

**Isaiah D. Clawson:**

***A Salem County Politician in a Time of Transformation***

**By Bruce A. Bendler**

**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v9i2.325>**

*Isaiah D. Clawson was a physician and politician from Salem County in the antebellum era. He first affiliated with the Whig Party. When that party disintegrated in the mid-1850s, Clawson sought the support of the American (Know-Nothing) Party before affiliating with the more enduring Republican Party. Clawson's political maneuvers when he ran for, and was elected to, the U.S. House of Representatives in 1854 and 1856 revealed the political options open to Whigs as their party faded from the political scene. In the context of New Jersey politics, where the American Party endured longer than elsewhere, political figures such as Clawson had to gain and hold on to support from both Americans and Republicans to unify the opposition to the Democrats. Although Clawson's political positions were more in line with Republican thinking on slavery and internal improvements, political realities of the time compelled him to rely on a united opposition to win and retain his seat in the House of Representatives.*

Isaiah D. Clawson, the son of Israel R. Clawson, was born in Woodstown, New Jersey, on March 30, 1822. Israel Clawson was a physician and a part-time politician who served in both houses of the New Jersey General Assembly in the 1820s and early 1830s. Israel himself got involved in politics at a time of transformation as the Federalist Party disintegrated and the American political system reconfigured itself based on support of or opposition to Andrew Jackson. Israel Clawson, who entered politics as a Jeffersonian Democratic-Republican, chose to affiliate with the opposition to Jackson, which in time became the National Republican, then the Whig, Party.

Isaiah Clawson followed in his father's footsteps in more ways than one. He became both a physician and a politician. Like his father, Isaiah Clawson became involved in politics at a time of political upheaval—at the end of the Age of Jackson—as the Second Party System disintegrated. The old Whig Party irretrievably splintered over the slavery question. For a few brief years, the American (Know-Nothing) Party rose up to oppose the tenuously united Democrats; about the same time, the Republican Party emerged to more permanently challenge the Democrats. In New Jersey, a longstanding dispute over monopoly privileges accorded to the Camden and Amboy Railroad and the Delaware and Raritan Canal—the Joint Companies—added to the political friction. Indeed, Isaiah Clawson stepped into the political arena at a time of almost kaleidoscopic change.

The demise of the Whig Party forced its adherents to choose between the emergent American or Republican Parties. Local politics and the uneven development of the new parties naturally influenced that choice. In Salem County, New Jersey, the Whig Party still fielded candidates in 1855 as it disappeared elsewhere. The Republicans did not field a ticket there until 1856 when Clawson sought and won a second term in the U.S. House of Representatives. Clawson thus sought support from the American Party in both 1854, when the Whigs also nominated him, and 1856, when he was the Republican nominee. Although his positions on issues such as the expansion of slavery and internal improvements, especially those of local concern, more closely aligned with Republican positions, Clawson, at least initially, saw the American Party as the most viable means to oppose the Democrats.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> David Potter noted the political uncertainties of the mid-1850s. He called the emergence of the Republican Party the “central development” of a “complicated process of political disintegration and reintegration.” However, he also noted that the midterm elections of 1854 “seemed to indicate the possible triumph of Know-Nothingism rather than anti-slavery.” Uncertainty prevailed. Clawson, seeking a platform on which to oppose the Democrats, accepted American support to do just that. Furthermore, from the perspective of a South Jersey politician seeking office in 1854, the American Party had elected a mayor in nearby Philadelphia and seemed poised to make major gains in state elections,

Isaiah Clawson received an education that prepared him for careers in both medicine and public service. In 1833, he began his studies at Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, after which he attended Newark College in Delaware, the forerunner of the University of Delaware. In 1840, he earned a bachelor's degree at Princeton and, in 1843, a doctorate in medicine from the University of Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup> It was during his college years that young Isaiah made decisions about his career and his political affiliation. Typical of many students, he did not always pursue his studies with diligence, and he also may have sought to escape a strict religious upbringing. A friend from Woodstown, T. Cailhopper, wrote Clawson, then at Newark College, venting his distaste for a Bible class he attended. "I don't think much of it," even though he did not "mind going to meeting once in a while." Evidently, Cailhopper felt that he would find in Isaiah Clawson a sympathetic listener.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, Richard F. Turner of Woodstown, about Clawson's age, felt compelled to offer spiritual counsel. In September 1838, when Clawson was at Princeton, Turner implored the 16-year-old student, likely a close friend, not to ignore spiritual values. After discussion of a "sickly season" prevailing in his hometown, Turner expressed his chagrin at seeing "so many unprepared to meet God in judgment." Turner then urged Clawson to consider spiritual matters, pointing out "the beauty there is in the religion of the Lord Jesus Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Clawson also faced more mundane concerns. On August 11, 1838, he wrote his father from Nassau Hall in Princeton asking, as most students do, for money. He had just become a senior at the college, and he needed to "procure some books so as to keep even with my class." In addition,

---

as well as elections for the United States Congress. David Potter, *The American Crisis* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 249–255.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah D. Clawson, *Memoranda of my Life* (Woodstown, New Jersey, 1877), 5–16.

<sup>3</sup> T. Cailhopper to Isaiah D. Clawson (hereafter: IDC), April 13, 1836, Clawson Papers, C0405, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey (hereafter: RBSCP).

<sup>4</sup> R. F. Turner, to IDC, September 25, 1838, RBSCP.

he asked for money to pay for “new and mended shoes.” Clawson also wanted to come home for a visit in five weeks, and he needed the carriage fare for that trip. Altogether, Clawson asked his father for 10 dollars. He stressed the urgency of the matter, noting that he needed the books by the end of the week and that the shoemaker “had already dunned me two or three times.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1840, Clawson, still a student at Princeton, received a scolding letter from his father. On February 17 of that year, Israel Clawson advised his son that the college had just sent a “circular” that did not reflect well on Isaiah’s conduct. The “circular” intimated that young Isaiah had absented himself from prayer meetings and had fallen into “indolent and lazy habits.” “Raise yourself up out of this most infamous practice, obey the rules of the college,” Israel Clawson commanded his son. Not only that, but Israel expressed concern about his son “smoaking” and “laying in bed in the morning while you ought to be up.” “I have nothing further to say,” Israel abruptly concluded.<sup>6</sup>

While at Princeton, Isaiah kept in touch with a classmate from his days at Newark College, George Earle of Queen Anne’s County, Maryland, from whom he may have learned some of those bad habits. On June 7, 1840, Earle, then a student at Jefferson College in Canonsburg in western Pennsylvania, replied to a letter Clawson had written on May 17. Earle invited his New Jersey friend to Queen Anne’s County, suggesting that the two could “puff away all the ills to which the flesh is heir” over a “glass of good Madeira and a fine Havana.” Apparently, Clawson had also become interested in a young lady. Earle made reference to “that little sparkling eye damsel in Jersey,” mentioning that Clawson “did not pretend to deny the charge I brought against you.”

Clawson had also expressed interest in politics to his Maryland friend. Earle resolved that the two “meet in Congress in 1856—or 7,” noting that Clawson had made a good beginning, having

---

<sup>5</sup> IDC to Israel R. Clawson, August 11, 1838, Salem County Historical Society, Salem, New Jersey.

<sup>6</sup> Israel Clawson, to IDC, February 17, 1840, RBSCP.

already served as a delegate to a Whig convention in New Jersey. Both Clawson and Earle had made the Whig cause their own; the Marylander had attended a Whig meeting in Washington, Pennsylvania, about 25 miles from Canonsburg. He noted that twelve thousand people from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia were present who proceeded to form a procession complete with log cabins, canoes, and hard cider, the symbols of the Whig campaign of 1840. Even though fearful that Whigs “might carry this humbug too far,” Earle still rejoiced, surely with Clawson’s concurrence, that “the people have espoused the cause of old Tip [William Henry Harrison].”<sup>7</sup>

A couple of months later, Earle and Clawson remained optimistic about the Whigs’ political prospects. The “Locos” had held a meeting in Washington, Pennsylvania, which attracted only five hundred men, two-thirds of whom were curious Whigs. A Democratic congressman, Albert Gallatin Brown of Mississippi, addressed the paltry crowd.<sup>8</sup> To Earle, Brown’s address proved only that “fools might be in Congress as anywhere else.” Earle’s letter also revealed that Clawson had decided to study for a degree in medicine, and the Marylander made note of the demanding nature of such a career. Earle himself had chosen to study law, and he took pride that they both had a “fixed object in view.” From that point on, medicine and politics became twin ambitions in Clawson’s life.<sup>9</sup>

At some point in his college career, Clawson articulated his political philosophy, expounding a generally Whig position in an essay entitled “The Stability of our Republic.” Clawson praised the still-young American republic as the best plan of government ever devised by humanity. In contrast to the “loose spirit of democracy” in ancient Greece, the American republic was governed by “constitutional restraints nicely united.” Under the “controlling principle of

---

<sup>7</sup> George Earle to IDC, June 7, 1840, RBSCP.

