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# “An Altercation Full of Meaning”: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge

## **Abstract**

“A Duel!” In late March of 1854, the northern press burst with the news. A duel had allegedly taken place between two members of the House of Representatives—Francis B. Cutting of New York and John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. Confusion and anticipation reigned, and a flurry of rumors circulated. Had Breckinridge been shot in the neck? Was he killed or wounded? Did Cutting emerge victorious? Or was the entire affair a mere hoax? The situation became so dramatic that it even appeared in a theatrical advertisement, beckoning people to see a play that promised to be just as exciting as the alleged duel. By early April, it had become clear that despite the conflict between Cutting and Breckinridge, an actual duel had been averted. Although their misunderstanding had been amicably settled, the affair still left many questions unanswered. Why did these two Congressmen feel compelled to resort to arms? And how did Cutting, a northerner, nearly become embroiled in a duel—a violent ritual typically understood by historians today as an archaic institution that was confined to the Old South? These questions can be partially answered by examining the Cutting-Breckinridge affair within the context of nineteenth century dueling culture generally and the increased sectional tensions that emerged during the Kansas-Nebraska debate specifically. However, the near-duel was given meaning and political staying power only through interpretation and manipulation by the northern anti-slavery press, which used the conflict to indict dueling as a product of violent southern slaveholding culture.

The Cutting-Breckinridge affair was part of the larger sociopolitical phenomenon of dueling that has been discussed by historians of early and nineteenth century America. In her critical study *Affairs of Honor*, Joanne B. Freeman explains that duels in early America stemmed from a commitment to “sacrifice one’s life for one’s honor,” or a sense of self-worth tied up with manliness and, in some cases, ability as a political leader. [excerpt]

## **Keywords**

Civil War, Francis B. Cutting, John C. Breckinridge, Cutting-Breckinridge affair, dueling

# “An Altercation Full of Meaning”: The Duel between Francis B. Cutting and John C. Breckinridge

Annie Powers

■ “A Duel!!” In late March of 1854, the northern press burst with the news. A duel had allegedly taken place between two members of the House of Representatives—Francis B. Cutting of New York and John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky. Confusion and anticipation reigned, and a flurry of rumors circulated. Had Breckinridge been shot in the neck? Was he killed or wounded? Did Cutting emerge victorious? Or was the entire affair a mere hoax? The situation became so dramatic that it even appeared in a theatrical advertisement, beckoning people to see a play that promised to be just as exciting as the alleged duel. By early April, it had become clear that despite the conflict between Cutting and Breckinridge, an actual duel had been averted. Although their misunderstanding had been amicably settled, the affair still left many questions unanswered. Why did these two Congressmen feel compelled to resort to arms? And how did Cutting, a northerner, nearly become embroiled in a duel—a violent ritual typically understood by historians today as an archaic institution that was confined to the Old South? These questions can be partially answered by examining the Cutting-Breckinridge affair within the context of nineteenth century dueling culture generally and the increased sectional tensions that emerged during the Kansas-Nebraska debate specifically. However, the near-duel was given meaning and political staying power only through interpretation and manipulation by the

northern anti-slavery press, which used the conflict to indict dueling as a product of violent southern slaveholding culture.<sup>1</sup>

The Cutting-Breckinridge affair was part of the larger sociopolitical phenomenon of dueling that has been discussed by historians of early and nineteenth century America. In her critical study *Affairs of Honor*, Joanne B. Freeman explains that duels in early America stemmed from a commitment to “sacrifice one’s life for one’s honor,” or a sense of self-worth tied up with manliness and, in some cases, ability as a political leader.

Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown similarly singles out this pre-modern cultural ideology of honor as the reason why political duels occurred during the nineteenth century. However, he contends that dueling in this period was almost exclusively a southern institution and links it with the prevalence of aggression in southern society. Likewise, in Jack K. Williams’ *Dueling in the Old South* and Steven M. Stowe’s *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, dueling is analyzed as “a facet of life [that existed] only in the Old South.” John Hope Franklin attributes this use of duels to a southern tradition of militancy and violence, which was rooted in the planters’ need to maintain absolute authority over their slaves. If this was the case, however, how could a duel have nearly occurred in which a northerner, Francis B. Cutting, challenged a southerner, John C.

