

Hemp & Henry Clay: Binding the Bluegrass to the World

By Andrew P. Patrick

In the early days of 1812, Congressman John Rhea of Tennessee seemed unable to understand the strident, aggressive tone that his western colleague Henry Clay struck in favor of enlarging the navy. Rhea mockingly expressed his “surprise to hear [that Clay] . . . desire[d] ships of war to protect the interests of the Western country” and quipped that the Kentuckians must be planning “to use them against the Indians.”¹ Yet Clay and the Kentucky hemp farmers he represented took a broader, strategic view based on their precarious place within the economy of the Atlantic World. They believed that the success or failure of their region hinged on secure access to favorable markets for their agricultural produce, especially hemp. Led by Clay, they argued for the government policies, such as expanding the navy and levying tariffs, that would ensure Kentucky farmers and manufacturers could sell their hemp and hemp goods from an advantageous market position.

In the remarks that drew Congressman Rhea’s derision, Clay recalled an economic crisis of the previous decade. He remembered the fury and frustration many Kentuckians felt at the 1802 closure of the Mississippi River to American trade, which essentially pre-

¹ Tennessee Congressman John Rhea response to Henry Clay, *Annals of Congress*, House of Representatives, 12th Cong., 1st sess., 920.

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vented the new state from exporting their agricultural surplus. Clay pointed out that the state “was in [a] commotion; and, at the nod of Government, would have fallen on Baton Rouge and New Orleans” to punish “the treachery of a perfidious” Spanish empire and seize the Louisiana territory for the United States in order to restore their access to international markets.²

Kentucky’s location near the western edge of American expansion in the early 1800s might seem a strange place to find the influence of the economy of the Atlantic World. Some four hundred fifty miles from the ocean and fifty miles from the Ohio River, which is the nearest major waterway that provided tenuous access to the Mississippi almost one thousand miles above New Orleans at the river’s mouth, the Inner Bluegrass region of Kentucky nonetheless quickly became attuned to the currents shaping the broader Atlantic economy. Indeed, these currents shaped the seemingly landlocked frontier region of Kentucky in a variety of ways during the decades after Euro-American settlement. The imprint of the Atlantic World was evident in many important developments for the regional environment ranging from the physical landscape itself to the priorities of Bluegrass political leaders. Henry Clay and his agricultural estate, Ashland, provide an ideal case study to demonstrate these connections between Kentucky hemp and the Atlantic World.³ From their earliest years, Bluegrass hemp farmers and manufacturers operated within the tangled web of the Atlantic economy and their interests helped define fundamental international policy positions held by

² Henry Clay, “Naval Establishment” *Annals of Congress*, House of Representatives, 12th Cong., 1st sess., 916.

³ The literature on Kentucky hemp is relatively sparse as most historians address the crop as part of their broader discussion of the state’s agriculture. One notable exception is James F. Hopkins, *A History of the Hemp Industry in Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1951), which does an admirable job of laying out the facts but lacks sustained analysis of many important aspects of hemp culture in the Bluegrass. This article aims to begin filling in these gaps. More broadly, new research has addressed the role of hemp in the Atlantic World, but without a focus on the features that made Kentucky’s hemp industry unique. See Bradley J. Borougerdi, “Cord of Empire, Exotic Intoxicant: Hemp and Culture in the Atlantic World, 1600–1900,” (PhD diss., University of Texas at Arlington, 2014) and Nadra O. Hashim, *Hemp and the Global Economy: The Rise of Labor, Innovation, and Trade* (Lanham, Md., 2017).

Kentucky's politicians on questions from whether or not to declare war to the proper role for tariffs and slavery.

