties of dealing with the loss of his son Wilson returned to Washington in January of 1867 intending to continue his work on reconstruction. In addition to Wilson's focus on racial issues during Reconstruction he continued to be a firm believer in temperance. Wilson and some of his like-minded associates even brought the ideals of Temperance to Congress forming the Congregational Temperance Society. Wilson spoke at length at the opening meeting and received the great honor of being named the President of the organization.¹²⁷ Wilson would serve in this post for the

remainder of his years in Congress and successfully combated the drunkenness in Congress with measures that supported his colleagues and prevented the sale of liquor in the Capitol Building.¹²⁸

1867 also signaled a rapidly changing political climate within the Republican Party. Wilson began the year by venturing to the south for several weeks in the spring to gauge the status of Reconstruction and assess republican political interests in the region. Despite taking criticism for his actions on the trip from both parties Wilson believed that peace in the South depended on cooperation between radical whites and freedmen who could promote the Republican cause in the region. In another show of his empathy towards Southerners Wilson also brought about the release of former colleague and Confederate President Jefferson Davis.¹²⁹ Displeasure with Andrew Johnson had reached a new extreme and, even in this early part of 1867, Civil War hero Ulysses Grant was already being mentioned as a candidate. Wilson, who as Chairman of the Military Committee had worked closely with Grant, supported such a nomination and some even went so far as to say that the two could form the Republican Presidential ticket in 1868.¹³⁰

Despite the optimistic news issues between congress and the President remained. Wilson had long been a proponent of finding a middle ground with the President but by 1867 he too had realized that the gap could not be bridged. Congress had toyed with the idea of forcibly removing Johnson from office, but they could find no legal way to do so. That changed in August of 1867 when Johnson tried to forcibly remove Secretary of War Edwin Stanton from office. Stanton refused to leave and was supported by the Tenure of Office Act. When Congress reconvened in January of 1868 they passed a resolution disagreeing with the dismissal and reinstated Stanton. Johnson, convinced that the legislation was unconstitutional, simply ignored it.¹³¹ Congress saw Johnson's actions as unconstitutional and on February 25th 1868, after approval from the House of Representatives, Andrew Johnson became the first United States President to be impeached in office. The impeachment hearing began on March 30th and the senate focused on the impeachment proceedings for the next month and a half, providing

evidence and speaking either in favor of or opposed to removal. When the final vote was tallied on May 26th Johnson was acquitted in a 35 to 19 vote, one vote short of the two thirds majority required for conviction. Despite the failure to remove Johnson from office the impeachment proceedings heralded the beginning of the end for Johnson with the Presidential election now only months away.¹³²

The Republican Party looked to the presidential election of 1868 as an opportunity to elect a president who was more representative of party principals and ideas. At the start of the convention Ulysses Grant had been all but nominated when the convention met. There was great speculation, however, as to who would serve by his side as the Vice President. When the votes were tallied Schuyler Colfax received the nomination.¹³³ Grant handily won the election receiving 53 percent of the popular vote and winning the electoral count by a total of 214 to 80. Republicans were ecstatic, after nearly four years of struggling against Johnson the party had a man in office who would defend their views and support their causes. A new age in Republican politics had begun.¹³⁴

On March 30th 1870 Wilson witnessed one of the objectives to which he had been working since the conclusion of the Civil war succeed. The 15th amendment of the Constitution had been ratified. The 15th amendment guaranteed the enfranchisement of the millions of freedmen who had been denied the vote for the past five years. Wilson's advocacy for equality had finally been recognized and one of his major objectives for Reconstruction was accomplished.¹³⁵

With the passage of the 15th amendment Wilson now wanted to play a more active role in Women's rights. Wilson had long been a supporter of Women's rights thanks to Harriet and his friendship with Clara Barton. Wilson often said that his wife deserved all of the rights which he held; however, he had wanted to wait for the passage of the 15th amendment before pushing for women's rights. As early as 1869 he was poised to support a 16th amendment to the constitution providing for women's suffrage.¹³⁶ Wilson was true to his word and worked closely with the American Women's Suffrage Association over the next several years, attending and speaking at their meetings and signing

an invitation for them to hold their 1870 conference in the nation's capital.¹³⁷ Wilson was rewarded for his steadfast defense of women's rights in the presidential election of 1872 in which he was the vice presidential candidate. In this election women played a bigger role than they ever had before by actively campaigning and speaking on behalf of a Grant/Wilson ticket. There is little doubt that their involvement in the election assured Wilson's presence on the Republican ticket.¹³⁸

For Wilson this period of excitement was subject to further tragedy in his personal life. Harriet's health had been declining steadily since 1867 and she had been unable to accompany Henry to Washington as was her normal custom. Henry spent more and more time in Natick by her side yet little could be done to reverse her condition. After three years of suffering she finally passed away in May of 1870 having spent three decades by Henry's side.¹³⁹ Henry Wilson was known as a determined, inexhaustible and committed individual yet the loss of his beloved wife left Wilson struck with grief. Wilson relied on Harriet and had only good things to say about her. In a letter to her family he referred to her as "one of the loveliest spirits that ever blessed kindred and friends by her presence, or left, in passing through death to a higher life, more precious memories."¹⁴⁰ In an attempt to cope with the loss of Harriet, Wilson spent the majority of the summer in 1871 in Europe. He enjoyed his trip but felt as though he had not taken full advantage of his opportunity due to his overwhelming grief.¹⁴¹