1. “A Duel!!!” *The Ripley Bee*, April 1, 1854; “Excitement at Washington,” *The Daily Scioto Gazette*, March 30, 1854; “The Duel Yesterday,” *New York Daily Times*, March 30, 1854.

Breckinridge? Historians like Michael C. C. Adams have objected to the traditional belief that dueling was an exclusively southern political ritual, arguing that “the disparity in the amount of violence between North and South was grossly exaggerated” and most apparently southern traits could be applied to nineteenth century America at large. Mark E. Neely, Jr., also contends that political dueling was not confined to the South. Both Adams and Neely use the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict to demonstrate that dueling as political violence transcended sectional boundaries.<sup>2</sup>

Yet the confrontation between Cutting and Breckinridge cannot be fully explained by the existence of a national dueling culture; it also occurred within the context of the heated and increasingly sectionalized debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The Kansas-Nebraska bill was presented to the Senate in January 1854 after significant modification by Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas and with the support of President Franklin Pierce. The act proposed to organize the Kansas and Nebraska territories by applying the doctrine of “popular sovereignty,” which allowed the residents of these regions to determine the status of slavery there themselves. Douglas championed popular sovereignty and justified its use by explaining that the 1820 Missouri Compromise’s prohibition of slavery north of the 36° 30’ line had been “subsumed” by the provisions in the Compromise of 1850 dictating that the slavery issue would

be decided in the territories of Utah and New Mexico by local choice. Douglas saw popular sovereignty as a “great contribution to freedom” and a way to end conflict over the slavery question. Instead, however, it prompted fresh and vehement sectional debate, with most southerners in favor of, and northerners split over, the bill.

Southerners perceived that popular sovereignty would give them a greater opportunity to spread slavery compared to earlier compromises. Northerners were largely divided over the Kansas-Nebraska measure. A vocal group was opposed to it for reasons of economics or morality, but others supported the popular sovereignty doctrine on the basis of idealized white democracy or as a method of ending debate over slavery. These arguments and deliberations over the Kansas-Nebraska bill led to several amendments while it remained in the Senate. The so-called Badger Proviso, introduced by Senator George E. Badger of North Carolina, dictated that no law could be revived that had either excluded or protected slavery in the territories, referring particularly to old French and Spanish legal codes. Furthermore, the Clayton amendment, presented by Senator John M. Clayton of Delaware, restricted popular sovereignty by forbidding immigrants from voting in territorial elections. In the early hours of March 4, 1854, the bill passed in the Senate, 37 to 14. Among northerners, however, the margin of victory was much narrower: 14 to 12.<sup>3</sup>

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2. Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 167-171; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), xv-xvi, 350; Jack K. Williams, *Dueling the Old South, Vignettes of Social History* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 7 (quote); Steven M. Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 5-7; John Hope Franklin, *The Militant South, 1800-1861* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956), viii, 44; Michael C. C. Adams, *Our Masters the Rebels: A Speculation on Union Military Failure in the East, 1861-1865* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 43-46; Mark E. Neely, Jr., “The Kansas-Nebraska Act in American Political Culture: The Road to Bladensburg and the Appeal of the Independent Democrats,” in *The Nebraska-Kansas Act of 1854*, eds. John R. Wunder and Joann M. Ross (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 14-23.
3. Nicole Etcheson, *Bleeding Kansas: Contested Liberty in the Civil War Era* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 9-27; S. 22, “A Bill to Organize the Territory of Nebraska,” December 14, 1853; “Washington Affairs,” *The Boston Daily Atlas*, March 27, 1854; *Senate Journal*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 3, 1854.

