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An Anomalous Case of Southern Sympathy: New Jersey's Civil War Stance

Abstract

A popular narrative of the Civil War assumes that all Northern states stood united behind President Abraham Lincoln in their loyalty to the Union. However, the case of New Jersey suggests that this narrative of devotion is simply a myth. The agrarian economy of New Jersey kept the state firmly opposed to universal emancipation, and New Jersey behaved more like a border state than its geographic neighbors of Pennsylvania and New York. By examining New Jersey's response to the release of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Election of 1864, the myth of Northern unity is broken by understanding persistent state-level economic factors.

Keywords

Civil War, New Jersey, Lincoln, South, Slavery, Emancipation Proclamation, Election of 1864

AN ANOMALOUS CASE OF SOUTHERN SYMPATHY: NEW JERSEY'S CIVIL WAR STANCE

Emily Hawk

On the balcony of the State House in Trenton on January 20th, 1863, the newly elected governor Joel Parker delivered his inaugural address to the people of New Jersey.¹ Parker, a War Democrat, had been elected governor the preceding November by the widest margin New Jersey had yet experienced, capturing 57% of the popular vote over his Republican opponent.² At the height of the Civil War, and just after President Abraham Lincoln's release of the Emancipation Proclamation, Parker's campaign called for "The Constitution as it is and the Union as it was,"³ a stance reinforced by his inaugural address. He, like many of the New Jersey citizens that supported him with their ballot, opposed the notion of universal emancipation foreshadowed by the President's proclamation. "[Our] energies should be devoted to the restoration of the Union," the new governor proclaimed from the podium, "And the problem of emancipation is one

¹ "The Inauguration," *Trenton State Gazette*, Jan 21 1863.

² Brad R. Tuttle, "Politics to the Dogs: Southern Sympathy During the Civil War" in *How Newark Became Newark: The Rise, Fall, and Rebirth of an American City* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 51.

³ Tuttle, "Politics to the Dogs," 51.

to be solved here after by the people of the States where the institution of slavery already exists.”⁴

Parker’s inaugural speech exemplifies a peculiarity about New Jersey during the Civil War: the state displayed unusual vehemence in its opposition to Lincoln and, in particular, his plan for emancipation. In fact, the political culture of New Jersey more closely resembled a slave-holding Border State like Kentucky or Delaware than its neighboring free states of New York and Pennsylvania. This divergence from Northern wartime norms—encountered at both the elite and popular levels of the citizenry and in both the Democratic and Republican parties of the state—is best understood by the state’s agricultural economy and political heritage.

New Jersey’s animosity toward Lincoln had its roots in the Colonial Era, when the state had been set apart economically from neighboring New York and Pennsylvania. As Maxine Lurie explains, many historical accounts of the state of New Jersey in its earliest days simply classify it as a “middle colony,”⁵ assuming that, by geographical circumstance, it is most similar to neighboring Pennsylvania and New York. This assumption is understandable, since much of New Jersey is located within the spheres of influence of the major urban centers of New

⁴ Larry Greene, “Civil War and Reconstruction” in *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State*, ed. Maxine N. Lurie and Richard Veit (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 162.

⁵ Maxine N. Lurie, “New Jersey: The Unique Proprietary” in *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* Vol. 111 (January 1987), 77.

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York City and Philadelphia. A great deal of trade flowing into and out of these city centers passed along New Jersey's Delaware and Hudson River networks.⁶ If regional and global ideas about liberty, emancipation, and equality also travelled these routes, then New Jersey was also a prime location for political debate in the North.