<sup>8</sup> Earle misidentified Brown as a senator. He was serving in the House of Representatives in 1840, having won election to that body in 1838.

<sup>9</sup> George Earle to IDC August 2, 1840, RBSCP.

Christianity generally prevalent in our land,” commerce, agriculture, and education flourished. A republic sustained by the intelligence and virtue of its people would resist the pressure of anarchy, despotism, and civil unrest. Such evils could not shake the “solid basis on which our union rests.”<sup>10</sup>

Clawson completed his studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 1843 and returned home to Woodstown, New Jersey. That same year, he began to practice medicine at the age of 21. For 10 years, medicine was his full-time profession. Indeed, he was a leading member of the Salem County Medical Society by 1848 when he joined his peers in publishing a table of medical fees. Those fees ranged from 25 cents for extraction of a tooth to 60 dollars for certain types of amputations.<sup>11</sup> Having launched his career in medicine, Clawson married Martha W. Shinn, a daughter of William J. Shinn, on December 30, 1850. Like his own father, Shinn had served in both houses of the New Jersey legislature, and he also served as a judge on the Court of Common Pleas.<sup>12</sup>

Soon after his marriage, Isaiah Clawson took title to a portion of his late father’s land. On March 1, 1851, Isaiah’s brother William J. Clawson and Allen J. Hires, acting on behalf of Isaiah’s sister Elizabeth Clawson Hires, deeded 11 tracts of land to their brother. The properties included two houses and a store in Woodstown, as well as six parcels in Pilesgrove Township outside Woodstown itself, including a couple of tracts of timber land. All were less than 25 acres. The transaction was part of a larger agreement over the distribution of the estate of Israel Clawson.<sup>13</sup> The Clawsons also acquired part of Martha’s father’s property. On December 11, 1850, Martha

---

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah D. Clawson, “The Stability of our Republic,” manuscript, no date, RBSCP. Clawson’s paper set forth Whig political philosophy in more than one way. His emphasis on constitutional government and “the controlling principle of Christianity” are noted as Whig principles by David Walker Howe. See Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 31, 52, 156.

<sup>11</sup> “A Table of Fees and Rates for Charging Passed by the Salem County Medical Society at Salem on Monday, October 30, 1848,” pamphlet, Salem County Historical Society, Salem, New Jersey.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Cushing and Charles E. Sheppard, *History of Gloucester, Salem, and Cumberland Counties, New Jersey* (Woodbury, New Jersey: Gloucester County Historical Society, reprint, 2002), 357.

<sup>13</sup> Salem County Deeds 11:629, County Clerk’s Office, Salem, New Jersey.

Shinn purchased just over one-half an acre from her brother William J. Shinn at “the angle of Main Street” in Woodstown near the Quaker Meeting House, formerly the property of her father Isaiah Shinn.<sup>14</sup>

In 1853, Clawson began to actively pursue the other ambition he had dreamed of as a student: politics. Like his father, Clawson affiliated with the Whig Party and won election to the assembly from Salem County on its ticket in October of that year. To win election, Clawson defeated two opponents: Democrat Harman Richman and Temperance candidate William S. Vanneman. The Whig *National Standard* of Salem hailed Clawson’s victory, noting that the Temperance candidate, a renegade Democrat, divided that party’s vote in the usually Democratic First Assembly District of Salem County. But the *Standard* speculated that Clawson may have won without divided opposition, such was his “personal popularity.”<sup>15</sup>

When Clawson entered the assembly, the status of the Joint Companies—the Camden and Amboy Railroad and the Delaware and Raritan Canal—dominated political discourse in New Jersey. Merged by an act of the legislature in 1831, the state granted the companies monopoly privileges over all freight and passenger traffic between New York and Philadelphia. Generally, New Jersey’s Jacksonian Democrats supported the monopoly, and the opposition Whigs challenged its privileged position. By the early 1850s, Whigs often identified themselves as the “anti-monopoly” party, labeling the Democrats as the opposite. Whigs coupled the challenge to monopoly rights with proposals to extend rail service into southern New Jersey, something desired by many of Clawson’s Salem County constituents.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Salem County Deeds 11:351.

<sup>15</sup> *National Standard*, Salem, New Jersey, November 16, 1853. The vote totals were Clawson, 656; Richman, 595; and Vanneman, 532. Five townships comprised the First Assembly District of Salem County: Pittsgrove, Upper Pittsgrove, Lower Penn’s Neck, Upper Penn’s Neck, and Pilesgrove.

<sup>16</sup> George L. A. Reilly, “The Camden and Amboy Railroad in New Jersey Politics” (PhD diss., New York University, 1951). For an anti-Camden and Amboy perspective see Hermann Platt, ed., *Charles Perrin Smith: New Jersey Political Reminiscences 1828–1882* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 3–33. Several articles examine legal

By 1852, residents of southwestern New Jersey organized meetings to support a “projected road from Camden to Cape May.” On April 12, 1852, “a large number of influential citizens of West Jersey” assembled in Salem to support the proposal.<sup>17</sup> A month later, a convention met in Camden for the same purpose.<sup>18</sup> At the end of December 1852, a committee appointed at the Camden convention drew up an application for a corporate charter to present to the state legislature, set to begin its January 1853 session. By early February 1853, the legislature had passed a bill to incorporate the West Jersey Railroad Company, allowing the Joint Companies to subscribe to its stock and bonds. The companies thus could obtain at least a measure of control over the new line.<sup>19</sup>

Clawson and his Whig colleagues set their sights on a much more ambitious effort to bring rail service into South Jersey when the Democratic-controlled Assembly convened in 1854. In February 1854, the assembly began consideration of a bill to charter the South Jersey Central and Air Line Railroad, a new line to be unaffiliated with the Camden and Amboy. The proposed new line was part of a larger rail network linking New York and the Virginia Tidewater via Delaware and the Eastern Shore of Maryland and Virginia. The New Jersey portion of this plan consisted of a line through the interior of the state from the Raritan River to the Cohansey River, a tributary of the Delaware Bay in Cumberland County. Debate raged over the real need for such a line, called

---

perspectives. See Christopher Gandy, “Can Government Be Trusted to Keep Its Part of a Social Contract: New Jersey Railroads, 1825–1888,” *Journal of Law Economics and Organization* (Autumn 1989): 249–269, and Howard Stoke, “Economic Influences upon the Corporate Laws of New Jersey,” *Journal of Political Economy* (October 1930): 551–579. New Jersey Whigs, while generally favorable to business, opposed the political and economic clout of the Joint Companies, chartered by a Jacksonian legislature in 1831. Peter D. Levine points out that while “sectional variations” did play a role in attitudes toward the companies, differences of opinion were generally partisan and became more so as time progressed. See Levine, *Behavior of State Legislative Parties in the Jacksonian Era: New Jersey 1829–1844* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977), 151–167. Michael F. Holt notes that, by 1849, there was “some Whig waffling” on the issue, pointing out that no politician could ignore the fact that revenue from the Joint Companies covered about 90 percent of the state’s expenditures. Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 455.

<sup>17</sup> *Trenton State Gazette*, Trenton, New Jersey, April 16, 1852.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, May 11, 1852.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, February 2, 1853.



derisively the “Sea Serpent” by some of its opponents. Opponents also argued that the proposal would violate the guarantee of a monopoly granted to the Camden and Amboy by an act of the legislature.