Early settlers foresaw an agricultural system patterned on those they had left behind in the eastern colonies-turned-states. They anticipated the need to adapt their agricultural practices to the local environment, but white settlers' ideas about its overall structure, function, and purpose survived the journey largely intact. In broad strokes, they assumed their new settlements would entail private individuals owning the land, cultivating domesticated crops, raising livestock, trading their surplus in local markets, and establishing commercial connections to the wider Atlantic World. Like the Long Hunters before them, the geographic distance between the new settlers and coastal settlements can give the incorrect impression that these people were fleeing from the commercial economy in order to pursue independence supported by agricultural self-sufficiency.⁴ To be sure, the settlers grew or hunted the vast majority of the materials that supported their physical lives, but settlers' aspirations always exceeded simply meeting their basic biological needs.⁵ By 1780, members of the eastern elite clearly recognized the commercial potential of the west; James Madison, for example, argued that in "a very few years after peace . . . this country will be overspread with inhabitants" cultivating surpluses of "wheat, corn, beef, pork, tobacco, [and] hemp." He anticipated such vast surpluses that Kentucky would "not only supply an abundance of all necessities for the West India islands, but [also] serve for a valuable basis of general trade" with European nations. Yet these optimistic predictions contained the important qualifier: "If no obstructions should be thrown in its course down the Mississippi."⁶ The actions of Kentucky's pioneers bore out Madison's predictions as

⁴ The term "Long Hunter" refers to men like Daniel Boone who first ventured into the region in pursuit of game, often on lengthy expeditions that lasted months, but without the intention to settle permanently.

⁵ For a discussion of commerce in frontier Kentucky see Elizabeth A. Perkins, "The Consumer Frontier: Household Consumption in Early Kentucky," *The Journal of American History*, 78 (September 1991): 486–510.

⁶ James Madison, October 17, 1780, *Journals of the Continental Congress*, 18:945–46.

they aimed not to escape the commercial economy, but to cultivate a more advantageous position within it.

However, the primary factor that gave would-be settlers confidence that their project would ultimately succeed—the vast quantities of “available” land—also reflected an obstacle to their immediate success: namely, the difficult distance from central Kentucky to profitable markets.⁷ If it had been close and easily accessible, white colonists would have already arrived. Instead, geography dictated high transportation costs, both into and out of the region. This meant only relatively lightweight, high-value exports could compete in more established markets. Deerskins met the requirement for Long Hunters but farmers had to search for financially viable products to export. Corn, for example, while an absolute necessity produced by nearly every farm, could not justify the cost of shipping east, but a barrel of bourbon whiskey distilled from several bushels might. While some experiments in commercial agriculture faltered in the first decades, notably cotton and vineyards that failed due to environmental constraints, the hemp industry showed early promise.⁸

Pioneers cultivated their first crop of hemp in 1775 and ecologically speaking, the region proved well suited to the production of the plant. Prior to hemp, a native bamboo, commonly known as “cane,” grew in dense stands that dotted the region. These “canebrakes” often grew upwards of a dozen feet in height and could cover miles. One early pioneer recalled the country as “delightful beyond conception,

⁷ When white male settlers arrived, they often found that the quantity of “available” land had been overstated. Eastern speculators often owned the best tracts long before the bulk of early settlement occurred. Land was rarely “available” at all for settlers other than white men. Yet the belief that Kentucky was the “best poor man’s country” because of the availability of productive land nonetheless continued to lure settlers throughout the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. The speculative value of the Bluegrass to the investor class was based on future trade projections and competed with the more immediate productive value that actual settlers and would-be landowners hoped to gain from the land. For more on how these dynamics shape settlement, see Honor Sachs, *Home Rule: Households, Manhood, and National Expansion on the Eighteenth-Century Kentucky Frontier*. (New Haven, Conn., 2015).

⁸ On struggling vineyards on the Kentucky River, see F. A. Michaux, *Travels to the West of the Allegheny Mountains*, vol. 3, (London, 1805), 207–09; on cotton failing due to early frosts see 237.

nearly one half of it covered with cane.” Looking back, another remarked that when he arrived during the early 1780s he “thought they would never get . . . the cane . . . out of this country, . . . but now it is scarce and a curiosity.”⁹ As the enormous grasses disappeared into the mouths of settlers’ cattle, many of the former canebrakes were repurposed as hemp fields. The domesticated fiber proved a successful analog and performed well in the niche opened by the decline of the native cane.