This assumption of geographic similarity is not, however, consistent with the reality of New Jersey's stunted economic development. In the years immediately following its founding as a colony, New Jersey failed to develop any of its towns or ports into major urban centers that could compete with rapidly-growing Philadelphia or New York City. This issued plagued New Jersey as it proceeded into statehood; it fell behind its neighbors in industry and manufacturing as the two bordering major cities drained it of trade and commerce.⁷ With economic growth in this dismal condition, settlers arriving to New Jersey instead focused their efforts on agriculture, making profit by selling or renting their land⁸ and by exporting produce throughout the Atlantic world.⁹

The agrarian economy of New Jersey was labor-intensive; thus, slavery played a crucial role in sustaining that economy. New Jersey's dependence on slave labor had been engrained by the time of the American Revolution. In

⁶ James Gigantino, *The Ragged Road to Abolition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 2-3.

⁷ Lurie, "New Jersey: The Unique Proprietary," 84.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁹ Maxine N. Lurie, "Colonial Period" in *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State*, ed. Maxine N. Lurie and Richard Veit (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 54.

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1790, New Jersey housed 11,423 slaves, 6.2% of its total population of 184,139.¹⁰ This figure surpassed the slave populations of all New England states combined.¹¹ While slavery in New Jersey did not reach the role of complete economic domination that it played in Southern colonies with large-scale plantations, the economy in New Jersey still relied on black labor to a significant extent.

Slavery was also, as Giles Wright calls it, “an important thread in New Jersey’s social fabric.”¹² If this thread were to be cut by abolition, the state’s agricultural routine would be greatly disrupted. White New Jerseyans across the socioeconomic spectrum, therefore, worried about the implications of abolition in both Northern and Southern states. White farm workers feared that the flow of freed migrant black workers into the market willing to work for lower wages would diminish their agricultural jobs.¹³ A similar fear affected the wealthier owners of the farms; this class’s “preference was for laborers like themselves, considered more assimilable than Africans, who were perceived as uncivilized, primitive, savage, vicious, dangerous, and capable of the greatly dreaded acts of rebellion.”¹⁴

¹⁰ University of Virginia Library Historical Census Browser.

¹¹ Gigantino, *The Ragged Road to Abolition*, 2.

¹² Giles R. Wright, “Moving Toward Breaking the Chains: Black New Jerseyans and the American Revolution” in *A New Jersey Anthology* ed. Maxine N. Lurie (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 194.

¹³ Greene, “Civil War and Reconstruction,” 149.

¹⁴ Wright, “Moving Toward Breaking the Chains,” 196.

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These fears perhaps contributed to New Jersey being the final Northern state to pass a gradual emancipation act in 1804. Even then, the process was *very* gradual: slavery was formally practiced in pockets throughout the state until 1820.¹⁵ As late as the 1860 census, New Jersey still counted a handful of slaves among its population, while Pennsylvania, New York, and all other free states reported zero.¹⁶ Although the formal practice of slavery in New Jersey fell away, racism and racial tensions persisted. In April 1861, just before the surrender of Fort Sumter, former New Jersey Governor Rodman Pierce wrote to the editor of *The Newark Journal*: “We believe that slavery is no sin,” concluding with a quote from the Confederate constitution that “Slavery – subordination to the superior race – is [the black person’s] natural and normal condition.”¹⁷ The same fear of economic disruption that caused white New Jerseyans to resist abolition within the state manifested in wartime discussions of universal emancipation.

The general resistance of white New Jerseyans toward Southern emancipation became apparent in the political sphere when the Whig Party dissolved in the 1850s. While most former Whigs, including future president Lincoln, turned to the emerging Republican party, many New Jersey Whigs joined the Democratic Party instead, unable to accept the Republicans’ antislavery

¹⁵ Graham Russell Gao Hodges, “New Jersey in the Early Republic” in *New Jersey: A History of the Garden State*, 104.

¹⁶ University of Virginia Library Historical Census Browser.