Although he supported the Kansas-Nebraska bill at large, New York Congressman Francis B. Cutting objected to both the Badger and Clayton amendments. Cutting was a “Hard” or “Hard-shell” Democrat, and as he explained in two speeches on January 17 and January 20, this meant that he wholly supported the doctrine of popular sovereignty and each state’s right to regulate its own affairs. Furthermore, Cutting condemned the Pierce administration for what the Hards believed was reliance on a coalition of disparate and sometimes contradictory interests, including a small group of “Free Soilers” who supported the unqualified exclusion of slavery from the West that rallied around the President for little but patronage and other benefits. Despite his frustration with Pierce, Cutting joined the president and other “Administration Democrats” like John C. Breckinridge in support of the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Cutting’s support of popular sovereignty motivated his proposal to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole—meaning that the entirety of the House acted as if in committee and could thus fully discuss and amend the measure. This was Cutting’s alternative to allowing the bill to be relegated to the much smaller and less representative Committee on Territories. Douglas’ principal ally in the House, Congressman William Alexander Richardson from Illinois, condemned Cutting’s maneuver. According to Richardson, movement of the bill would “kill it by indirection” due to the apparently large number of items in the Committee of the Whole that would be ahead of the Kansas-Nebraska measure for consideration. Cutting replied that he had no intention

of destroying the bill’s prospects or ending discussion; rather, he believed wholly in the measure and the principles of state and territorial self-determination written into it. However, Cutting continued, both the Clayton and Badger amendments violated the doctrine of popular sovereignty—the former by withholding suffrage from residents of the territory who had declared their intention to become citizens and the latter by endorsing Congressional interference with slavery via the relocation of early Spanish and French law. With these provisions in the Kansas-Nebraska bill, Cutting maintained that he could not fully endorse it—and doubted whether the House would pass it. Furthermore, Cutting asserted that the entirety of the House must “fully discuss” the bill in order to give it legitimacy as law, because it deals “with a subject which enlists the sympathies and feelings of men so deeply.” Finally, Cutting reminded Richardson and the House at large that, by a two-thirds vote, the measures preceding the Kansas-Nebraska Act in the Committee of the Whole could be temporarily laid aside. After Cutting refused to withdraw his motion, the House twice voted to move the bill to the Committee of the Whole, 110 to 95.<sup>4</sup>

Despite his clear explanation of his choice to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole, most press coverage portrayed Cutting’s maneuver as intentionally damaging if not irreparably killing the measure. Newspapers representing interests opposed to the bill rejoiced. In describing Cutting’s speech, *The Daily Cleveland Herald* explained that “the monster is not killed *dead*, but he gasps for breath.” William Lloyd Garrison’s anti-slavery newspaper, *The Liberator*, described

4. *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, January 17, 1854, 192-195; *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, January 20, 1854, 84-87; *House Journal*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 21, 1854; *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 21, 1854, 701-703; “Congress – Yesterday,” *Daily National Intelligencer*, March 22, 1854.

the movement of the measure to the Committee of the Whole as “encouraging” and the enemies of the bill as “exultant.” Some papers counseled readers to continue what Cutting had begun and thus destroy the bill. The *New York Tribune* remarked that

The monster has received a staggering blow, which can and must be followed up with energy till the last breath is beaten out of his carcass . . . . Let no muscle be relaxed till the last demagogue is convinced that to attempt to break compacts for the benefit of slavery, and turn over to bondage an empire long consecrated to freedom, is very far off.

By contrast, those northern Democrats who understood Cutting’s apparent intentions in favor of the bill commended his behavior by passing resolutions in his support. For example, the Young Men’s National Democratic Club stated that his speech “reflects a brilliant halo . . . and entitles him to the gratitude of the North” and the Democratic Republican General Committee “applaud[ed] the chivalric conduct of Mr. Cutting.” Even northern newspapers less jubilant about Cutting’s action similarly reported that the bill would likely not survive its transfer to the Committee of the Whole; the *New York Courier and Enquirer* remarked that the reference was “very unfavorable” to the prospects of the bill and the *New York Weekly Herald* likened it to “crucifixion.” The southern press agreed with northern newspapers that the referral of the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole had killed it; however, the largely Democratic, pro-slavery southerners disparaged Cutting in particular and northern Democrats in general for doing so. The *Daily Morning News* from Savannah, Georgia reported that

Cutting’s “motion astonished everyone. The southern members [of Congress] denounce it as traitorous.” North Carolina’s *Weekly Raleigh Register* was more combative, explaining that Cutting and the fifty-four allegedly “national” Democrats who voted to “kill the bill” should be “kick[ed] out of the party—‘they have become *abolitionized*—they are ‘a miserable faction!’” and utterly “denationalized.” Therefore, despite Cutting’s apparent attempt to openly discuss the bill in the whole House and amend it to more fully fit the doctrine of popular sovereignty, he was portrayed throughout the nation as destroying the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Public reaction tracked, for the most part, along clearly delineated sectional lines.<sup>5</sup>