Clawson actively participated in the debate, strongly supporting the new rail line, but on February 8, 1854, the assembly adopted an amendment to reroute it toward Tom’s River and Absecon rather than through the central part of the state, an amendment opposed by Clawson.<sup>20</sup> Supporters of the Joint Companies wished to keep some distance between the new line and Camden and Amboy tracks. Concerned that efforts were underfoot to scuttle the entire project, Clawson offered an amendment requiring construction of 10 miles of track northward from the proposed southern terminus, the Cohansey River. Clawson worked with assemblyman William Parry of Burlington County to convince fellow assembly members that the proposed new line would not directly compete with the Camden and Amboy.<sup>21</sup>

Clawson also presented petitions signed by over 1,200 residents of Salem County supporting the new rail line to the assembly, calling support for the proposal “the undivided sentiment of the people of Salem.” Residents of every township in the county had signed the petitions, and Clawson claimed that he had received no counterpetitions at all. The Salem County assemblyman also implied that he himself, and the rest of the Whig ticket in the county, had won election in 1853 mainly because of anti-monopoly sentiment. Opponents of the proposal argued that the West Jersey rail line from Camden to Cape May, running through Salem County, would render the Air Line unnecessary. Clawson retorted that his constituents, though supportive of the

---

<sup>20</sup> *The War with the Monopoly: Speeches and Proceedings Concerning the Air Line Railroad and Extension of the Camden and Amboy Railroad Charter* (Trenton: William Brown, 1854), 3–5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15–19.

West Jersey line, would “rather do without the West Jersey than to have it under the threat” of not constructing the Air Line.<sup>22</sup>

Supporters of the Air Line summoned a host of agricultural statistics to support their case. Focusing on counties through which the line would pass, they asserted that the proposed new railroad would serve prosperous, growing markets. For example, Salem County alone had over 145 thousand acres of land under cultivation, on which over 1.2 million bushels of wheat were harvested annually, along with over 248 thousand pounds of potatoes. Despite such evidence, opponents of the bill carried the day; on February 22, 1854, the assembly defeated it by a vote of 34 to 23.<sup>23</sup>

The assembly then proceeded to debate a bill to extend the Camden and Amboy’s monopoly privileges until 1869. In spite of his misgivings about the West Jersey line, Clawson proposed an amendment to require continuation of its construction, even though Camden and Amboy president Robert F. Stockton had asserted that extension of the monopoly privileges would ensure, and not impede, construction. Clawson’s amendment to require completion of that line in 9 years failed by a vote of 44 to 10.<sup>24</sup> Recognizing that the solidly Democratic assembly would not support his efforts, Clawson sought to delay consideration of the unamended bill for one year, perhaps hoping for an assembly with more Whigs. That proposal also met with defeat, and the legislature extended the Camden and Amboy’s charter and monopoly rights for 15 years until 1869.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 28–29, 36 Charles Perrin Smith referred to the bill’s defeat “by appliances peculiar to the monopoly.” See Platt, 56.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 48, 49, 64. Michael F. Holt noted that New Jersey Whigs, “facing disarray” in 1853, sought to gain or hold onto support from nativists, temperance advocates, and opponents of the Joint Companies. Clawson addressed and focused on the railroad issue, which was of clear concern to his Salem County constituents. Holt further notes that, in 1853, the Whigs downplayed the temperance issue but emphasized opposition to the Joint Companies. Holt, 791.

Clawson's work in Trenton enhanced his reputation, at least among those who opposed the Democrats. He became a candidate for the United States House of Representatives in 1854, a race complicated by the rapidly changing political landscape. The Whig Party, on the verge of disintegration, still fielded a slate of candidates, as did the newly organized American (Know-Nothing) party. Both parties nominated Isaiah Clawson to oppose Democrat State Senator Thomas W. Mulford of Camden County, the American Party doing so first in August. The Whig *Trenton State Gazette* commented on Clawson's dual nomination, calling him a "clear and unequivocal Whig, hitherto uncontaminated by any political chicanery." That newspaper urged Whigs in the First Congressional District to overcome doubts about his Whig credentials raised by the American Party endorsement and unite behind his candidacy.<sup>26</sup>

The *State Gazette* pointed out that the Democratic opposition overstated Whig disagreement over the American Party's support of Clawson's candidacy. The "Monopoly papers republish every scrap set forth" by Whigs who withheld support from Clawson. Democrats clearly hoped that dissension in Whig ranks would abet Mulford's cause.<sup>27</sup> When the Whig convention convened on September 16, it did in fact endorse Clawson but only after some debate about the American Party endorsement. Ultimately, his "talents, his high character, his past services in the Whig cause" carried the day, but questions remained about his "parting from old friends for the sake of a nomination to Congress." Others at the convention argued that Clawson's stance on key issues was "not inconsistent with Whig principles," and Clawson won a roll call vote with the support of 26 townships to 13 for his opponent, Thomas J. Saunders of Gloucester County.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *Trenton State Gazette*, Trenton, New Jersey, September 11, 1854.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. William Gillette notes that Whigs only "grudgingly accepted" Clawson, and the proceedings of the convention reveal both enthusiasm and reluctance. Gillette ascribes Whig acceptance of Clawson's candidacy to the party's efforts to form coalitions and alliances to slow down "the accelerating pace of political reorganization" that hastened the demise of the Whig Party. William Gillette, *Jersey Blue: Civil War Politics in New Jersey 1854-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 29.

The delegates to the convention unanimously adopted a resolution that set forth those “Whig principles.” The delegates opposed any tinkering with the Compromise of 1850, viewing the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 as a “fraud and surprise,” advanced by demagogues “for the purpose of advancing their personal ends and strengthening the interests of slavery.” The Whigs also adopted a nativist resolution deploring appointment to federal offices of “foreigners of questionable character and doubtful fidelity” instead of well-qualified Americans. The convention also reaffirmed traditional Whig support for protective tariffs and internal improvements. The convention then went on record expressing its confidence that Isaiah D. Clawson would “give a hearty support to those measures that would advance the interests of the District and the State.”<sup>29</sup>

Within the First Congressional District, the Democratic *Salem Sunbeam* was one of the newspapers that magnified the difficulties accompanying Clawson’s endorsement by two parties. The Democrats no doubt feared, rightly so, that a unified opposition imperiled their candidate’s chances. Thus, the *Sunbeam* sowed dissension in Whig ranks, insinuating that Whigs from Camden and Gloucester counties wanted a man with “old Whig principles,” who was free from “all entangling alliances.”<sup>30</sup>

Editors of Whig newspapers in the district seemed uncertain about how to deal with the American nomination of Clawson. A writer in the *National Standard* of Salem reprinted comments from *Jersey Blue* about the *Standard*’s seeming reticence “regarding the Native nomination.” The

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., September 16, 1854. Michael F. Holt points out the dilemma confronting the Whig Party in 1854. Northern Whigs saw opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a drawing point, while fearful of losing some anti-Democratic voters to the surging American Party. In addition, Holt points out that New Jersey Whigs, wishing to maintain a national organization, had not broken their ties with the southern Whigs, in spite of tension over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Even so, the Whigs in New Jersey set forth their opposition to that act. To survive, the moribund Whig Party had little choice but to form a united front with the Americans in opposition to the Democrats. Thus, the convention adopted, at least in part, the nativist position. But Holt added that Whigs affiliated with Americans in only two of the state’s five congressional districts: the Third, where the alliance was a quiet one, and the First, where Whigs endorsed Clawson only after the American Party had done so. Holt 876–878.

<sup>30</sup> *Salem Sunbeam*, Salem, New Jersey, September 15, 1854.

writer quickly affirmed the *Standard*'s full support for Clawson, extolling his "talent, probity, and support for Whig principles." Clawson opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, was "no friend of the Monopoly," and a "Henry Clay Whig."<sup>31</sup> Two weeks later, the *Standard* declined to "heap brush" on the "Congressional difficulty in the Whig ranks." Indeed, it derided efforts by the "Monopoly papers" to create dissension and discord in Whig ranks; "the only effect has been to close them up."<sup>32</sup>

Democrat Thomas Mulford did indeed face two opponents but not because of disharmony between Whigs and Americans. Rather, the Temperance Party fielded a candidate of its own, John W. Hazleton of Gloucester County. The Whig *National Standard* of Salem frantically urged its readers to maintain a united opposition and support Clawson, calling a vote for Hazleton a vote for Mulford. Hazleton stood "no earthly chance of election," and voting for him would be "indirectly aiding" Thomas Mulford and the "late acts of the Pierce administration with reference to Nebraska and Kansas." Mulford would also serve as a "willing instrument in the hands of the Monopoly" in either Trenton or Washington.<sup>33</sup>

To hold the support of two parties, Clawson did have to walk a political tightrope. Reports circulated that upon accepting the American nomination, Clawson had called the Whig Party "defunct." The *Woodbury Constitution* reprinted Clawson's acceptance of the American nomination, in which he committed himself to the principles of that party. For the devoutly Whig *Constitution*, Clawson's acceptance of the American nomination was sufficient reason to deny him support; if the Whigs were to select another nominee, Clawson "stands pledged as his opponent."<sup>34</sup> The editors of the Woodbury newspaper thus continued to suspect Clawson's full loyalty.