¹⁷ Greene, “Civil War and Reconstruction,” 159.

stance.¹⁸ Because so many Whigs backed Democratic candidates in New Jersey, Democrats dominated state politics throughout the 1850s and 1860s, winning most statewide elections and supporting Democratic candidates in presidential elections.¹⁹ Even after Lincoln became the first Republican to win the presidency in 1860, the Democratic Party in New Jersey remained the formidable political force.²⁰

Throughout this period of Democratic dominance, the Republican Party in New Jersey was notably lukewarm in its support of federal Republican measures. The New Jersey branch of Republicans called themselves the “Union” Party, shying away from the abolitionist associations that came with Lincoln’s brand of Republicanism.²¹ *The Trenton State Gazette*, a Republican paper, often published the Confederate perspective alongside its own opinion pieces, such as the opinion of Confederate President Jefferson Davis. Despite the balancing efforts of its attempt to appeal to a broader readership, New Jersey’s Republican press struggled significantly as the war progressed and universal emancipation became a more serious possibility. *The Newark Daily Mercury*, one of the Republican Party’s highest-profile newspapers, went out of business just after

¹⁸ Tuttle, “Politics to the Dogs,” 43.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

²¹ Greene, “Civil War and Reconstruction,” 156.

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the release of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 due to lack of support.²²

As New Jersey's economic and political behavior continued on a divergent path from that of its neighbors, the state began to resemble loyal border slave states, particularly Kentucky and Delaware. Though neither Kentucky nor Delaware had abolished slavery, both of these states remained loyal to the Union throughout the Civil War. However, despite their loyalty to the Unionist cause, Kentucky and Delaware did not show loyalty to its leader, President Lincoln, or his efforts toward emancipation. The citizens of New Jersey similarly failed to unify behind President Lincoln.²³ Two critical moments during the Civil War best exemplify the parallels among these three states: their shared opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and their electoral votes against the reelection of Lincoln in 1864.

In the case of the Emancipation Proclamation, the promise of freed slaves from the states in rebellion presented an external economic threat to many residents of New Jersey. As the numerous Copperhead, or anti-war, Democrats in New Jersey imagined it, "the war, originally envisioned solely to preserve the country, had been co-opted by zealots."²⁴ The Democratic position—still the dominant political stance in New Jersey at the time—had "consistently portray[ed] the war as an illegal, misguided

²² Tuttle, "Politics to the Dogs," 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

abolitionist quest”²⁵ and used the release of the Emancipation Proclamation to justify their rationale. State election results in November 1862 confirmed the popularity of this oppositional stance when Democrat Joel Parker won the office of governor and Democrats won control of both houses of the state legislature.²⁶

Upon the release of the Emancipation Proclamation, the Democratic press was quick to argue that ending the war did not and should not require universal emancipation. An article in a December 1862 edition of *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register* quipped, “The President’s logic continues the war to 1900, if we understand it. He says without slavery this war *could not continue*, and yet he proposes by his emancipation policy to continue that which continues the war until 1900!”²⁷ Many New Jerseyans took comfort in the idea that the Proclamation had validity only as a wartime measure and would be nullified upon the war’s end. As another issue of *The Atlantic Democrat* reported, “The Constitution gives the President no authority whatever to issue such a decree as the emancipation proclamation and that the decree, legally regarded, is simply null and void...it must be looked upon as a measure of war, and not even policy.”²⁸ By questioning the validity of Lincoln’s action, New Jerseyans

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ Ibid., 51.

²⁷ “True American,” *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, December 20, 1862.

²⁸ “The Emancipation Proclamation Abroad,” *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, January 10, 1863.

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expressed their hope that universal emancipation would not become a reality.

Even though the Emancipation Proclamation only freed slaves in the states in rebellion, and therefore did not apply to loyal slave states like Delaware and Kentucky,²⁹ leaders in these two states similarly opposed the President's measure. Delaware Senator Willard Salusbury "claimed that its effect would be to flood his state with the freed slaves of rebels, creating racial conflict and serious social problems."³⁰ He reiterated that abolition was not an option for Delaware, despite its loyalty to the Union, and charged that he "never did see or converse with so weak and imbecile a man as Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States."³¹ These concerns, stated on behalf of Delaware's citizens, echo those of white New Jersey farmers. They express a fear of both the economic and social challenges posed by an influx of freed black laborers.