Southern Congressman John C. Breckinridge’s virulent and insulting response to Cutting—and the ensuing debate between the two that nearly led to a duel—fits within this context of sectionalized response to what was perceived to be Cutting’s supposed attack on the Kansas-Nebraska measure. Breckinridge, a representative from Kentucky, was a pro-slavery, pro-Kansas-Nebraska, and pro-administration southern Democrat. On March 23, prior to a lengthy speech in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska bill delineating his faith in states’ rights, Breckinridge made a series of remarks sharply criticizing Cutting for moving to transfer the measure to the Committee of the Whole. Breckinridge accused Cutting of destroying the bill by moving it to the end of the House calendar and thus smothering it beneath “a mountain [of other bills] that is piled upon it.” Furthermore, Breckinridge explained that Cutting’s decision could have been based on little more than “pretexts” that

5. “How It Was Done,” *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, March 24, 1854; “The Nebraska Bill in the House,” *The Liberator*, March 24, 1854; *New York Tribune*, March 22, 1854; *The Weekly Herald and Courier and Enquirer* quoted in the *Boston Daily Atlas*, March 23, 1854; “Democratic War on the Administration,” *The Boston Daily Atlas*, April 3, 1854; “The Administration and the Nebraska Bill,” *The Boston Daily Atlas*, April 10, 1854; *Daily Morning News*, March 28, 1854; “More ‘Nationality,’” *The Weekly Raleigh Register*, March 29, 1854.

appeared to support of the bill, because the Kansas-Nebraska measure would have ultimately been discussed in the Committee of the Whole after it had been modified in the Committee on Territories. To Breckinridge, the support given to him by the measure's opponents in Congress and throughout the North made it clear that Cutting had damaged the bill. Southern Congressman had an appreciated alliance with Cutting heretofore, Breckinridge stated, but the New Yorker's behavior of late had been that of an enemy. Breckinridge concluded that Cutting was a traitor to the Kansas-Nebraska measure and its supporters; moving to refer the bill to the Committee of the Whole "was the act of a man who throws his arm in apparently friendly embrace around another, saying, 'How is it with thee, brother?' and at the same time covertly stabs him to the heart."<sup>6</sup>

Cutting responded to these remarks on March 27. Cutting explained that he had made it clear that while he supported the doctrine of popular sovereignty behind the bill, he believed it required an amendment both to fulfill this principle and to successfully pass through the House. He accused Breckinridge of exaggerating the number of bills before the Kansas-Nebraska measure in the Committee of the Whole. Cutting maintained that if Breckinridge truly believed that moving it there would defeat it, he would not have taken the time or the energy to defend it in his March 23 speech. Finally, Cutting questioned why Breckinridge would set out to insult and attack a supporter, rather than an opponent, of the bill. Cutting suggested that Breckinridge's speech was "unbecoming of a Congressman," a personal attack that was both "inflammatory in style, and exaggerated in facts." Breckinridge responded by claiming that Cutting had

missed the point of his March 23 speech; Breckinridge had not meant to insinuate that Cutting had intentionally killed the bill, but rather that this was the impact of the New Yorker's actions. Furthermore, Congressman William H. English of Indiana, a pro-Nebraska Democrat, indicated that there were fifty bills in front of the Kansas-Nebraska measure in the Committee of the Whole. For his part, Breckinridge contended that it was hardly overstatement that there were an immense amount of other measures that the House would have to consider before reaching the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Breckinridge concluded by reiterating that he could not conceive of a reason that Cutting would refer the bill to the Committee of the Whole unless he intended to destroy it, because it would be discussed by the entire House after it moved through the Committee on Territories. Cutting escalated the pitch of the debate by remarking that Breckinridge was "the last person from whom I expected" such disrespect, because the New York Hards had contributed fifteen hundred dollars to Breckinridge's Senate campaign when he was in danger of defeat. Cutting insisted, furthermore, that Breckinridge was doing little more than arguing over the number of measures in the Committee of the Whole, thus "skulking" behind the Kansas-Nebraska bill's position at the end of the House calendar. Breckinridge, appalled, asked Cutting to withdraw his last statement. Cutting refused, stating that it was "in answer to the most violent and the most personal attack that has been witnessed" upon the floor of the House. Breckinridge countered that "if the gentleman [Cutting] says I skulk, he says what is false, and he knows it"—in effect accusing Cutting of intentionally lying on the floor of the House. Cutting replied that