Wilson was again thrust into the political limelight upon his return from Europe in the fall of 1871. Grant's first term was almost at an end the nation was abuzz about what the Republican ticket might look like. As in 1868 there was little question as to who would receive the nomination for the presidency, but questions abounded as to who would be nominated as vice president. Wilson and his friend Schuyler Colfax were once again the top two candidates for the post. On June 6th 1872 the Republican National Convention was called to order in Philadelphia with the objective of determining which of these two candidates would eventually receive the nomination. In the initial balloting Wilson carried much of the West as well as the South and was just short from receiving the votes required for

the nomination. At the conclusion of the second balloting after also receiving support from Virginia, West Virginia, and Georgia, Wilson had more than enough votes and soon received the unanimous consent of the convention. The widespread support is not surprising as few politicians could claim to have been as central to the success of the Republican party as Wilson. His opponent and friend Colfax was extremely supportive of his friend and the two remained close even after the nomination.¹⁴² Wilson quickly accepted his new position and in between his senate duties found time to campaign giving several speeches during the fall of 1872. Wilson appeared confident during the election and believed he and Grant would win by a substantial margin. Grant's popularity was only aided by Wilson's mass appeal and the two won the election even more impressively than Grant had in 1868, receiving 286 out of a possible 349 electoral votes and winning every northern state and several southern states as well. With the results of the election in Wilson had accomplished another high aspiration and many believed that this was merely a stepping stone for the Massachusetts senator. Remember that Grant was serving his second term. Many believed that in 1876 Wilson would be headlining the Republican ticket.¹⁴³

Sadly, this was not to be the case for Wilson. In comparison to his herculean efforts in the Senate his service as Vice-President was relatively unexceptional. This was by no means by any fault of his own but the result of recurring health problems that plagued him during his years as Vice President. The first several months of his term in office represented what one might expect from Wilson. He worked constantly, dedicating himself to his duties as Senate President and responding the unending flow of letters that he received almost daily. At this point Wilson considered it a success if he were to obtain just two hours of sleep in a day. Unfortunately, years of dedication to his nation had finally caught up to the elder statesman and within a few months of his election to the office he suffered a facial nerve paralysis. His health would steadily decline for the next three years; he was eventually forced to take time away from Washington traveling and attempting to rest and recover. He did however manage to use this time to author one more book, "The Rise and Fall of the Slave Power in

America” which he completed in 1874.¹⁴⁴ After completing this final work Wilson adopted a real sense of his own mortality. When his associate and close friend Charles Sumner with whom he had served for over 20 years passed away in 1874 Wilson was quoted as saying, “I soon shall follow him.”¹⁴⁵

Wilson appeared to make a recovery in late 1874 and for a time continued his duties as Senate President. For several months he seemed to be in good health as he made a tour of the South in the spring of 1875 and in September oversaw the state Republican Convention at Worcester where he delivered a well-received address. Wilson returned to Washington in November to see a doctor with hopes of receiving treatment. On November 10th he was struck by another bout of paralysis, this one more severe, but once again he recovered, many believed for good this time. He in fact felt so good that he entertained guests and his physician no longer felt it necessary to be by his side. Ultimately, this recovery proved short lived. On November 22nd 1875 Henry Wilson lay down on his couch in the Vice President’s office and passed away.¹⁴⁶

The response to Wilson's death was fitting for a man of his importance. Politicians around Washington paid their respects regardless of party affiliation or personal beliefs. On the day of his funeral all government departments in the capital were closed. An estimated 25,000 people came to pay their respects while his body rested in the Rotunda. In Natick the people mourned for their cobbler as black drapes hung from houses and bells tolled in all public buildings. It is fitting that Wilson was the first Vice-President to have African-American pallbearers. As Wilson's body traveled from Washington to his home in Natick thousands turned out regardless of train schedules or poor weather conditions. In New York an estimated 200,000 thousand watched the parade, a total only rivaled by the parade given to Abraham Lincoln. Wilson's body finally made it back to Massachusetts on November 27th of 1875 and, after stops in Worcester and Boston; Wilson's body was delivered to Natick where he was finally laid to rest.¹⁴⁷

Although Henry Wilson passed on his legacy remained and continues to this day. The poor

uneducated child who spent the majority of his childhood in indentured servitude had risen to the second most powerful position in the country. Along the way he dramatically altered both the political and social realities of the United States, destroying and creating political parties and helping demolish the institution of slavery. The Natick Cobbler helped lead the nation through the Civil War, emerged as a preeminent figure in the struggle to reconstruct the nation afterward, and loomed as one of the most influential individuals during a formative time in the nation's development. His tireless demeanor and unyielding dedication to the office would come to define him, overshadowed only by the convictions which he held dear: equality and freedom. At his core Wilson represents the epitome of the American politician, a selfless and empathetic individual who dedicated himself to the protection of the weak, the downtrodden, and the marginalized. He was a champion for those groups that needed one, a man who was not afraid to challenge the powers that be and, consequently, a man who rose to greatness, not on the coattails of others, but by his own virtues and labors.

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