---

<sup>31</sup> *National Standard*, August 30, 1854.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, September 13, 1854.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, November 8, 1854.

<sup>34</sup> *Woodbury Constitution*, August 29, 1854.

Even after the Whig convention endorsed Clawson, the editors of the *Constitution* did not accept that decision. “Expediency has triumphed over principle,” they lamented. The editorial also excoriated the one vote per township rule, presumably adopted to aid Clawson. “The little township of Elsinboro [in Salem County] with a population of less than 700” had an equal vote with much larger municipalities in the district. Although affirming their “kindest feelings” toward Clawson as a person, they saw his endorsement as an act “embarrassing and forestalling the Whig party.” Even so, Clawson won the nomination based on nearly unanimous support from Salem and Cumberland Counties. Camden and Cape May Counties gave strong support to Thomas Saunders. Gloucester County was divided, and Atlantic County’s delegates were not present for the vote, although they were “understood to be unanimously in favor of Saunders.”<sup>35</sup>

The editors of the *Constitution* never did support Clawson. They did not put his name “at the head of our columns, where it might have been in deference to our Whig friends.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the editors insinuated that the nomination of Saunders might have averted the decision of the Temperance Party to field its own candidate. That party, they argued, would not have opposed Saunders “for he would have been acceptable” to its membership. Saunders himself, though solicited by the Temperance Party, “refused any nomination but that of his own party. And there he stands today—a firm, consistent Whig.”<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, Clawson won election to Congress, based largely on an overwhelming victory in the supposedly hostile territory of Camden County. He also won Salem and Cumberland Counties by smaller margins, while he lost Atlantic, Cape May, and Gloucester Counties to Hazleton, who won more support than expected. Even the *Constitution*, though hostile to Clawson,

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., September 19, 1854.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., October 24, 1854. At the time, it was customary for newspapers to prominently display names of the candidates they endorsed, seldom concealing their partisanship.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., October 31, 1854.

rejoiced at the defeat of Mulford. It attributed the Democratic defeat to a national issue, the “iniquitous Kansas-Nebraska Act, repudiated even by the staunch Democrats” of the First District.<sup>38</sup>

When he went to Washington, Clawson entered into a political firestorm. The Congress elected in 1854 reflected the political incoherence caused by the disintegration of the Whig Party, the short-lived presence of the American Party, and the more permanent emergence of the Republican Party. The new Congress was also split nearly down the middle over the issue of slavery. No party commanded a majority in the House of Representatives, and that body deadlocked for nine weeks over the election of a speaker, a position eventually won by Massachusetts Democrat Nathaniel Banks who, unlike most Democrats, opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. For the first 33 ballots for Speaker, Clawson voted for his fellow Whig and New Jerseyan, Alexander Pennington, but he finally threw his support to Banks.<sup>39</sup>

The debate over the geographical extension of slavery dominated the proceedings of the Thirty-Fourth Congress. Clawson consistently voted against efforts to allow its extension into the territories. On January 26, 1856, Indiana Republican George Dunn offered a series of resolutions that condemned the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 and called for the restoration of the compromises of 1820 and 1850. Clawson supported one of those resolutions that called upon the yet-un-elected Speaker to affirm Dunn’s position. He voted for another resolution stating that restoration of restrictions on the spread of slavery was the only means of “reviving that concord and harmony among the states of the American union which are essential to the welfare of our people and the perpetuity of our institutions.”<sup>40</sup> A closely divided House defeated the former

---

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., November 14, 1854.

<sup>39</sup> *New York Times*, December 10, 1855. No party had a majority in the House of Representatives in the 34th Congress.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., January 28, 1856.

resolution by one vote, while it passed the latter by the same margin. The presence or absence of just a few members often resulted in contradictory votes.

The House also adopted a resolution stating that “any agitation on the question of slavery” was “unwise, unjust to a portion of the American people, injurious to every section of our country, and therefore should not be countenanced.” Despite Clawson’s opposition, that resolution won approval by one vote. But later that same day, when some members had left the chamber, the House passed another resolution calling repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 an “example of useless and factious agitation of the slavery question, unwise and unjust to the American people.” This resolution, with Clawson’s support, won adoption by 10 votes.<sup>41</sup>

Later in the session, Clawson reaffirmed his free-soil credentials. On July 3, 1856, Congressman David Barclay of Pennsylvania offered a motion to reconsider the previous defeat of a bill to admit Kansas under an antislavery constitution adopted by a convention in Topeka. The reconsideration motion won by two votes; the House then passed the bill by a vote of 108 to 97 with Clawson’s support.<sup>42</sup> Clawson also voted against the seating of the proslavery John Whitfield as the territorial delegate from Kansas.<sup>43</sup> He then voted to strike out language in an appropriations bill to prevent the use of the military against proslavery ruffians in Kansas, but that resolution was defeated by three votes.<sup>44</sup>

Differences over slavery had torn the Whig Party apart; northern and southern Whigs simply could not find common ground. As the campaign of 1856 heated up, Clawson and others elected as Whigs, or with Whig support, found themselves compelled to seek a new base of support. In New Jersey, the new Republican Party began to organize in some localities across New

---

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., July 5, 1856.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., August 2, 1856.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., September 2, 1856.



Jersey in 1855, while the American Party continued to make its presence felt in state politics. As the election of 1856 approached, the question confronting First Congressional District politicians was if these two relatively new political parties—the Republicans and the Americans—could present a united front against the Democrats as Whigs and Americans had done in 1854.<sup>45</sup>

Although Clawson had won election to the state assembly in 1853 as a Whig, he had accepted the nomination of the American Party in 1854 before the Whig convention even met. By the summer of 1855, he more firmly identified himself with the American cause. He worked with American Party leaders such as A. Sargent of Washington, DC, and Felix Zollicoffer, an American congressman from Tennessee, to formulate party strategy in the Thirty-Fourth Congress. Sargent suggested avoiding a formal party caucus, but he also suggested that Clawson give attention to Zollicoffer's succinct ideas for a party platform: naturalization only after 21 years' residence and exclusion of the foreign-born from any position of trust in the United States government.<sup>46</sup>

As a member of Congress, Clawson also worked and corresponded with his South Jersey constituents about both national and local issues. His stance on slavery won widespread support. A neighbor, A. Bassett of Woodstown, warmly applauded Clawson's stance on the Kansas-Nebraska imbroglio.<sup>47</sup> Clawson's sister Elizabeth Hires reported that local newspapers generally

---

<sup>45</sup> Herman Platt notes the presence of five political factions in New Jersey by the mid-1850s: (1) the administration Democrats, (2) anti-Nebraska Democrats, (3) Nativist Americans—pro-Joint Companies, (4) National Americans—mainly old Whigs, and (5) Republicans. Opponents of the Democrats attempted to overcome factionalism, coalesce, and form a united “opposition” ticket. After the middle of that decade, the Democrats and an “Opposition” ticket usually contested elections. See Platt, 18–21. Republicans, Americans, and, at times, anti-Nebraska Democrats often joined forces to form such tickets. Gillette 25–73. The Republicans held an organizing convention in Newark on April 3, 1856, giving notice of that meeting in anti-Democratic newspapers. *National Standard*, April 2, 1856.

<sup>46</sup> A. Sargent to IDC, August 22, 1855, MS 798, Special Collections, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, New Jersey (hereafter: RUSC). The American Party sought to broaden its base. By 1855, William Gillette points out that, to some politicians and voters, the party offered a “safe haven from extremism,” a “political center that could save the nation” by diverting attention from the slavery issue. Zollicoffer's proposals fit in with such efforts; they toned down more extreme nativist proposals while still imposing restrictions on immigrants' access to public offices. Such efforts attempted to moderate the American Party's harsh nativism in hopes that voters would perceive it as that “political center.” Gillette, 32.