6. *Congressional Globe, House of Representatives*, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 23, 1854, 439-443.



he would not answer Breckinridge's remark, because "it was not here that I will desecrate my lips by undertaking to retort on it in the manner which it deserves."<sup>7</sup>

Later that day, Cutting sent Breckinridge a note through James Maurice requesting that Breckinridge retract his claim that what Cutting had said was false or else "make the explanation due from one gentleman to another." This would have clearly implied a duel. Breckinridge refused to do so unless Cutting withdrew his insinuation that the Kentucky Congressman had been "skulking." Cutting sent a reply on March 28 professing that he had not intended any personal insult during their debate the previous day, but Breckinridge's representative, Kentuckian Colonel Hawkins, declined to receive the letter because he believed he could not do so due to Cutting's potential challenge to a duel. Thus Breckinridge never received the message. As a result, he sent a note to Cutting that he intended to "embrace the alternative" that he believed the New York Congressman had offered: a duel. Over the course of the next several days, communication fell to their "seconds": Hawkins and Kentucky Congressman William Preston for Breckinridge and the New York Colonel Monroe and Illinois Senator James Shields for Cutting.

Hawkins and Monroe were the correspondents primarily responsible for determining the precise arrangements of the duel. On March 29, Hawkins submitted the terms of the duel to Monroe, including the suggestion that the weapon would be the ordinary, or "Western," rifle. Monroe responded that Cutting considered himself the challenged party and thus had the right

to determine the terms of the duel. Cutting was unacquainted with the Western rifle, and instead chose "ordinary duelling pistols." Confused, Hawkins explained to Monroe that Breckinridge thought that he had been challenged and thus maintained his rights as such. Monroe replied somewhat disingenuously that Cutting's original note, asking for "the explanation due from one gentleman to another," could not be construed as a challenge to a duel—it was nothing more than a demand for verbal clarification. On March 30, after hearing about the confusion and reading Cutting's March 28 letter that Hawkins had previously rejected, Breckinridge withdrew his statements that commenced the overtures to a duel and expressed his regret for the misunderstanding. Cutting reciprocated the apology, and the matter was settled. On March 31, Preston rose in the House to explain that the conflict between Cutting and Breckinridge had been resolved amicably, "in a manner which is mutually satisfactory, and which is conceived alike honorable to both of the gentlemen who were engaged in the debate."<sup>8</sup>

What were the implications of this affair in the context of the era that produced it—that of the Kansas-Nebraska conflict specifically and nineteenth century America generally? As Mark Neely suggested, one near-duel instigated by a northerner does not necessarily imply that violence was part of a larger American political culture—and even if it can be conceded that dueling was not confined to the southern states, then why, with evidence of conflicts such as the one between Cutting and Breckinridge, have they been construed as a distinctly

7. *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 27, 1854, 759-764; Etcheson, 173.  
8. Lorenzo Sabine, *Notes on Duels and Duelling* (Boston: Crosby & Nichols, 1859), 137; Ben C. Truman, *The Field of Honor: Being a Complete and Comprehensive History of Duelling in All Countries* (New York: Fords, Howard, & Hubert, 1884), 438; "The Cutting and Breckinridge Difficulty – The Correspondence Between the Parties," *New York Daily Times*, April 7, 1854; *Congressional Globe*, House of Representatives, 33rd Congress, 1st Session, March 31, 1854, 825.



