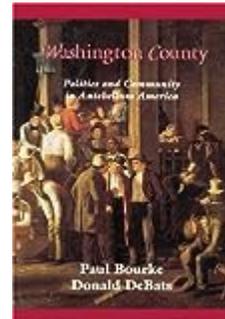




Paul Bourke, Donald Debats. *Washington County: Politics and Community in Antebellum America.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. xvii + 407 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-4950-3; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8018-5946-5.



Reviewed by Michael Chesson (Department of History, University of Massachusetts-Boston)

Published on H-Pol (February, 1997)

An Empire To Be Lost Or Won?

The Oregon that Hezekiah Butterworth extolled in 1843 is captured in this fascinating volume, which is both an illustration of the joy of interdisciplinary scholarship and an example of the frustrating limits that academic authors (Australians in this case) often operate within. *Washington County* has many virtues. It is comprehensive, extensively documented, with cutting-edge methodologies and graphical displays, and is beautifully illustrated with well-chosen photographs and sketches from George Caleb Bingham's *The County Election* (1852). A color reproduction of the finished painting adorns the dust jacket. The book has one great defect: it is unlikely to get anywhere near the readership and attention that it deserves with the scholarly community, much less from the legendary but elusive quarry, "the intelligent reader." The book is well written but dense, crammed with information. The many charts, graphs, statistical tables and formulas will discourage those who do not have quantitative backgrounds. Anyone who perseveres will find the effort worthwhile. The statistics are quite interesting and comprehensive. The authors wisely keep most such data out of their prose, confining themselves to arguments and conclusions drawn from a rich evidentiary

base.

There are several themes that carry the book along with irresistible force, like the tens of thousands who took the Oregon Trail. *Washington County* is a paradigm, named for the father of our country. Few states in the union lack such an entity, with the exception of older or smaller ones like Massachusetts and Delaware. As in Richmond, Virginia, and other southern cities and towns, *Washington County* employed viva voce voting, the men declaring their voice orally before the entire community. For a classic description of the practice in the Old Dominion, see John S. Wise, *The End of An Era* (1901; pp. 55-56). Authors Bourke and Debats skillfully interpret this particularly rich documentation, covering not only political behavior and trends, but also the county economy and government, population, culture, and ideology, as well as two important and representative communities within the county, Forest Grove and Hillsboro. Theirs is not the usual aggregate study; instead they "examine the internal coherence of all the individual ballot itself, a task possible only in the viva voce states" (p. 13), which included Virginia, Kentucky, Illinois, Mis-

souri, and Arkansas.

The book begins and ends with the killing of a southerner by a Yankee, and the tension between the two groups continues throughout this work. Andrew Jackson Masters was a Kentuckian. His antagonist, James H. McMillan, was born in Genesee County, New York. Their story—one of two passionate and violent men who clashed—produced results seen all too often in American life, especially on its frontiers. But Washington County was not a frontier outpost, though the authors sketch its early history. It had become a settled farming community well before 1860. By 1854, it was “a thickly settled country,” according to one resident (p. 75). The book traces the evolution of its political system along with the fight Democrats waged with Whigs and Know-Nothings and then with the emerging Republicans, who would control the county for the rest of the century.

The authors somewhat exaggerate Republican power at the state level (p. 187), probably an unconscious result of their focus on a single county, and that leads them to overstate this aspect of their thesis. A fusion group of Republicans and Douglas Democrats, the Union Party, controlled Oregon during the war. Resurgent Democrats blocked the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1870. Oregon had a Democratic governor in 1876-1877, Lafayette Grover, already prominent in the 1850s and mentioned often in this work. Grover played a role in the disputed Hayes-Tilden presidential elections in 1876-77. Although the Democrats carried Oregon in a presidential election only once after the Civil War (in 1868), from 1859 to 1899 four Democrats and four Republicans held the governorship. Two of the Democrats served multiple terms in the 1870s and 1880s, and a majority of the forty year period saw Democrats in the governor’s mansion, hardly a sign of overwhelming Republican strength in a state that was nearly evenly divided, with the Republicans having a slight edge.

The disruption of Democracy in the county parallels in miniature what was happening back east to the party of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson in the age of Stephen A. Douglas and James Buchanan. It was a struggle between what Masters and McMillan represented: different regions, philosophies, cultures, ideologies and, often, different political affiliations. The county’s Democratic party split in the 1850s and hardly resembled the force it had been in the previous decade. As a result of Democratic factionalism, and a number of other factors, a northern type of reformism triumphed in the county. An enclave west of Masters farm, centered around the

hamlet of Hillsboro, remained a stubborn enclave of the conservative old regime, while an embodiment of southern agrarian Jacksonian northeast, heavily favored by New Englanders and their descendants, predominated, and were particularly strong in the town of Forest Grove. It was almost as if a geological fault line separated the land of the two men.