<sup>47</sup> A. Bassett to IDC, January 22, 1856, RUSC.

spoke well of the congressman, adding that their late father would be proud of his son's work. Elizabeth envisioned her brother reaching heights such as those attained by Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and John Quincy Adams.<sup>48</sup>

Clawson also learned that some, if not all, politics are local. On March 10, 1856, Richard C. Holmes of Cape May Courthouse wrote Clawson asking his congressman to support construction of a breakwater at Cape May. This project, the subject of a state legislative report in 1844, deeply concerned mariners at New Jersey's southern tip. Holmes pointed out that sailors in the area had no protection from the "heavy northeast gales" that beset coastal New Jersey, and indeed the entire Atlantic coast. Writing at the end of a harsh, cold winter, Holmes noted that the Delaware River had been closed by ice to navigation for over two months; those seeking shelter at the cape had to sail 25 miles northward to the cove of the Maurice River. He added that the Cape Henlopen breakwater near Lewes, Delaware, afforded little protection for small vessels. Larger vessels seeking refuge there, coupled with "drift ice," left the small boats and ships "not safe at any time." Noting such obstacles, Holmes remarked that "it's all the same to the little fellow; he must suffer." Holmes' efforts did not meet with success, but politically, he noted that support for, and approval of, the breakwater would abet the cause of Cape May County Republicans.<sup>49</sup>

Holmes's mention of the Republicans in his county set forth evidence of the new political environment in New Jersey and across the nation. As in 1854, Clawson won the nomination of two parties in 1856, but, in the latter year, the newly emergent Republican Party had supplanted the Whigs. The American Party, though fading as a national political force, remained a factor in New

---

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Clawson Hires to IDC, June 13, 1856, RUSC.

<sup>49</sup> R. C. Holmes to IDC, March 10, 1856, RUSC.

Jersey politics.<sup>50</sup> Winning the endorsement of two parties again presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the now-incumbent congressman. Presidential politics further complicated the picture, as Americans and Republicans supported different candidates for the White House. The Americans nominated a ticket of Millard Fillmore for president and Andrew Jackson Donelson for vice president; the Republicans nominated John C. Fremont and New Jersey's own William Dayton. Clawson again, as in 1854, had to walk a political tightrope.<sup>51</sup>

But Clawson had gained respect and more widespread support during his first term in Congress. Even the *Woodbury Constitution*, which had withheld its support in 1854, published laudatory comments early in 1856, quoting the *Salem National Standard*. Noting that both friends and opponents had observed Clawson with the "strictest scrutiny," the writer noted that the former offered "hearty approval" and the latter found "nothing to condemn." The article praised Clawson's support of anti-Kansas-Nebraska Democrat Nathaniel Banks for Speaker of the House and Clawson's sentiment that "the North had suffered great injustice at the hands of the South." In sum, Clawson was "an industrious representative" who would prove a "formidable candidate" if renominated.<sup>52</sup>

Republicans took notice of Clawson's opposition to the expansion of slaveholding territory. In June of 1856, Clawson won the support of South Jersey's nascent Republican

---

<sup>50</sup> William Gillette points out that New Jersey Republicans recruited former American Party supporters as late as 1860 to unite the opposition, even though Republicans at the national level, such as William Seward, had distanced themselves from nativists. Gillette, 99.

<sup>51</sup> Eric Foner describes early Republican efforts to address concerns about temperance and immigration along with the new party's main objective to restrain the spread of slavery, thus broadening the party's appeal. He discerns tensions between Republicans who wished to join forces with Americans and more strident Republican opponents of slavery, such as Seward, who viewed the nativist cause as an "unfortunate aberration" that diverted attention from the antislavery cause. Even so, Republicans, eager to establish their presence on the political landscape, did work with nativists and other opponents of the Democrats. Thus, in New Jersey, they supported Clawson because of his opposition to Kansas-Nebraska and in spite of his connections with the nativist movement. Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 230–233.

<sup>52</sup> *Woodbury Constitution*, April 8, 1856.

organization. On the seventh of that month, State Senator Joseph S. Franklin of Woodbury noted the need for united opposition to the Democratic presidential nominee James Buchanan. He hoped that Fillmore would decline the American nomination and that anti-Democratic forces would unite behind the Republican Fremont-Dayton ticket.<sup>53</sup> At the district level, Joseph A. Shute of Mullica Hill in Gloucester County talked to Republicans as well as members of the still-extant Temperance Party. To his surprise, he found that both were satisfied with Clawson's performance in Congress and were willing to unite behind the incumbent against the Democratic nominee.<sup>54</sup>

Supporters of John Hazleton, Clawson's Temperance opponent in 1854, actually abetted Clawson's cause in 1856. Joseph Shute noted that in his home town of Mullica Hill, 15 "Hazleton men" and 7 who had supported Democrat Thomas Mulford in 1854 now declared their support for Isaiah Clawson.<sup>55</sup> A couple of weeks later, Isaac V. Dickinson of Woodstown reported Hazleton's assessment that the path was clear to Clawson's securing the nomination of the new Republican Party.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the American Party had already re-nominated Clawson by acclamation, commending his support "of the glorious cause in which we are still engaged."<sup>57</sup> The Republicans followed the American lead, formally nominating the congressman on September 10, 1856.

Clawson faced Democrat Charles Hineline in the election of 1856. Hineline, a Camden newspaper editor and former assemblyman, had earned a reputation as a vicious partisan skewering everyone, regardless of party, opposed to the Democrats. Clawson himself had drafted a letter to his opponent that made no effort to conceal the antipathy between the two men. In that

---

<sup>53</sup> J. S. Franklin, to IDC, June 7, 1856, RUSC. Charles Perrin Smith identified Franklin as a "Stockton American," willing to work with Robert F. Stockton, a Camden and Amboy executive and nativist Democrat, to control the state senate in 1855. See Platt, 63–65. New Jersey Republicans had held their first state convention on May 28, 1856, in Newark.

<sup>54</sup> Joseph A. Shute to IDC, June 19, 1856, RBSCP.

<sup>55</sup> Shute to IDC, Jun 10, 1856, RBSCP.

<sup>56</sup> J. V. Dickinson to IDC, June 25, 1856, RBSCP.

<sup>57</sup> *Woodbury Constitution*, August 5, 1856.

communication, Clawson defended his stand against the “iniquity” of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, but he also lambasted Hineline’s violation of “the common decencies of life” in his editorial comments. Rather than debate Hineline, Clawson “would as soon enter into a treaty with that obscene bird [here he crossed out ‘buzzard’ in his draft of the letter] with which you have long been distinguished by your contemporaries.” Clawson concluded, “It is enough I am forced to have you for a competitor.”<sup>58</sup>

Clawson faced another difficult choice in the course of the campaign of 1856 about who he would support for President. Running on the American and Republican tickets, Clawson faced demands from both parties that he support their respective presidential nominees, the American Millard Fillmore or the Republican John C. Fremont. Further complicating matters was the possibility that the election could be decided by the House of Representatives if no one obtained a majority in the Electoral College. Clawson evidently had signaled his intention to support Millard Fillmore. Maskell Ware of Camden and Samuel Bayard of Woodbury both expressed concern about Clawson’s intentions. Ware, a Republican, hinted at the possibility of the Republicans nominating another candidate, thus dividing the opposition to Hineline. Bayard, an American, feared that Clawson might shift his allegiance to Fremont and inquired about Clawson’s intentions should the House of Representatives end up choosing the next president.<sup>59</sup>

By October, rumors had spread that Clawson would first vote for Fillmore in the House and then switch to Fremont. Republican John Peacock still wanted to “nail down” Clawson’s

---

<sup>58</sup> Draft of letter, IDC to Charles Hineline, c. 1856, RUSC. Eric Foner notes ongoing competition between the Republicans and the Americans for leadership of the opposition to the Democrats. Foner 250. Such competition persisted in New Jersey as well, made manifest in the ongoing tensions within the Opposition political alliance and efforts to resolve them such as the nomination of the “neutral centrist” Charles Olden in 1859. Gillette 60–62.