southern phenomenon? The reaction of the press to the Cutting and Breckinridge duel, particularly in the North, provides answers to both these problems. After a flurry of rumors that were printed with little discrimination, northern newspapers, and primarily those opposed to the spread of slavery, began to editorialize heavily. Many used coverage of the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as a way to indict dueling as a backward institution belonging to the violent, slave-holding South—and by arguing that dueling as it existed through the nation should not have a place in the North, the press proved that it held one. Furthermore, this group of northern newspapers overwhelmingly blamed Breckinridge—and southern culture by proxy—for the duel, overlooking Cutting’s culpability as the challenger. Thus these anti-slavery northern newspapers, in the increasingly sectionalized political climate of the Kansas-Nebraska debate, used the disagreement between Cutting and Breckinridge to assert that dueling was a southern problem, representative of the allegedly violent character of southern slaveholding society. In this way, the northern anti-slavery press was able to construe the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as an argument against the spread of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.<sup>9</sup>

Immediately after word broke about a potentially violent conflict between the northerner Francis Cutting and the southerner John C. Breckinridge, the anti-slavery northern press in particular began to criticize dueling as a southern social phenomenon that should not be present in the North. In so doing, these newspapers proved the existence of a national dueling culture and then rejected it as the product of southern violence. The *New York Independent* criticized Cutting for lowering himself to the un-Christian and “assassin-

like practice of sending a challenge,” blaming northern society for creating a political culture tolerant of duels by electing men of “violence and blood” to positions of power. This editorial maligned northern culture for accepting dueling, arguing that it was a tradition not endemic to—and that should not exist in—the northern states. Wisconsin’s *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* was less implicit in its sectional indictments and associations of violence with the South. An editorial printed on April 19 explained that as a southerner raised in a society that explicitly condoned duels, Breckinridge took advantage of Cutting by forcing him “into a position in which he must submit to a most humiliating attack upon his character and motives, or fight.” Cutting could not be condemned for his choice to fight, because “public sentiment at the North is but half [against] the barbarous practices of dueling.” This proved a partial acceptance of dueling in the North and thus a national political culture at least somewhat tolerant of dueling. Moreover, this editorial condemned the practice of dueling by suggesting that southerners forced their violence on northerners and thereby manipulated northern society’s half-aversion to the practice. The *New York Evangelist* furthered this by offering a virulent criticism of what the *New York Times* had described as “the bloody code” of dueling, calling it “a barbarous and murderous business” in all cases, whether involving men North or South. However, the *Evangelist* urged northerners to repudiate the national toleration of duels as they were “immensely behind the times at the North” and belonged to the “land of slavery”—and concluded by criticizing southerners for using duels to violently “browbeat Northern Representatives” into submission to southern interests. Thus the *Evangelist* attested to and then rejected the

9. Neely, “The Kansas-Nebraska Act in American Political Culture,” 16.

presence of a dueling culture in the North while maintaining that it was representative of the evils of southern culture and extremely harmful to northern interests. In this way, the coverage of the Cutting-Breckinridge duel by the northern anti-slavery press proved the existence of a more national dueling culture while explicitly condemning it as a backward southern institution.<sup>10</sup>

In censuring dueling as a southern institution in general, northern anti-slavery newspapers specifically faulted Breckinridge for the conflict because he was a product of violent southern society. Writers for the northern press that supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act or were not staunchly anti-slavery, such as the *New York Weekly Herald*, similarly blamed the near-duel on Breckinridge. However, these newspapers did not perceive Breckinridge's behavior as an expression of the evils of southern society at large. The *Weekly Herald* merely expressed its disappointment that the Kentucky Congressman had anomalously lowered his otherwise upstanding character by insulting Cutting and thereby almost causing the duel. However, the *New York Daily Times*, or what historian Mark Neely calls the *Herald's* "anti-slavery Whig competitor," indicted Breckinridge in more sectional terms. Emphasizing Breckinridge's quick "loss of temper" and readiness to "charge Mr. Cutting with treachery" during their debate despite Cutting's relatively inoffensive remarks, the column asserted that this was

Characteristic of the class of gentlemen to which Mr. Breckinridge belongs. Quick to take offence, they are far from being slow to give it. In dealing with Northern men especially, whose principles or laws they

have reason to suppose fetter their hands in the matter of fighting, they are pretty apt to play the bully.