Early cultivators raised small patches with seeds brought from the east and used the fiber locally. While still living in a defensive “station,” for example, one man raised a small patch as a seed crop for future seasons, but “Saved the stocks,” and rotted them “one layer thick at a time” in “A hole in the creek down below the Spring.” He then “broke it up and [his] wife made [him] a shirt out of it.”¹⁰ Soon, however, the fecundity of the hemp plants in their new environments encouraged farmers to sell their surplus. Equally important, the value of hemp on a per pound basis outstripped that of other commodities cultivated in the region. In 1789, for example, hemp sold at five cents per pound in Lexington while tobacco sold for two cents.¹¹

Relatively high market values ensured that commercially minded farmers often found a place for hemp in their slice of the agricultural landscape. As more settlers arrived, the countryside took on an increasingly settled appearance often marked by the presence of hemp. Fields and woodland pastures gradually replaced the native flora on agricultural estates like Henry Clay’s Ashland outside of Lexington, which he established during the first decade of the nineteenth century, and Kentucky’s hemp emerged as a prominent aspect of the landscape. Hemp’s seasonal cycle combined human labor with biological processes to generate economic value. Laborers cleared fields in the late

⁹ Mary Wharton and Roger Barbour, *Bluegrass Land and Life: Land Character, Plants, and Animals of the Inner Bluegrass Region of the Kentucky, Past, Present, and Future* (Lexington, Ky., 1991), 23 (first through third quotations), 46 (fourth quotation).

¹⁰ Lucien Beckner, ed. “Reverend John D. Shane’s Interview with Pioneer William Clinkenbeard” *Filson Club History Quarterly* vol. 2 (1928): 108.

¹¹ Hazel Dicken Garcia, “‘A Great Deal of Money...’: Notes on Kentucky Costs, 1786–1792” *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* (hereinafter RKHS) 77 (Summer 1979): 200.

winter, planted the crop in the spring, tended the plots during the early summer, harvested the fiber in the late summer, and processed the harvest through the fall and winter.

At Ashland, like the vast majority of Bluegrass farms that produced hemp, enslaved men, women, and children performed the work to cultivate, harvest, and process the crop. Hemp was a labor-intensive crop during the nineteenth century, especially during harvest and while “breaking” the plant to remove the woody stalk from the valuable fiber. “Breaking” typically occurred on simple hand machines that enslaved men often built and operated in the field. The job was monotonous, dirty, and so physically demanding that white farmers sometimes offered small bonuses to the best hemp breaker in a work crew or small bounties for exceeding their assigned task.¹² Once the valuable fibers were separated from the bulky stalk, they were sold to be manufactured into a value-added good. Most Kentucky hemp was processed at in-state establishments, where it might be transformed into anything from rope and bagging to wrapped bales of cotton. Like breaking, these transformations from raw material to finished goods, typically relied upon relatively simple machines and the labor of enslaved Kentuckians. In fact, the modest capital needed to manufacture hemp sometimes served as a selling point for Henry Clay who argued that relatively cheap facilities and unskilled labor, often from “small negro boys and a few negro girls,” were sufficient to enter the cotton bagging industry.¹³ In Clay’s framing, slavery gave white Kentuckians an advantage in hemp manufacturing since

¹² These payments and the fact that white hemp farmers and manufacturers often rented enslaved people from their legal owners should not distract from centrality of slavery to the antebellum Kentucky hemp industry. This system was *not* a version of wage labor, but a local iteration of profit-minded slavery such as that described in Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery’s Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, 2016). Casting the antebellum Kentucky hemp industry as a “democratizing influence” on the American economy a woeful misreading of the evidence, both primary and secondary, and obscures the exploitation endured by enslaved Kentuckians as their enslavers sought profits from hemp sales. See Hashim, *Hemp and the Global Economy* 2–3 (quotation).