<sup>59</sup> Maskell Ware to IDC, September 25, 1856, and Samuel Bayard to IDC, September 26, 1856, RUSC. David Potter pointed out that the choice for president was even more complicated. The three candidates “held five different nominations.” Democrats nominated Buchanan. Republicans and some northern Americans supported Fremont, and southern Americans and a “breakaway group of northern Americans” supported Fillmore. Potter, 260.

intentions in the event that the House of Representatives chose the president. Peacock warned Clawson that some Republicans would not work for him “until this question is answered.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, the Democratic press had a field day with Clawson’s dilemma. As early as July, the Democratic *Salem Sunbeam* had made note of the “disjointed” condition of the opposition to the Democrats, noting the “folly and danger of a fusion of parties” working together “for a mere temporary advantage.”<sup>61</sup> The *Sunbeam*’s editor ridiculed Clawson’s efforts to “ride two horses at the same time.”<sup>62</sup> The *Sunbeam* had also sought to sow discord between Americans and Republicans on the slavery issue. It noted Clawson’s ambivalent stance on that issue; he opposed abolition while supporting restrictions on the spread of the “peculiar institution.” Clawson had, however, sharply criticized the Pierce administration’s “hollow approach” to the question. The editor concluded that if “Clawson is not a genuine wooly head, we confess our inability to know who he is.”<sup>63</sup>

Indeed, the weakness of the Republican Party in Salem County surely affected Clawson’s choice for the presidency. On election day, Republican John C. Fremont ran a poor third behind both Millard Fillmore and James Buchanan who won a plurality of the votes in the county. In Salem County’s two assembly districts, the Republicans ran third in one of them and did not even field a candidate in the other. Gubernatorial candidate William Newell did provide a bright spot for Republicans; he carried Salem County by a small majority. Opposition to the Democrats in Salem County in local races remained fragmented, thus ineffective.

---

<sup>60</sup> J. Peacock to IDC, October 1856, RUSC.

<sup>61</sup> *Salem Sunbeam*, July 25, 1856.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, October 3, 1856.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, August 8, 1856. “Woolyhead” was a derogatory term applied to Blacks and abolitionists, especially by those who opposed further restrictions on slavery. Clawson presented his critique of the Pierce administration in a speech critical of the administration’s support of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and its consequent repeal of the Missouri Compromise, reported in the *Salem National Standard* on August 8, 1856.

With the support of both Americans and Republicans, Clawson easily defeated Charles Hinline. He won the First Congressional District by a majority of 2,327 votes of just over 17,000 cast. He carried five of the district's six counties, losing only Atlantic County by 58 votes. James Buchanan carried New Jersey, but the combined Fillmore-Fremont vote exceeded the Democrat's total. In the First Congressional District, Clawson's ability to gain and hold the support of both opposition parties paid off. The district's voters gave Buchanan a slight plurality, but not a majority, in the presidential race; he led Fillmore by only 260 votes of over 17,000 cast. Fremont won only about half of Fillmore's total, revealing that Clawson's tacit support of the American nominee was an astute political decision.<sup>64</sup>

After winning a second term in Congress, Clawson received congratulatory letters from across his district, letters which also sought to take some credit for his victory. One of the first came from Robert B. Potter of Bridgeton who called the vote in Cumberland County "glorious" to "all conversant with the politics of the county." Instead of the 200-vote majority for Charles Hinline predicted by some observers, Clawson won the county by 150 votes. Potter pointed out that extraordinary efforts in Bridgeton and Maurice River Townships proved crucial to Clawson's triumph.<sup>65</sup>

Even in Atlantic County, where Hinline had bested Clawson, there was cause for some celebration. Nathaniel Disbrow of Smith's Landing sent Clawson a listing of the returns pointing out "reasons you did not run up with your ticket." A key reason for that, in Disbrow's mind, was that Hinline "told about one hundred lies." Additionally, "professed Americans proved traitors to

---

<sup>64</sup> *Woodbury Constitution*, November 25, 1856. The opposition to the Democrats lost two congressional seats, the governorship, and control of the state legislature in 1856. The American Party could not maintain the momentum it gained in 1854, and the Republicans had just fully organized at the state level. American strength was "more apparent than real." Even so, William Gillette points out that the American Party still maintained the balance of power in New Jersey politics. And the American-Republican coalition won two important victories: Isaiah D. Clawson to Congress and William A. Newell to the governorship. Gillette, 45–48.

<sup>65</sup> R. B. Potter to IDC, November 8, 1856, RUSC.

you,” saying that “you was a woolyhead and not an American,” a charge that strengthened Clawson’s support among Republican voters in the area.<sup>66</sup> Joseph Myers of Camden, engrossing clerk of the assembly, succinctly noted that Hineline looked as though “his time on earth was short,” and that “the boys in Camden were greatly rejoiced at the result.”<sup>67</sup>

The lame duck Thirty-Fourth Congress convened for its final session in December 1856, less than a month after the new one was elected. Clawson’s constituents wrote him about a number of issues, both local and national. Political patronage was always a concern. C. B. Potter of Bridgeton wanted to know the “why and wherefore” of Edward Acton’s removal from a postmaster’s position, guessing that Charles Hineline had instigated the removal. Turning to national matters, Potter called slavery “the main subject of discussion through the rest of your career,” truly “the eternal question,” or so it seemed, in late antebellum America.<sup>68</sup>

Tariff rates remained a contentious issue as they had for years. Providence Ludlam of Hopewell Township in Cumberland County expressed his opposition to tariffs as “an infringement on the rights of the farming and producing classes.” He claimed “the settled policy of Congress was to ignore those rights whenever an advantage is wanted by any other class on the face of God’s earth.” Ludlam believed that farmers and fishermen, especially those living in the eastern states, were hurt by large unsold surpluses of their products. Specifically, Ludlam pointed out that Spain might allow the importation of grain duty-free from the United States if the American government removed duties on sugar and molasses from Spanish colonies. “Let us have a reciprocal treaty in our favor sometime,” Ludlam implored.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> Nathaniel Disbrow to IDC, November 11, 1856, RUSC.

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Myers to IDC, November 15, 1856, RUSC.

<sup>68</sup> C. B. Potter to IDC, December 15, 1856, RBSCP.

<sup>69</sup> P. Ludlam to IDC, January 25, 1857, RBSCP.



On January 27, 1857, Thomas C. Garrett of Atlantic City again raised the issue that had occupied the attention of Jersey shoremen for some time and continued to do so for some time to come. Another “terrible storm” had just swept through the area, resulting in severe beach erosion in several locales. Garrett sought federal support for a harbor and protection of the lighthouse in his area. He expressed special concern about “the beach above the lighthouse,” where erosion was particularly alarming. Garrett called for federal support for the construction of a breakwater at the point of Brigantine beach to mitigate the problem.<sup>70</sup>

In spite of his busy congressional schedule, Clawson still found time to keep abreast of events at home. His neighbor, Isaac V. Dickinson of Woodstown, informed Clawson of a religious revival underway in the early months of 1857 when the congressman remained in the nation’s capital. The “reformation” in the town had led to the reduction of “tippling and dissipation” by about one-half.<sup>71</sup> Not everyone hailed that “reformation.” That same day, Omar Borton, another neighbor, informed Clawson that even the game of “seven-up” was “stigmatized as the game of the devil.” He urged Clawson to “take an uncertain number of good round oaths” before leaving Washington, enough “to last you until next December” when Congress reconvened. Borton, evidently not a man of exemplary piety, hoped that “one Congressman elected for two terms would undo all that two or three ministers have done in much shorter time.”<sup>72</sup>

Politics did go on. Talk had surfaced of Clawson’s becoming a candidate for governor of New Jersey. Isaac V. Dickinson mentioned that possibility in his letter of February 11, 1857, to Clawson. He noted that the congressman could obtain the nominations of both the Republicans and Americans as he had in the congressional race of 1856. Even though Dickinson viewed the

---

<sup>70</sup> Thomas C. Garrett to IDC, January 27, 1857, RBSCP.

<sup>71</sup> I. V. Dickinson to IDC, February 11, 1857, RBSCP.