This perceived southern tendency for violence was made explicit in an April 7 editorial that assailed Breckinridge for being "more anxious to commit homicide than to vindicate his character." Thus the *Daily Times* not only blamed Breckinridge's irrational violence on his southern roots, but also implied that southerners in general used force to impose their own opinions on northerners. The Canadian African-American newspaper the *Provincial Freeman* explained that Cutting moved to refer the Kansas-Nebraska bill to the Committee of the Whole "greatly to the chagrin and irritation of Breckinridge and other slavemongers, who determined therefor to settle a personal quarrel upon Cutting" in the form of a duel. Using Breckinridge as a case study, the newspaper blamed the brutality inherent in slavery for the contretemps and exonerated Cutting entirely. Frederick Douglass made the relationship between slavery and violent dueling culture clear in his newspaper, stating that in his behavior during the March 27 debate, Breckinridge "showed himself to be possessed of all the claims of a genuine lord of the lash" as opposed to Cutting, who "bore himself like a MAN." Here, Douglass entirely reversed responsibility for the duel by applauding Cutting's honor and manliness, while maligning Breckinridge as a representative of the violent culture of the slavocracy. By vilifying Breckinridge as the instigator of the duel, northern anti-slavery newspapers were able to use the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as an example of the violence-prone slaveholding culture.<sup>11</sup>

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10. "Congress," *The Independent* . . . Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts 6 Issue 280 (April 13, 1854): 116; *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, April 19, 1854; "Latest Intelligence," *New York Daily Times*, March 29, 1854; "The Affair of Honor," *New York Evangelist*, 25 Issue 15 (April 13, 1854): 58.
11. *The Weekly Herald*, April 1, 1854; Neely, 23; "Display of Chivalry," *New York Daily Times*, March 29, 1854; "An Affair of Honor," *Provincial Freeman*, April 15, 1854; *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, March 31, 1854.

This indictment of southern society, stemming from criticism of duels in general and Breckinridge in particular, ultimately manifested itself in the northern anti-slavery press as an argument against the extension of slavery and the Kansas-Nebraska Act. *The Independent*, after printing a transcript of the Cutting-Breckinridge debate in Congress, offered a brief editorial explaining that the “policy of the slaveholders for keeping Northern Congress-men in due subjection, is first to flatter them with tantalizing hopes; failing in that, to purchase them with offices or money; failing in that, to bully them down; and failing in that, to shoot them down.” The *Independent* censured Cutting for falling prey to “the overseers’ last resort” of dueling, but was much more critical of southerners by portraying them as intentionally oppressing northern Congressmen through corruption or violence. The column concluded that “nothing can stop it [southern subjection of northerners] but the absolute overthrow of the political power of slavery,” suggesting that northern political influence would increasingly diminish under the thumb of a spreading slave power that used the violence of dueling as a means of asserting its dominance. The *New York Tribune* continued this line of argumentation, explaining that the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict “teaches to the northern Members [of Congress] who rejoice in the title of ‘Democratic’ is substantially this: Support the Nebraska bill or submit to be bullied or shot.” Furthermore, the *Tribune* indicted Breckinridge as the “sole author” of the duel and explained that it was part of “a well considered plan” to coerce “through intimidation and violence . . . every independent northern Democrat who dares

to defy the mandates of the Slavocracy” by opposing the Kansas-Nebraska bill. In this way, the *Tribune* unambiguously portrayed the Cutting-Breckinridge duel as an example of the southerners’ plan to suppress their opponents through unabashed violence in order to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act and thus extend slavery. *The Daily Cleveland Herald* was more specific, contending that Breckinridge and his second, Colonel Hawkins

Evidently meant that Mr. Cutting should fall, and we are not too charitable to believe that the death of that man was one of the means to be used in forcing the passage of the iniquitous Nebraska measure. It is perhaps consistent that that “code,” which finds its advocates on slave soil, should be called in to back up a measure which was invented for the express purpose of extending slave territory.