¹³ James F. Hopkins and Mary W. M. Hargreaves, eds., *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 3. (Lexington, Ky., 1963), 642.

“where slaves are used, the capital is chiefly in slaves and hemp” which cost “nothing in comparison to what is required in other branches of manufactures.”¹⁴

No matter the devices and laborers used to break the hemp, twist it into rope, or weave it into bagging, Kentucky’s signature fiber held value primarily because of the utility it offered to consumers outside of the Bluegrass. This meant that even as locals addressed the practical issues of raising and processing a hemp crop they also worried about the security and viability of the transportation network their produce traveled through on its way to market. For decades after initially settling in the region, early Kentucky commercial farmers focused their attention on securing access to the Mississippi River, largely because the geography of North America and the roiling imperial competition of the Atlantic world made the “noble stream” a hotly contested space.¹⁵

Virtually all white settlers agreed that access to the mighty river was a vital factor in the success of the regional economy. As the primary author of the first state constitution, George Nicholas asserted the “free navigation of the Mississippi will always be the favorite object with the inhabitants of the Western Country.”¹⁶ This became clear as early as 1784 when Spanish officials closed the river to American traffic, touching off a firestorm of protest in Kentucky and catalyzing the movement for statehood. Kentuckians felt particularly incensed by the national government’s apparent willingness to exchange their rights on the Mississippi for favorable trade terms between eastern states and European powers. Enraged westerners burned administration diplomat John Jay in effigy and denounced the national government’s abdication of its duty to protect its citizens.¹⁷ Securing access

¹⁴ Ibid., 648–49.

¹⁵ James F. Hopkins, ed., *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 2 (Lexington, Ky., 1959), 692–93.

¹⁶ Harry Innes and George Nicholas to Thomas Power, *Harry Innes Papers*, Library of Congress, copy at the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky, quoted in Huntley Dupre, “The Political Ideas of George Nicholas,” *RKHS*, 39 (July 1941): 212.

¹⁷ Lowell Harrison, *Kentucky’s Road to Statehood*, (Lexington, Ky., 1992), 18, 46. See also Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Pinckney’s Treaty: A Study of America’s Advantage from Europe’s Distress*

to the river figured prominently in residents' political calculations regarding national and international events from that point forward. Many people thought that only independent statehood within the Union would give them enough of a voice to secure their access, but others considered the intersection of geography, shifting imperial boundaries, and their own vision for the future of the Bluegrass commercial agriculture and proposed even more dramatic solutions to the problem of market access.

Famous political intriguer and "scoundrel," James Wilkinson saw opportunity among the uncertainty.¹⁸ Rivers of ink have been spilled on the so-called "Spanish Conspiracy" that Wilkinson organized to separate Kentucky from the United States and ally it with the Spanish crown during the 1780s, yet little attention has been paid to the environmental and agricultural context that made the scheme appear viable in the first place.¹⁹ Wilkinson, like those white men he hoped to convince, viewed a market for their expected agricultural surplus as absolutely essential. He immediately set about establishing the connections he perceived to be necessary, partly because his personal finances dictated he act quickly. His initial efforts met with encour-

(Baltimore, 1926), 80–108, 147. Jay's Spanish counterpart reported to his foreign minister that westerners "have become very much exasperated by the first reports that Congress is discussing the surrender of the navigation of the River . . . and they have openly asserted that if this is done they will seek aid from another Power as an Independent State." Diego de Gardoqui to the Conde de Floridablanca, October 28, 1786, Gardoqui Dispatches, 1784–1789, Special Collections, University of Chicago Library. See also Duvon Corbitt, ed. and Roberta Corbitt, trans., "Papers from the Spanish Archives Relating to Tennessee and the Old Southwest, 1783–1800," VIII, *East Tennessee Historical Society Publications* 16 (1944): 87.