Kentucky, considered "the bellwether of the loyal slave states,"³² also opposed President Lincoln—himself a native Kentuckian—and the Emancipation Proclamation. Like many New Jerseyans, Kentuckians generally prioritized the preservation of the Union as the purpose of the war, in

²⁹ Lowell H. Harrison, "Lincoln, Slavery, and Kentucky" in *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*, Vol. 106 (Summer/Autumn 2008), 598.

³⁰ William C. Harris, "His Loyal Opposition: Lincoln's Border States' Critics" in *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, Vol. 32 (Winter 2011), 1.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³² Harrison, "Lincoln, Slavery, and Kentucky," 571.

turn resenting any effort to universally end slavery.³³ Both parties in Kentucky shared this resentment: while the Democrats staunchly supported the states' rights argument for slavery, many Kentucky Republicans were former Whigs who insisted that preservation of the Union was the single issue of the war.³⁴ For both Kentucky and Delaware, as slave states, abolition presented too much of an economic and social risk. New Jersey joined these states in opposing the Emancipation Proclamation and the damaging potential it promised.

The presidential election of 1864 was Lincoln's campaign for reelection and another instance in which New Jersey behaved similarly to Kentucky and Delaware. The first wartime presidential race since 1812, the election pitted incumbent Lincoln against Democratic challenger George B. McClellan, a recently dismissed Union general who ran on a promise "to take every possible measure to end the war quickly."³⁵ Despite McClellan's advantage in military experience, all but three Union states cast their electoral votes for Lincoln, solidifying the Union's general confidence in President Lincoln to see the war to its finish.³⁶ However, three loyal states did indeed oppose the reelection of Lincoln and instead supported McClellan: New Jersey, Delaware, and Kentucky. As the only free state to oppose Lincoln's reelection, New Jersey earned a

³³ *Ibid.*, 580.

³⁴ Harris, "His Loyal Opposition," 2.

³⁵ Tuttle, "Politics to the Dogs," 56.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

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dubious reputation as “the most traitorous state in the North.”³⁷

Although McClellan was a well-respected resident of West Orange, New Jersey, his home state advantage did not influence the election so much as the citizens’ distrust of Lincoln. In the months before the election, New Jersey’s Democratic press lambasted Lincoln’s character to direct support toward the Democratic candidate. One editorial by former Attorney General Senator Reverdy Johnson twisted the words of Lincoln’s own campaign to encourage voters to choose McClellan, stating,

It is not that we wish, to use his own classic figure, to swap horses in the midst of a stream, but that when we are on a journey and safety depends on making our destination at the earliest moment, we should cast aside a sprained and thin horse, and secure a sound and active one. In Gen. McClellan we are furnished.³⁸

This author described McClellan as a reliable and trustworthy figure to imply that Lincoln was not.

A printed speech by Governor Parker also endorsed McClellan for the presidency on the basis of his superior character. Parker proclaimed, “I will say that the man presented by that [Democratic] convention is a man of

³⁷ Ibid., 39.

³⁸ “Hon. Reverdy Johnson for Gen. George B. McClellan” in *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, October 8, 1864.

great ability and character, and a man of sound principles, honest and faithful to the Constitution.”³⁹ Parker then diminished Lincoln’s character while disagreeing with the president’s political decisions; “The very first article of the Constitution provides that the legislative power shall be intrusted [sic] to Congress, and the Executive of the United States has usurped the power of Congress in repeated instances,”⁴⁰ he complained. Parker took issue with three specific actions of Lincoln’s: the creation of West Virginia “contrary to the Constitution,” the violation of free press, and the suspension of habeas corpus.⁴¹ The head of the State of New Jersey, two years into his term at this point, confirmed his anti-Lincoln stance in the months immediately preceding the election.