The First Europeans in what became Washington County were Hudson’s Bay Company officials, trappers, and farmers, and, later, American mountain men. Both groups intermarried with local Indians. The arrival of the first white women in the 1820s put such unions in disrepute, creating a metis that thereafter occupied a separate ambiguous place. There were missionary efforts by Catholics and various Protestant denominations, who proselytized among whites and Indians, Americans and British Canadians. David Lennox led an early wagon train of Baptists that arrived in 1843. Other settlers included retired Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries. The first significant numbers of American emigrants came in the early 1840s, attracted by reports of the mild climate and vast amounts of land of incredible fertility. The Donation Land Claim Law (DLC) of 1850 was the major factor for later emigration. This Congressional enactment altered relationships between and among the various groups in Oregon and also retarded the development of urban and village life. Every man, and his spouse if he was married, who could reach Oregon would each receive a free gift 160 acres of prime land in beautiful Tualatin Valley. The law originally had a three year span but was extended by two years. The great influx of people came between 1850 and 1855, but the best land in the area had been claimed even before the end of that period. Citing John D. Unruh’s *The Plains Across* (1979), the authors note that of the estimated 53,062 who took the Oregon Trail, most came in the early 1850s. Visitors usually commented on land settlement patterns, the appearance of farms, and the crops grown, comparing the area to New England and New York. The best land was a combination of forest and natural prairie. The California Gold Rush of 1840 had a significant impact on the population, especially in crops grown, as did the Yakima Indian war of 1855, which followed the Cayuse War of 1848. The lucrative California market caused some farmers to abandon wheat farming for dairy and beef cattle, but wheat and oats continued to define the local economy.

Washington County enjoyed a relatively high level of government activity with little expenditure of public funds because most officials were not permanent of full time. Roads were the primary concern of the county

board of commissioners, which worked to maintain them and build new ones. The county was somewhat isolated by rivers and mountains from the closest urban centers and outlets for shipping before completion of a road and rail network. Most appointees to office were longterm residents who performed a variety of roles. Economic status was clearly a factor; there was a high positive correlation with those appointed by the board of commissioners who ran the county and selected men for specific jobs. Those who ran most often for elective office had ambitions beyond the county. Most candidates ran only once. There was little connection between social standing as indicated by economic status and the frequency of office seeking. Women participated as well, particularly as leaders in the active temperance movement.

Those concerned with “children having children” today might find some consolation in Washington County, where the DLC produced enormous pressures for early marriage, in contrast to some societies where marriage was long delayed because of scarcity or high cost of land. Marriage at fifteen was not uncommon, and many women had ten children by forty. There was a “marriage hysteria” (p. 120) between 1850 and 1855. In 1860 the census showed only eight unmarried women between the ages of twenty and forty. The average age of married women was twenty-nine, but 15 percent were under twenty. Seventeen was the generally accepted threshold for marriage, and 68 percent of females were married by that age, compared to the national norm of those married in 1860. Among eighteen year old women, 77 percent were married; for those nineteen, the figure was 90 percent. Over half of all married women under thirty gave birth to their first child before they were nineteen. There were three wives of fourteen that year in the county; all were married to men at least ten years their senior. There was an apparent relationship between a woman’s age, her age at the time of the birth of her first child, and the woman’s presence in Oregon. Like the land, once in Oregon women had great fecundity. The territory’s fertility ration of 2.10 was the highest in the United States in 1860, topping the national rate of 1.31. The county’s was even higher, at 2.32. Kinship ties and extended families dominated the county. Although one-third of the households in 1860 had no obvious link of marriage or kinship with another household in the county, the authors conclude from other data that, in 1850, 45 percent of the households did have such a connection, and that the real figure may have been as high as 65 percent. The largest kin network in the county touched thirty-two separate households.

New Englanders controlled much of the county’s public culture, especially its schools. They saw threats from Catholicism, foreign enemies, European immigrants, slavery, and Indian uprisings. All these factors provided “a congenial setting for the articulation of new ways to understand the meaning and importance of fertility” (p. 138). “Northeastern nativism” (p. 139) by the mid-1850s provided “the dominant language” of the county. It was not just the foreign born, but backwoodsmen and poor whites, especially those of southern origin, who were feared and resented. Not surprisingly, among residents who had been southern Democrats there was a deep fear of the entire northern package of reform. One sign of the strength of northeastern reformist trends was that “the politics of the 1850s may have derived part of its force from the relationships of women to those who could vote on polling day” (p. 141).