The *Cleveland Herald* focused on the southern custom of dueling as not simply part of a plot to force the Kansas-Nebraska bill through Congress, but also as thinly veiled murder that was used to spread slavery. Significantly, this expansion of slavery would ultimately lead to the augmentation of southern power—and the perpetuation of the South’s violent political oppression of the North. The violent southern ritual of dueling was thus portrayed by the northern anti-slavery press as a means by which slaveholders like Breckinridge could extend their “peculiar institution” and, accordingly, political power—in this case, by passing the Kansas-Nebraska Act.<sup>12</sup>

When southern writers commented on the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict, they did not address it specifically—instead, they criticized anti-slavery coverage of the near-duel, proving the political salience of

12. “Congress,” *The Independent* . . . Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts 6 Issue 278 (March 30, 1854): 104; “Cutting and Breckinridge,” *New York Tribune*, March 29, 1854; “Breckinridge and Cutting Duel,” *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, April 8, 1854.

the arguments those northern newspapers made. The *Mississippian and State Gazette* suggested that northern coverage had been excessive, explaining that “much more has been said about this affair by the press than its importance or good taste either, admitted of.” North Carolina’s *Daily Register* expressed similar sentiments, explaining that an actual duel would have exacerbated the excitement of northern journalists “to an alarming extent.” This response suggests that the northern anti-slavery press may well have extrapolated from the duel to prove a political point that overstretched the relevance of the conflict. The *Richmond Examiner* took this a step further, condemning “the demagogue press of Northern Abolitionism” for “railing out against southern ‘bullyism.’ Already are the passions of the populace invoked against southern *hauteur* and violence.” This extract from the *Richmond Examiner* indicates that southerners understood that the northern opponents of slavery had harnessed the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict in order to condemn the alleged prevalence of southern violence. The *Daily Morning News* from Savannah went furthest in its censure of the northern anti-slavery press, accusing “Greel[e]y, and his collaborators in the cause of abolitionism” of “exhausting the English language in the search of epithets with which to denounce its [the Kansas-Nebraska Act’s] friends; and their tools, instigated by their intemperate language, are burning the effigies of Senator Douglas.” This editorial connected the anti-slavery tenor of the Cutting-Breckinridge conflict as a method of formulating an argument against the Kansas-Nebraska Act specifically and the extension of slavery generally. Interestingly, however, the paper cited the New York *Weekly Herald* and the

*Sun* as examples of anti-slavery agitation, associating these more conservative papers with Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune*, which was explicitly opposed to slavery. By portraying the northern press—or at least that of New York—as almost monolithically opposed to slavery, the *Daily Morning News* fed into the sectionalism many southern newspapers criticized the anti-slavery press for fueling. Taken together, southern newspapers explained that opposition to dueling in the anti-slavery northern press was a way to condemn the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the extension of slavery; and these southern complaints and portrayals of the northern press proved the political staying power and salience of the anti-dueling and anti-slavery arguments advanced by these anti-slavery newspapers.<sup>13</sup>

The Cutting-Breckinridge conflict was a product of its era, a part of nineteenth century dueling culture and a result of the increasingly sectionalized political tensions that arose from debate over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Yet it was the appropriation of the near-duel by the northern anti-slavery press that proved more important than what had actually occurred. Although Cutting, a northerner, offered the challenge, these newspapers cast a national culture accepting of dueling as a product of southern slaveholding society and blamed Breckinridge for the conflict as representative of the violence of that southern culture. By portraying dueling as a function of the violence-prone southern slaveholding society, the northern anti-slavery press was able to advance an argument against the spread of slavery and the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The argument held enough political salience to be noted and deplored by southern writers at the time. If the

13. “The Cutting and Breckinridge Affair,” *Mississippian and State Gazette*, April 14, 1854; *The Daily Register*, April 8, 1854; *Richmond Examiner* as quoted in “Messrs. Cutting and Breckinridge,” *New York Daily Times*, April 6, 1854; “The New York Press and the Sectionalism at Washington,” *Daily Morning News*, April 5, 1854.

Cutting-Breckinridge conflict can be understood as a microcosm of the reaction of the anti-slavery northern press to duels in general, then their arguments have held enough weight to persist to the present. Northern anti-slavery newspapers used the Cutting-Breckinridge affair to formulate a case against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the extension of slavery at large by asserting unequivocally that dueling was representative of the violence apparently inherent to southern society. Thus the modern perception of nineteenth century dueling as a uniquely southern problem due to the endemic aggression of that region is an echo of these early anti-slavery arguments and a testament to the significance of contemporary political interpretation in determining historical perception.