<sup>72</sup> Omar Borton to IDC, February 11, 1857, RBSCP.

possibility of Clawson's candidacy as a "pretty sure thing," it did not materialize. Clawson never did become a nominee for governor.<sup>73</sup>

Clawson did face criticism for one of his first decisions in the new Thirty-Fifth Congress when it convened in December of 1857. He opposed the Republican choice for Speaker, Galusha Grow of Pennsylvania. Coming to Clawson's defense, the *Woodbury Constitution* pointed out that Clawson's vote did not make a difference. Indeed, the *Constitution* criticized Grow for his opposition to the principles of the American Party and his "free trade proclivities." Retracting its criticism of Clawson's acceptance of American support in 1854, the Woodbury newspaper commended Clawson for supporting the "measures and principles of both [American and Republican] parties." Although the *Constitution* desired a "hearty, cordial union" of the opposition to the Democrats, it opposed "ultraism" of any kind, apparently considering Galusha Grow an "ultraist."<sup>74</sup>

Clawson commenced his last year in Congress, 1858, again preoccupied with the issue that preoccupied most Americans: slavery. On January 29, Edward A. Acton of Salem wrote his congressman a long letter about the reaction in New Jersey to the ongoing unrest in the Kansas territory. "The Kansas resolutions multiply before our legislature," Acton noted. Acton hoped that the legislature would pass a resolution to "rebuke our Senators, as well as the administration," who must certainly know that they "misrepresent the views of nine-tenths of their own [Democratic] party in the state." The blatant proslavery stance of the Buchanan administration had led many New Jerseyans to be more accepting of the popular sovereignty stance of Democratic Senator

---

<sup>73</sup> Dickinson to IDC, February 11, 1857, RBSCP. Dickinson's letter confirms ongoing efforts by Americans and Republicans to unite against the Democrats as a combined opposition, an oftentimes uneasy and tenuous unity. Such efforts are pointed out in Charles Perrin Smith's reports and are discussed by William Gillette. Gillette 70–73

<sup>74</sup> *Woodbury Constitution*, December 22, 1857.

Stephen Douglas. Indeed, the “Little Giant” had more admirers in New Jersey than “two years ago, I ever supposed he would have.”

Even though Clawson was no Democrat, Acton heaped praise on the senator from Illinois. The shift toward Douglas, who had repudiated the activities of proslavery agitators in Kansas, was, in Acton’s mind, one of the most astonishing changes of public sentiment “that you have ever witnessed.” Acton almost sounded rhapsodic. “It must be a great man, whose outspoken words are listened for with eagerness by a mighty nation of people—by the high and lowly—the toiling day laborer of our own country and the crowned heads of Europe.” Despite his greatness, Acton believed that like Henry Clay, the senator from Illinois would never become president. Even so, Acton believed that Douglas’s name would go down in history in a “prouder position” without having won the presidency. His efforts to resolve the slavery question would give him historic immortality.<sup>75</sup>

Samuel Reeve of Salem also wrote Clawson about the slavery question. Reeve questioned the assumption that all southerners were attached to the “peculiar institution.” Opposed to slavery himself, Reeve believed that many southerners also opposed it but “dare not publicly advocate” that position. Reeve based his thinking on observations he made while living in the South back in 1824. At that time, he had heard sons of planters acknowledge that “they admired [how] the Yankies (sic) brought up their sons and daughters” and that “slavery was a curse to theirs.” Reeve saw an opportunity for the Republican Party if it could exploit and capitalize on that latent southern discontent. At heart, Reeve thought slaveholders were cowards “to be pitied.”<sup>76</sup>

Clawson maintained his opposition the extension of slavery, particularly in the Kansas territory. Efforts to grant statehood to that territory, with a proslavery constitution drafted in the

---

<sup>75</sup> E. A. Acton to IDC, January 19, 1858, RUSC.

<sup>76</sup> Samuel Reeve to IDC, February 14, 1858, RUSC.

town of Lecompton, confronted Congress in 1858. Clawson opposed such efforts. On April 1, 1858, the House of Representatives approved an amendment first proposed in the Senate by John Crittenden of Kentucky that would grant statehood on the basis of a new referendum for a state constitution. Crittenden argued that the matter was “greatly disputed” as to whether the Lecompton document was “fairly made, or expresses the will of the people of Kansas.” Clawson, along with most opponents of the Buchanan administration in Congress, supported Crittenden’s amendment.<sup>77</sup> The House version of the bill did not win approval in the Senate, and Kansas did not win admission to the Union until 1861, after the secession of 11 southern states.

Isaiah Clawson made one of his most noteworthy speeches not about slavery but about a local issue, the long-debated breakwater at Cape May. On May 19, 1858, he delivered a speech to the House discussing “the preservation of life and property on the coast of New Jersey.” A “civil appropriations bill” was again under consideration, and Clawson took the opportunity to advance a project strongly desired by residents and seafarers in South Jersey. Clawson’s speech in support of the breakwater and other measures to protect life and property along the shore might well have been the most widely reported of his career. He assembled a wide range of arguments that included political, economic, and humanitarian ones.

He first presented to the House resolutions passed by the state legislature in Trenton supporting “the better protection of life and property upon her [New Jersey’s] coast.” Representing, as he did, a district bounded by the Delaware Bay on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other, Clawson noted that “few subjects are reported with so much interest by my constituents.” He alluded to the dangers along New Jersey’s long coastline and pointed out that north-south commerce along the entire East Coast “has to run the gauntlet of those dangers.”

---

<sup>77</sup> *New York Times* April 2, 1858.

Indeed, the Jersey shore “teems with the recital of many a full admiral and rich merchantman” who had become “the prey of the ruthless sea tempest.”

What was to be done? Clawson noted that station houses and accoutrements were “liberally distributed along the beach,” but the metallic lifeboats at those locations were not adequate. Clawson pointed out that a new design developed by Richard C. Holmes of Cape May, a “self-righting and self-bailing life and surf boat,” would prove much more serviceable in the “tumultuous surf that ever breaks on our shores.” Clawson urged the committee to provide funds to purchase the “Holmes boats” for lifesaving stations along the Jersey shore.

Clawson also urged Congress to take advantage of new technology to keep mariners abreast of changing weather conditions. He noted that research had proven the general northeastward track of Atlantic coastal storms, noted a century earlier in the correspondence of Benjamin Franklin. He further noted that weather conditions could be telegraphed to the observatory in Washington and from thence to stations “hovering upon the coast.” Nearby vessels could be warned and would then have “opportunity to find a safe harbor” or “stand out to sea.” In any event, Clawson urged that knowledge of the weather patterns, along with the use of well-designed rescue boats, be coupled to save lives.

But the most urgent need remained a safe harbor. The “low sandy beaches” along the Jersey shore afforded no such natural harbor. Therefore, Clawson urged the House to appropriate 50,000 dollars for construction of a breakwater on the Delaware Bay side of Cape May. In spite of the “embarrassed state of the public treasury,” Clawson noted that the House Commerce Committee’s report stated that the measure was “absolutely essential to the public good.” Clawson emphasized

that construction of the breakwater would benefit the federal government itself, since government vessels were among those at risk in the Atlantic storms.<sup>78</sup>

Clawson's speech won him acclaim, not the least among his own constituents. Edward A. Acton of Salem called it a "capital speech." Insertion of the appropriation into the committee's report, constituted, in Acton's view, a "great achievement."<sup>79</sup> Clawson's neighbor Isaac V. Dickinson of Woodstown added his compliments.<sup>80</sup> Outside the First District, Henry Hopper of Newark noted that he had perused the speech and wished the South Jersey congressman success.<sup>81</sup> In spite of the committee's favorable report, Congress did not appropriate the funds in 1858. Clawson's successors continued his efforts without success.<sup>82</sup>

Isaiah Clawson chose not to run for a third term in the House of Representatives in 1858. Two men—American John H. Jones and Republican John T. Nixon—sought the support of the "opposition" to the Democrats. Jones, a staunch nativist, allied with Joint Companies part-owner Robert F. Stockton, straightforwardly sought Clawson's blessing. On February 13, 1858, he wrote a long, "private" letter to the incumbent clearly seeking his support. First, Jones expressed his belief that a Republican would not gain the support of Douglas Democrats. Based on a miniature "test of that in Camden," Jones heard of no "Locos" who would abandon the Democrats for a Republican candidate. On the other hand, he knew of "several Locos" who signed the constitution of the Ward Association of the American Party. Jones further noted that Democrats who opposed their party's position on the admission of Kansas would not publicly condemn the Buchanan

---

<sup>78</sup> Speech of Representative I. D. Clawson, reported in the *Trenton State Gazette*, June 1–3, 1858.

<sup>79</sup> E. A. Acton to IDC, June 6, 1858, RBSCP.