In 1859, Abigail Scott published *Captain Gary’s Company*, the first novel to be printed in Oregon. It is rough fiction but since it was based on the author’s experience moving west it has historical qualities, focusing on the changes women had to make because of the frontier. “These demands and opportunities,” the authors conclude, “allow women to slough off older values and habits to deal with their biological roles in new and liberating ways.” But *Captain Gary’s Company* also evokes a political sensibility constructed out of a life of “unending childbirth combined with the painful experience of the self-regarding and dishonest quality of male behavior” (p. 142). This deconstruction of the semi-autobiographical novel, an early example from the same genre that produced *Little House on the Prairie* (1935), is at odds with all the land-hungry women who ran away to marry at fifteen or even earlier. They were not kidnapped and forced into lives of matrimonial drudgery. Rather, they had made their beds and spent lots of time lying in them, conceiving children and bearing them. That American frontiers in some ways liberated some women is a truism going back to the colonial period, as depicted by observers from William Bryd II to John Demos. Their lives were not always filled with connubial bliss, nor were they always victims of evil, selfish men. Some males in Oregon probably possessed a small share of human virtue, and may even have been good husbands and fathers.

In “Politics and Society,” a section at the heart of the book, the authors conclude that “A simple model that expects southerners to be Democrats and non-southerners to form the opposition does not hold” (p. 150), but that for the leaders of each site it works quite well. Democratic leaders were mostly southerners by birth, and Andrew

Masters' Kentucky supplied the largest bloc of them. Non-Democratic figures were far more likely to come from the northeast and from the state territories of the old Northwest, with New York supplying the largest number, including James McMillan. Intraparty warfare destroyed the Democrats in the 1850s. Joseph Lane broke with the Salem Clique of regular Democrats headed by Asabell Bush, editor of the Salem-based *Statesman*, who was aligned with President Buchanan, and that group rebelled against the popular sovereignty doctrines of Senator Douglas. Washington County became "not simply an opposition county but a Know-Nothing county, returning a clear majority for the American party in 1857" (p. 167) after the decline of the party elsewhere in Oregon and the nation, which helped delay the rise of the local Republican party. Somewhat confusingly, the author also claims that it "was first formed" (p. 14) in the county. The first came from the Democrats; the only prominent Republicans who had not been members of the American Party were abolitionists. Immigrants, especially Catholics, were seen as a greater threat, for a longer time, than more remote slaves and slave owners. "It was no accident of fevered imaginations that caught up Catholics, foreigners, slavery, and Democrats in one frenzy of emotion," the authors conclude. "All these forces are smacked of an aristocratic and ultimately non-American polity" (p. 162).

As with most studies of antebellum American reform movements, these perceived evils are given the same moral value. Peter Novick in *That Noble Dream* (1988) quoted from Oscar Handlin's famous review of Allan Nevins's *The Emergence of Lincoln* (1950), chiding his revisionist colleague "for failing to recognize that there was surely a difference between being a fanatic for freedom and being a fanatic for slavery" (p. 355). Bourke and Debats are not the first to turn Handlin's statement on its head, lumping together hatred of Catholics and other immigrants, Democrats, and slavery. At least they are candid about the racist views of these same Oregonians. In their eyes, Native Americans were clearly un-American: the fear of Indian uprisings in Washington County was almost "as pervasive as was the nightmare of white southerners about slave revolts following Nat Turner's rebellion" (p. 160), an assertion that the authors fail to document from the rich literature on antebellum slavery. "The sentiments of the new organization, the American Party," they write, "continued and were wholly absorbed after 1858 into the new organization, the Republican party" (p. 165). The county's Know-Nothings were antislavery and anti-black: they opposed

both slaves and free blacks in the territory. In the constitution referendum on the admission of Free Negroes to Oregon, held in 1857, 83 percent of the voters in Washington County cast ballots in the negative. In only two of the seven precincts did the negative vote fall below the 79 percent (72 and 68 percent). Isaac Mills, a native of Tennessee, was the only man in his precinct to vote for the admission of free blacks. Evidently it did not make him popular with his neighbors. He ran unsuccessfully for justice of the peace the next year; other than occasional jury duty, he held no public office.