The governor’s opinion represented a voice of political authority, but New Jersey’s McClellan campaign also had strength at the popular level. As Election Day approached, several advertisements appeared in *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register* for meetings of so-called McClellan Clubs.⁴² These clubs hosted festivals in McClellan’s honor and stumped on his behalf throughout the state.⁴³ The club meetings took place predominantly in the South Jersey agricultural hubs of

³⁹ “Speech of Gov. Parker” in *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, October 8, 1864.

⁴⁰ “Speech of Gov. Parker,” 2.

⁴¹ “Speech of Gov. Parker,” 2.

⁴² For example: *Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, October 22, 1864, 2.

⁴³ *Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, October 22, 1864, 2.

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Leedstown⁴⁴ and Egg Harbor City, where poor farm workers gathered in meeting halls and public houses in support of their favorite candidate. These cities were strategic locations for such gatherings, as supporters could engage large segments of the working classes and organize their support for the Democratic platform.

Disapproval of President Lincoln surfaced in popular literature as well. *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register* advertised for a bookstore in Absecon, a frequent stop for middle-class and wealthy tourists passing along the South Jersey shore. The book titles advertised included *Abraham Africana I: His Secret Life Revealed*, *The Lincoln (Negro) Catechism*, and *Trial of Abraham Lincoln*.⁴⁵ These texts circulated popular racist propaganda against the President, employing tropes that were commonly seen in political cartoons of the era. For example, as *The Lincoln (Negro) Catechism* ponders, “Does the Republican party intend to change the name of the United States?...What do they intend to call it? New Africa.”⁴⁶

It is no coincidence that New Jersey Democrats sought to disseminate this literature in Absecon. This location provided access to a wide audience beyond the area residents. Since Philadelphia and New York became commercial cities in the Colonial Era, New Jersey shore

⁴⁴ Now called Linwood.

⁴⁵ “For Sale at the Absecon Bookstore,” in *Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, October 22, 1864.

⁴⁶ Charles Bracelen Flood, *1864: Lincoln at the Gates of History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 2009), 250.

points provided city dwellers with an opportunity for quiet refuge.⁴⁷ By the 1850s, the New Jersey beaches “offered what was to be a hallmark of Jersey Shore tourism: excess, size, and overwhelming hype.”⁴⁸ With virtually no risk of battles occurring along these beaches, New Jersey provided a safe setting for wealthy tourists to pass through the state, as it was easily accessible by rail or by water.

While this literature spread via the Democratic press, the New Jersey Republican press worked to maintain a balance between their party identity at large and the state’s economic concerns regarding abolition. Republican newspapers supported Lincoln’s 1864 candidacy with tepid endorsements. For example, an October 1863 issue of *The South Jersey Republican* critiqued, “From the President to the postmaster...none are exempt who have resting upon them the sin of differing in their political faith from the standards of the Democracy – so called.”⁴⁹ The article continued its mixed support by suggesting sympathy for the Southern cause, saying, “Confederates are admirable for the frankness and enthusiasm of their faith.”⁵⁰ The lack of enthusiasm among Republicans in New Jersey is suggestive of wider public ambivalence toward the president’s agenda.

The Daily State Gazette, another Republican newspaper published in the state capital of Trenton,

⁴⁷ Mark Alan Hewitt, “Boardwalks Reborn: Disaster and Renewal on the Jersey Shore” in *Taking Chances: The Coast after Hurricane Sandy* eds. Karen M. O’Neill and Daniel J. Van Abs (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 166.

⁴⁸ Hewitt, “Boardwalks Reborn,” 166.

⁴⁹ “Their Way” in *South Jersey Republican*, October 3, 1863.

⁵⁰ “Political” in *South Jersey Republican*, October 3, 1863.