¹⁸ Royal Ornan Shreve, *The Finished Scoundrel: General James Wilkinson* (Indianapolis, Ind., 1933).

¹⁹ See for example, Daniel Clark, *Proofs of the Corruption of Gen. James Wilkinson and of his Connection with Aaron Burr* (Philadelphia, 1809); James Wilkinson, *A Brief Examination of Testimony to Vindicate the character of General James Wilkinson against the imputation of a sinister connexion with the Spanish government, for purposes hostile to his own country* (Washington D.C., 1811); James Ripley Jacobs, *Tarnished Warrior: Major-General James Wilkinson* (New York, 1938); Thomas Robson Hay and M. R. Werner, *The Admirable Trumpeter: A Biography of General James Wilkinson* (Garden City, N.Y. 1941). Despite the wealth of research on the topic, Wilkinson's "true intent may never be known" since he always "displayed a genius for avoiding any absolute commitment that would condemn him if the schemes failed." Harrison, *Kentucky's Road to Statehood*, 51.

aging successes—he secured a virtual monopoly on the Mississippi River trade from the Spanish governor at New Orleans and began exporting Bluegrass produce.

Prices for agricultural products rose across Kentucky in response to Wilkinson's New Orleans trade and his influence waxed within the district. For a brief period, Wilkinson's scheming appeared to pay off as he seemed poised to capitalize on his privileged market access and significant political influence with the Spanish. Yet in the end, progress on the question of statehood within the union and the Spanish relaxation of trading restrictions stifled Wilkinson's plans to use his monopoly to steer Kentucky in the direction of his greatest advantage.²⁰

Whatever his ultimate intentions, Wilkinson's plans hinged on utilizing his political connections to exploit the settlers' culturally defined perception that they *needed* a market for their goods by controlling the geographically and technologically defined route to that market.²¹ Without this culturally defined need for market access, Wilkinson's scheming would likely have taken a different form. Imagine instead that the settlers in the region truly found their new home an "Eden" that completely met all of their needs and desires, thus removing the cultural impulses to trade; in that case, no market access would have been necessary and Wilkinson's plans devolve into incoherence. Or, suppose that the market with which new Kentuckians were most in-

²⁰ Harrison, *Road to Statehood*, 53.

²¹ Later in life, Wilkinson performed a rear-guard action to protect his legacy via his memoirs in which he claimed his actions stemmed from his "enterprise and patriotism" combined with "a view to promote my own fortune, *and* to benefit my fellow citizens." See James Wilkinson, *Memoirs of My Own Times*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia, 1816), 2:110. After the accusations came to light, many Kentuckians continued to view Wilkinson positively. Even Humphrey Marshall, a vociferous critic of Wilkinson, allowed that Wilkinson "left his countrymen enraptured" by "his spirit of enterprise" and "unbounded patriotism" based on his trade in New Orleans. Humphrey Marshall, *The History of Kentucky: Exhibiting an Account of the Modern Discovery; Settlement; Progressive Improvement; Civil and Military Transactions; and the Present State of the Country*, 2nd ed. (Frankfort, Ky., 1824), 271. For more on Wilkinson's continued intrigues, especially as he continued to receive a stipend from the Spanish crown in exchange for information he gathered in his position as an officer in the U.S. Army and government, see Andro Linklater, *An Artist in Treason: The Extraordinary Double Life of General James Wilkinson* (New York, 2009).

fatuated lay in a native settlement at the headwaters of the Missouri, in which case geography would have encouraged Wilkinson to seek out very different political alliances than the Spanish in Louisiana. Imagine, finally, that Wilkinson's plans unfolded after the railroad became the dominant technology transporting produce to market, as opposed to flatboats and wagons, in which case his plotting would have involved more corporate executives and fewer imperial officials. As these counterfactuals suggest, the specifics of central Kentucky's agricultural and commercial context fueled the political controversy that intrigued the state for decades.