Like their Puritan ancestors, most county residents were against Catholics, immigrants, poor people (or those who look like they might become a public burden), and racial minorities, as described by many scholars of colonial New England, including Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms* (1970, pp. 106-18). Having largely eliminated the Indians in two wars, they were not about to welcome free blacks, though some were said to perform heroic work on the underground railroad back in Indiana, a claim that may have no more foundation than many others, as shown by Larry Gara's *The Liberty Line* (1961). It is remarkable that these paragons of virtue got on as well as they did with each other, not to mention their neighbors of southern origin and Democratic leanings. Another group of Hoosiers had contempt even for the "suckers" they encountered, particularly in Springfield, as they headed west across Illinois in 1852. Later (p. 213), the authors seem to imply that there were significant differences on slavery and race between those who came from the north and the south, but from their own ample evidence such was not the case. It was not until the end of the decade that slavery became more important than religious and ethnic issues among the good Protestant folk of such American and Republican stronghold as Forest Grove. Nor was it even true of Civil War soldiers, as shown by Larry M. Logue in *To Appomattox and Beyond* (1996) and James M. McPherson in *What They Fought For* (1994).

Chapter Seven, "The Electorate," discusses in detail "The surviving poll books for elections in Washington County between 1855 and 1860" that "provide an unusual opportunity to explore at the individual level this political world and the changes occurring within it. The poll books preserved a comprehensive political record indicating precisely who voted, where they voted, in what order they cast their ballots, and for which candidates they voted" (p. 182). There was a consistent pattern of party loyalty. In 1859, for example, only 7 percent of Know-Nothing voters switched to the Democrats, and

only 8 percent of Lane's supporters went to Republican. In 1859, 61 percent of the American Party voters in 1857 voted Republican. Despite a badly divided Democratic party, one half of Lane's 1857 voters supported his hand-picked candidate in 1859. The Republicans continued to grow, attracting far more new voters than the Democrats. The data in this volume confirm most other statements about the high turnout and participation in most American elections during the nineteenth century.

"The Republican vote of 1859 built upon the 1857 swing to the American Party that moved the county firmly and irrevocably beyond the reach of the Democratic Party. The key element in that change was the arrival at the polls of new voters, about half of whom were recent arrivals. Overwhelmingly, the Republicans of 1859 were the American Party. Only twenty-four men (7 percent of the American party voters in 1857) switched to the Democrats. Of the 268 American Party supporters from 1857 who were still in the county for the 1859 elections, only forty-three failed to vote, very much the normal rate of abstention. The Know-Nothings of Washington County moved en masse to the Republican party, providing 56 percent of its 1859 support. The second largest group of Republican ballots came from men who had not voted in 1857; new residents in the county provided 27 percent of the votes while previous nonvoters provided 12 percent. Only 4 percent of the Republican Party's strength in 1859 came from former Democrats (p. 200). So the purpose of an election campaign and all its trappings "was not to convert the opposition but to maintain the political faith and enthusiasm of those already committed to the cause" (p. 241). "Roll-off," the tendency of voters not to cast votes for offices at the bottom of the ballot, and ticket splitting by men who "exhibited a highly independent cast of mind" (p. 201) were both important factors in the county's political history. "The true believers, those casting straight party tickets in all three elections, numbered just 88-34 Democrats and 54 Republicans; less than 10 percent of the total number of participants in these elections defined the committed partisan core of the Washington County electorate. The political changes of the 1850s gave the Republican Party a political dominance it would not surrender for rest of the century. The Democrats were swept from the field, but not as a result of existing voters converting to the Republican cause. Democrats simply ceased to participate politically and the newcomers disproportionately entered Republican ranks" (pp. 208-09). The split between the Democrats hard and Soft factions of Bush and Lane was a disaster for the party. As it widened, it drew in other

elements and national factions. Yet "The real problem for the Democrats was the loss of support from all cultural groups" (p. 230). The Democrats continued to dominate Oregon throughout the 1850s, but in Washington County Know-Nothings, Free soldiers, Republicans, and anti-slavery men took control.

A man's social and economic status was clearly related to the level of his political activity: "those persisters who voted regularly and maintained a straight ticket tended to be the wealthiest residents; those who voted infrequently and engaged in various ballots-or-ticket-splitting choices were poorer than true believers. Being a full integrated party man and turning out to the polls regularly was like belonging to one of the churches—it implied being married and in possession of considerable economic independence. The politically active had a stake in the community" (pp. 217-18). Which is to say that such a man lacked ideological independence as well as physical and sexual autonomy, having both vested interests and hostages to fortune. He was married to a political organization and to one woman, who was likely to be at least as demanding as his party. This economic trend continues, and nineteenth century Republicans would probably approve. Today a tiny part of the electorate has grossly disproportionate power or influence on election results and legislation at all levels, especially the national one, without even having to vote. In Washington County it was the economic elite who were most committed to their party and to political participation. Below them in wealth were those voting a straight ticket, and then men who voted, but abstained in some races or split the ticket with their ballot. All three groups possessed wealth substantially higher than the average for adult male taxpayers in 1859. At the bottom were non-voters, 237 men whose assets were valued at more than 30 percent below the average. There was a high correlation between church membership and wealth; the higher a man placed in the tables of wealth distribution, the more likely he was to be a church member.