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endorsed Lincoln while also applauding the efforts of New Jersey Democrat groups.⁵¹ On the same page as their official endorsement of the Lincoln ticket, a September 17, 1864 issue of the newspaper contained multiple update letters from the McClellan camp. It reports, “Our Democratic friends are no half-way supporters of their candidate. They pitch the planks of the Chicago Platform to the wind, and go for ‘little Mac’ without conditions.”⁵² Perhaps influenced by the sheer strength of the state’s Democrats, Republican newspapers felt compelled to provide readers with the opponents’ perspective. *The Gazette* even advertised an upcoming “Grand McClellan Festival,” an event likely to be held with the same intention as the McClellan Club meetings of southern New Jersey.

Even after Lincoln achieved reelection, New Jersey newspapers remained steadfast in their disapproval of the President. In *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, Lincoln’s defeat of McClellan did not even make the front page. The newspaper admitted, “We honestly believed that McClellan would lead to a restoration of the Union on terms no less honorable than by the election of Abraham Lincoln, but more to the interest of the country in every respect, and for that cause advocated his election.”⁵³ In other words, although both men *could* achieve the goal of restoring the Union, McClellan would do so without universal emancipation as a term of surrender. Most New

⁵¹ *Daily State Gazette* (Trenton, NJ), September 17, 1864, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ “The Election—Its Effect on the Future,” *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May Country Register*, November 19, 1864.

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Jersey citizens preferred McClellan and his promise of a prompt end to the war without demanding abolition.

The December 8, 1864 issue of the *Register* featured statistics of the election, reporting that McClellan carried New Jersey with 68,018 votes to Lincoln's 60,014.⁵⁴ True figures for the election's results gave McClellan 52.84% of the popular vote and Lincoln 47.16%.⁵⁵ The incumbent president had fared worse in New Jersey's 1864 popular vote than he had in the election of 1860. In that earlier presidential race between Lincoln and Douglas, New Jersey split its electoral votes, casting four for Lincoln and three for Douglas even though Lincoln gained just 48.13% of the popular vote overall.⁵⁶

The newspaper's report generously overestimated McClellan's performance in the national election outcomes as well. As the article stated, "The President has hardly five per cent majority on the total vote. For every hundred votes for Lincoln in the loyal States, there have been cast ninety-five for his Democratic competitor."⁵⁷ Bitter about this close margin that resulted in the loss of their preferred candidate, they continued, "[Lincoln] is spoken of by his partisans as if he were the saviour of his country... This exaggerated and mischievous language is one of the strongest proofs of the bad results of this method of

⁵⁴ "The Election in New Jersey," *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, December 3, 1864.

⁵⁵ Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1864.

⁵⁶ Dave Leip's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1860.

⁵⁷ "The Popular Vote of the United States," *The Atlantic Democrat and Cape May County Register*, December 3, 1864, 2.

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selecting the chief executive officer of the nation.”⁵⁸ As they did in their reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation, the press of New Jersey once again questioned the validity of President Lincoln.

In examining New Jersey’s behavior throughout the Civil War, especially its reaction to the Emancipation Proclamation and Lincoln’s reelection, we discover that New Jersey was anomalous among Northern free states by opposing the antislavery endeavors of wartime leadership. New Jersey’s historically agrarian economy instead placed it in a category with loyal slave states and War Democrats. This categorization affected not only the strength of Democratic opposition to Lincoln, but also the weakness of Republican support for the president throughout the state.

The case of New Jersey during the Civil War suggests the merit of state level economic and political analysis for understanding the patchwork of Northern unity. Such state-level study has often been overlooked, as the popular narrative assumes that all Northern states stood united behind Abraham Lincoln in their loyalty to the Union. New Jersey’s unusual stance demonstrates that, at least in one particular state, economic interests at the state level controlled the wartime actions and political endorsements of Union states. The resulting actions of New Jersey’s economic interests challenge the narrative of Northern unity and dispel the myth of Lincoln’s universal popularity that prevails in memory of the Civil War.

⁵⁸ “The Popular Vote of the United States,” 2.

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