Even after Wilkinson's schemes collapsed and statehood within the union achieved, any disruption of the downriver trade caused Kentuckians to quickly weigh their options, often publicly and with a hint of threat should the situation not be speedily resolved in their favor. In the midst of one impasse between the national government and the Spanish empire, John Breckinridge darkly cautioned that as far "as our thoughts may be from a connexion [sic] with the British or Spaniards, at this present time, let Government take care they do not drive us" into the arms of an imperial competitor. He set the stage for Clay two decades later as he emphasized the Kentuckians' priorities with the unambiguous assertion that "The Miss[issipp] we *will* have. If Government will not procure it for us, we must procure it for ourselves. Whether . . . by the sword or by negotiation."²²

²² Breckinridge to Samuel Hopkins, September 15, 1794, Library of Congress, quoted in Lowell Harrison, *Breckinridge: Jeffersonian Republican*, (Louisville, Ky., 1969), 58. Kentuckians viewed access to the Mississippi as a "natural" right, inextricably written into the landscape. John Rhea, for instance, described the river as "the great Road of Nations—its Waters run free, so ought its use to be" from John Rhea to Breckinridge, September 19, 1784, quoted in Bernard Mayo, *Henry Clay: Spokesman of the New West* (Washington D.C., 1937, repr. 1966), 133. Regional promoters glossed over the issue, focusing on the ready market in New Orleans for agricultural surplus, while briefly acknowledging that it was "true we only enjoy this privilege from the court of Spain," and asserting, "whenever that is withheld, we most likely shall seize upon all Louisiana." Letter from Gilbert Imlay to Harry Toulmin on February 2, 1793, published in Harry Toulmin, *A Description of Kentucky in North America: To which are Prefixed Miscellaneous Observations Respecting the United States* edited by Thomas D. Clark (Lexington, Ky., 1945), 118. To those men and women already living in Kentucky, however, the blithe assumption that access would be secured at some future date provided little consolation.

This position, based on the importance of maintaining an outlet for Kentucky agricultural surpluses, including hemp, remained constant throughout the subsequent decades.

The fact that Kentuckians continued to depend on the goodwill of a foreign power to reach their markets became abundantly clear in 1802 when the Spanish governor rescinded the Americans' right to deposit goods at New Orleans. Clay recalled this crisis a decade later, highlighting the reasons Kentucky hemp growers eyed the routes to southern markets with suspicion and jealousy. Yet the Louisiana Purchase promised to permanently resolve the problem of Mississippi access and held tremendous implications for Bluegrass commercial farmers.

Apparently confident in their access to the harbors at New Orleans, Natchez, and other Mississippi River ports, Kentuckians' rapidly expanded their downriver trade in the years after the Purchase. Yet they remained aware that the new American ports were not the only markets available via the mouth of the Mississippi. Some looked to the wider Caribbean to stimulate prices. One transplanted Kentuckian operating a commission business in New Orleans in 1805 reported that "the Port of the Havanna is open to Americans" and produce "was shipping rapidly to that Port" which promised to improve the return on all of the goods exported south from the Bluegrass.²³ Others looked to tap these markets more directly. For example, the *Go By*, "the first sea vessel built at Frankfort," plied the waters of the Gulf by 1804, but was drawn into the fervor surrounding the Haitian Revolution, captured and "robbed" by European privateers.²⁴ Another young Kentuckian charged with transporting and selling a cargo of flour in New Orleans, but finding the going-rate in the city below his expectations, decided to hire a ship and try his luck at a South American port. The journey to modern-day Venezuela proved more difficult than he had anticipated, including an outbreak of yellow

²³ Daniel Hanagan to James Morrison, March 23, 1805, James Morrison Papers, 1798–1823 at Transylvania University Special Collections, Lexington, Kentucky.