Despite the importance of regions, the authors find that the evidence does not support any broad interpretation of political affiliation based on birthplace, at least partly because few came to Oregon directly from their native state. Citing John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Oregon Trail* (1979), they note that 90 percent of those coming to Oregon from the midwestern states had been born in states outside that region. Missouri or Kansas was "only the last stopping-off point before the final plunge west" (p. 231). In only 33 of 431 families with children in Washington County in 1860 was the first sur-

living child born in the state of either parents birth, and in only 18 did husband, wife, and child all come from the same state—barely 4 percent of such households. Voters who had grown up in a state or region, especially those who had married and raised at least some children there, were more likely to remain true to their original political affiliation, regardless of party. But regional origin helped determine patterns of settlement in the county. Everything east of James McMillian’s farm reeked of abolitionism, improvement, and the Old Northwest; immediately to the west, for several miles, was the culture of Andrew Masters, reminiscent of the “little Dixie” section of Missouri, and the culture of small scale southern farming.

The Democratic hamlet of Hillsboro, and the Republican town of Forest Grove, were the largest precincts, each embracing three of four smaller neighborhood clusters. The strongest Republican precincts, each embracing three or four smaller neighborhood clusters, were on the eastern side of the county, and were the ones where men were least likely to leave their precinct to vote. In 1855, 75 percent of the voters of Hillsboro supported Democrats and in Forest Grove 81 percent of the men voting went for the American Party. The latter was a town apart from the surrounding hinterland, with a vital and diverse community. Hillsboro was more like a typical county seat in the old south, and there was little there aside from what was needed for government activities and socializing on election day and other events. The very fact that such a small crossroads was even called a town reflected the southern origins of many of its inhabitants. In Forest Grove, a scattered residential community, “There was an air of failure, turning easily to rancor, about the New England missionaries who had removed by the late 1840s from various parts of the Oregon mission to the western side of the Tualatin Plains” (p. 298). This town of about 250 in 1860 boasted several shops including a book store and an apothecary, a Templars Hall, and Tualatin Academy and the fledging Pacific University (the county’s only places of higher education). Yet despite its cultural resources, the town did not dominate the county politically, nor did its residents provide persuasive or prominent leadership. County voters looked elsewhere for delegates to the ter-

ritorial legislature and for the part-time officers who carried out county responsibilities. The much smaller Hillsboro was a compact cluster of buildings that hardly existed except on community occasions, when it filled up. A “hermit,” Henry Davis, a strange man with a colorful past, and a candidate for poor relief toward the end of his life, lived in Hillsboro. When he died, neighbors found a fortune in cash hidden in his crude hut, and the county assessor said that he held title to much acreage. Davis and other unorthodox residents of Hillsboro probably would not have been allowed to remain in prim Forest Grove in the author’s judgment.

The authors tells us that “The history of Forest Grove and Hillsboro reminds us, finally, that Washington County’s experience in the decade before the Civil War was at once special and, at another level, quite ordinary. Little else in the United States replicated the county’s remoteness and the distinctive triangular contests between Native American, representatives of residual British imperial ambition, and American settlers. But there also could be found in unusually sharp relief, in the conflict between Hillsboro and Forest Grove and in Washington County at large, a replication of the struggle for cultural and political allegiance that occurred throughout much of the nation in the middle decades in the Northeast and old Northwest and in many of the counties and small communities of the newer states of the South” (pp. 321-22). That “Coda” is perhaps as good a statement of the significance of this excellent, pathbreaking, meaty book, as any that could be written. Its influence should be great. Few scholars with a claim to expertise in nineteenth century American history, of interests in any number of specialties, can afford to ignore *Washington County*. But given its price and the demands it makes upon even serious readers it remains to be seen what that impact will be.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-Pol is Lex Renda <renlex@uwm.edu>]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Michael Chesson. Review of Bourke, Paul; Debats, Donald, *Washington County: Politics and Community in Antebellum America*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=835>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.