



## Editorial

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**P**OLITICS and economics. That two-headed monster has loomed large in our national discussion of late, and many are tired of the endless talk. But perhaps you will forgive us a historical view of the perennial beast.

Before government had grown big, a group of wealthy New England merchants protested the new country's self-protective policies, policies that, they thought, disrupted trade. To soothe their antagonism, as Lindsay Schakenbach shows, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams negotiated the terms of the Transcontinental Treaty with Spain so as to profit the businessmen and curry their favor. Thus enriched, and with Spain ceding territory that could yield yet more slave-produced cotton, the contented merchants were well positioned to diversify their activities into textile manufacturing and other industrial enterprises.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, as the vote was being extended to ever more white men, free blacks were losing the franchise, with one scholar estimating that only 6 percent of the African American population was eligible to vote. Because of a scarcity of sources, antebellum black voting behavior has been difficult to gauge, but Richard Rohrs has located a rare and extraordinary source that, in combination with census data, allows him to profile black voters in 1840s Newport, Rhode Island. Just as with New England's merchant princes, African Americans' political participation and affiliation were, perhaps unsurprisingly, closely tied to their economic interests.

Economics, Jonathan McKenzie argues, offers us a way to understand Henry David Thoreau's moral philosophy and to reconcile his political thought with his sporadic political action.

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“Let every one mind his own business,” Thoreau declares in *Walden*, a statement McKenzie reads as a repudiation of the nation’s “busyness” and a preference for a privatist posture that requires an elective detachment from public affairs. The Anthony Burns incident and John Brown’s capture at Harpers Ferry, however, tested the limits of Thoreau’s political indifference at the same time as they revealed how firmly he clung to his fundamental values.

William Bryan returns our attention to Rhode Island, where a debate over the state’s fisheries played out just as the federal government was establishing the U.S. Commission of Fish and Fisheries (1871) to investigate the depletion in New England’s fish stocks and to recommend remedies. In Rhode Island, however, science gave way to politics as each of the two major factions of fishermen insisted that their particular practice alone guaranteed the state’s economic prosperity over the long term.

Peter Stoneley traces the rise of the museum professional who, with his control of an acquisitions budget, had the political power to affect the nation’s taste in art. His authority would not be uncontested, and Stoneley reveals how charges of homosexuality were brought to bear as a means of discrediting the museum professional’s judgment. One especially colorful personality, a director of the Wadsworth Atheneum, drew fire even as he built an impressive legacy at that Hartford institution.

Finally, Adrian Johns reviews the monumental, five-volume *A History of the Book in America*. The book is, of course, highly sensitive to both economic and political forces, as is the journal you are now reading. As universities and other scholarly institutions deal with pressures both from within and without, the historian of the book has, perhaps, a special role in reminding us that those organizations bear a particular responsibility not only to instruct but to support the production of knowledge that is properly vetted and broadly accessible. *The New England Quarterly* was founded in that spirit in 1928, and, thanks to its loyal partners and its readers, it continues to hold steadfastly to that mission today.

—LINDA SMITH RHOADS