<sup>80</sup> I. V. Dickinson to IDC, May 25, 1858, RBSCP.

<sup>81</sup> Henry Hopper to IDC, June 5, 1858, RBSCP.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Perrin Smith noted that an effort to fund a breakwater years later in 1872 was nothing more than a job of "notorious political schemers," which was "abandoned at the doors of Congress." See Platt 220.

administration and support Republicans. Jones urged Clawson to work behind the scenes to shore up support for him in Salem County.<sup>83</sup>

At first, it appeared that Jones had a clear path to the nomination by both the American and Republican Parties. E. A. Acton of Salem had received a letter from him on February 17, 1858. According to Acton, Jones spoke very “encouragingly.” “His prospects are improving with us; he must certainly get our county.” Acton dismissed John Nixon’s prospects, not believing that he intended to be a candidate for the open congressional seat.<sup>84</sup>

Nixon, a former Whig and assembly Speaker from Cumberland County, did declare his candidacy and gained support in Salem County in spite of Acton’s discouraging assessment. Thomas B. Jones of Mannington Township reported that Salem County was “solid for Nixon” and that even Americans there opposed Jones.<sup>85</sup> Jonathan Ingham agreed with that assessment, pointing out that Jones had no hope of gaining Republican support and the “cry all over the state is ‘Union.’”<sup>86</sup> Jones also faced allegations that he had agreed to support assembly candidates pledged to vote for Democratic U.S. Senator William Wright in exchange for their support for his congressional bid.<sup>87</sup> Clawson ultimately decided to steer a middle course and even offered to run himself if both Jones and Nixon withdrew their candidacies in his favor.<sup>88</sup>

James Shinn of Woodstown, a Clawson’s friend and cousin, discussed the problems posed by the fragmented opposition to the Democrats. Shinn, who greeted Clawson as “My dear Doc,” lamented that “we are in a snarl” brought about by that divided opposition. He pointed out that the

---

<sup>83</sup> J. H. Jones to IDC, February 13, 1858, RUSC. Stockton, who bolted the American Party in 1856, led a faction of dissident nativists. Jones’s failed bid to succeed Clawson reveals a “reduction in the role of hard-core nativists” in favor of moderate Americans, acceptable to Republicans and supportive of efforts to unite the opposition to the Democrats. Gillette, 53–54.

<sup>84</sup> E. A. Acton to IDC, February 18, 1858, photocopy in the Clawson family folder, SCHS.

<sup>85</sup> Thomas B. Jones to IDC, April 12, 1858, RBSCP.

<sup>86</sup> J. Ingham to IDC, April 13, 1858, RBSCP.

<sup>87</sup> See Platt, 23 and 97.

<sup>88</sup> IDC to “Ike” (further identification unknown), June 7, 1858, RBSCP.

American Party had called a convention in Salem to meet on June 24. The writer had hoped that a Union convention “so as to cover the whole opposition to the [Buchanan] administration” could meet uncontested. Two competing conventions were not the way “to beget a heart of cooperation.” He further noted that John H. Jones could not possibly win without “both wings” of the American Party. Indeed, any opposition candidate faced long odds, both in 1858, and “the next campaign [1860],” without unity. The writer sought Clawson’s assistance in blunting “the wedge of discord.”<sup>89</sup>

Ultimately, both Americans and Republicans united behind Nixon, Clawson bowed out, and Nixon won Clawson’s seat in the midterm elections of November 1858. After leaving Congress, Clawson remained a potent force in New Jersey politics. William Frazier of Camden noted that many political leaders in his county supported Clawson for a vacancy in the United States Senate in 1859. “Get [William] Dayton out of the road, and you are safe,” Frazier told Clawson.<sup>90</sup> John C. Ten Eyck won the Senate contest, but Clawson’s name was then set forth as an “opposition” candidate for governor. Jacob R. Freese, editor of the *Trenton State Gazette and Republican*, advised Clawson against running as a “straight out” Republican candidate, cautioning him that such a decision could “ruin you politically for all time.”<sup>91</sup> If nominated by a united opposition, Clawson could win hands down. Although Clawson did not run for governor, his political peers viewed him as a viable candidate for that office.<sup>92</sup>

After those setbacks, Clawson never again openly sought office, but he did identify himself with the Republicans after the final demise of the American Party. Republican Party leaders often

---

<sup>89</sup> James Shinn to IDC, May 24, 1858. In 1856, a small group of “secessionist Americans” had joined Robert F. Stockton in bolting the American Party. Stockton, with Jones’s support, had unsuccessfully challenged Millard Fillmore for that party’s presidential nomination.

<sup>90</sup> William Frazier to IDC, April 9, 1858, Salem County Historical Society, Salem, New Jersey.

<sup>91</sup> J. R. Freese to IDC, April 18, 1859, RBSCP.

<sup>92</sup> Charles S. Olden became the state’s first Republican governor.



consulted him for political advice. On May 5, 1862, Charles P. Smith of Trenton, former Salem *National Standard* editor and clerk of the state supreme court, wrote him about the appointment of one of Smith's cousins to the Court of Errors and Appeals. Smith also discussed the formation of a state Republican ticket. He asked Clawson to assess political conditions in South Jersey and then give advice about them to party leaders. As for his cousin, Smith requested Clawson to "secure his acquaintance with Gov. [Charles] Olden."<sup>93</sup>

Six years later, in 1868, Smith wrote Clawson again, this time concerned about a "systematic effort" to cast Salem County's vote in the Republican state convention for Cornelius Walsh for governor. Smith set forth a case against Walsh's candidacy. Smith identified Walsh as a "foreigner," and that fact would jeopardize support "from the large American sentiment" that still persisted within Republican ranks. Furthermore, Smith saw "men not usually speaking for the party" behind Walsh's candidacy. He did not know a "single prominent Republican in this section who favors the nomination" and predicted that Republican congressional and legislative candidates would go down to defeat on a Walsh-led ticket. Smith urged Clawson to resist "a half-dozen men" to whom Salem County "has entrusted all of her political interest." These men, according to Smith, abused that trust, coming to Trenton to "make merchandise of it." Smith clearly believed that only a man of Clawson's stature could rectify matters in Salem County.<sup>94</sup> Ultimately, John Blair won the Republican nomination only to lose the general election to Democrat Thomas F. Randolph.

In addition to lingering nativist sentiment, other matters that had first emerged in antebellum years continued to shape New Jersey politics after the end of the Civil War in 1865. In 1870, John W. Hazleton, the Temperance candidate who Clawson had defeated in 1854, sought

---

<sup>93</sup> C. P. Smith to IDC, May 5, 1862, RUSC.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., May 15, 1868. Walsh did not win the nomination, losing it to John Blair, who lost to Democrat Theodore Randolph in the general election.

the Republican nomination for Congress. Alexander Wentz, writing from the Customs House in Philadelphia, asked Clawson to throw his support behind F. W. Westcott, arguing that three factors worked against Hazleton. First, he had been a “temperance man,” and support for that movement had diminished. Second, he had a reputation as a “standing candidate,” a reference to perennial office-seeking. And third, Wentz reminded Clawson that Hazleton had jeopardized the ex-congressman’s own chances of victory back in 1854.<sup>95</sup> In spite of these old unsettled scores, Hazleton won both the Republican nomination and the general election in 1870.

Isaiah D. Clawson died in 1879, still highly respected for his life’s work as a physician and for his career in politics. During that career, he navigated the political turbulence caused by rapid changes in American politics. After the demise of the Whig Party, he identified with the American Party, but it proved to be politically ephemeral. He then won the support of the new Republican Party, but he sought office at a time when opposition to the Democrats remained divided. Clawson gained support from differing factions of the opposition in both of his campaigns for Congress, a tribute to both political dexterity and personal popularity. During his years in Congress, Clawson addressed issues ranging from slavery to more local concerns about the treacherous waters along the Jersey shore. In so doing, he successfully navigated the equally treacherous waters of New Jersey politics.

*Bruce A. Bendler is Adjunct Professor of History at the University of Delaware. He earned his PhD in United States History from the University of Delaware in 2000; his dissertation focused on politics and political culture in Delaware during the Revolutionary era. His main research interest is political history in the mid-Atlantic. He has previously been published in New Jersey Studies and its predecessor New Jersey History.*

---

<sup>95</sup> Alex Wentz to IDC, August 17, 1870, RBSCP.