²⁴ *Kentucky Gazette*, May 1, 1804.

fever and a violent storm in the Gulf, but suggests the ways in which Kentuckians of the era viewed New Orleans as the entry point to wider markets, rather than as a final destination.²⁵

Closer to home, the new frontiers opened to American settlers by the Louisiana Purchase and the agricultural development of the new southern lands, in particular, held tremendous significance for Kentucky hemp. Contemporary observers noted the relationship clearly, arguing that as King Cotton “advances on the Mississippi and neighbouring streams, the demand for cordage and bale cloth must increase also.” Taking their logic a step further, they also predicted that knitting the Bluegrass to the Lower South via steamboats “will aid the commercial and manufacturing interests of Kentucky . . . beyond our means to calculate.”²⁶ The antebellum cotton boom necessitated a corresponding boom in Kentucky hemp since approximately 5 percent of the weight of a bale of cotton was actually processed hemp in the form of bagging and rope; each three hundred pound bale contained about fifteen pounds of hemp products.²⁷

Thus, the maturation of southern cotton economy created new opportunities for hemp farmers. Yet obstacles remained. Part of the challenge for Kentucky producers stemmed from hemp growers in other parts of the world. The cotton boom occurring to their south would not benefit them if Louisiana growers wrapped their bales in

²⁵ Hambleton Tapp, “Notes on the Life of Benjamin Rush Milam, 1788–1835” *RKHS* 71 (1973): 88.

²⁶ William Darby, *The Emigrant's Guide to the Western and Southwestern States and Territories* (New York, 1818), 205. Steamboats played a central role in expanding and accelerating antebellum commerce, especially by allowing efficient up-river trade. Not only did the ability to travel against the current allow more goods to be imported to places like the Bluegrass, providing competition from places up the Ohio River like Pittsburg, but by the 1830s, it also meant Kentucky traders were far less likely to make the difficult *walk* back from New Orleans or Natchez at the end of their trip, as John Stuart did during the summer of 1806. For a detailed overview of the rise and fall of the steamboat industry in the region, see Louis C. Hunter, *Steamboats on the Western Rivers: An Economic and Technological History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949).

²⁷ Darby, *The Emigrant's Guide*, 184–85. Recent literature on southern agriculture gives little indication of this relationship; it would take an unprecedented flurry of hemp scholarship to begin to approach one-twentieth of that written on the cotton south.

Russian hemp.²⁸ Coupled with the recognition that southern cotton sold in Atlantic markets, this international competition made Kentucky hemp producers keenly aware of their position within the Atlantic World. These connections help explain otherwise confusing aspects of the foreign policy positions held by many Kentuckians, such as their anger over perceived offenses against American international shipping and support for tariff protections.

Henry Clay provides a useful example, both as a producer and spokesman for Bluegrass planters. As a successful attorney-planter-politician, Clay's agricultural operations at Ashland overlapped with those of his peers. He spoke out on their behalf in an 1810 speech to Congress that focused on hemp, but also laid out the principles behind his argument in favor of federal protection for domestic manufacturing that came to characterize his "American System."²⁹ Clay argued that the young nation could flourish by focusing on developing their own internal markets behind protective tariffs that would give American producers and manufacturers an advantage over their European competition, especially through a series of internal improvements like roads and canals that would facilitate expanded profitable trade.³⁰ His view of the allied interests of agricultural producers and proto-industrial manufacturers drew on his own experience with the Kentucky hemp industry, as did his belief that transportation networks could be the key to unleashing the country's economic potential.³¹

²⁸ Kentucky hemp growers, including Clay, worried constantly about competing with Russian producers for market share and many attributed the relatively low quality of Kentucky hemp to the retting process, arguing that water-retting would make Kentucky hemp just as strong and attractive as the Russian. Recent scientific evidence, however, suggests that there may have been genetic factors in play as well. Some researchers believe that the Russian varieties were actually hybrids or even a different genus with different physical traits than the species grown in North America. See Hashim, *Hemp and the Global Economy*, 26.

²⁹ Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore, 1996), 135.

³⁰ Denver Fugate, "American System" in *The Kentucky Encyclopedia* (Lexington, Ky., 1992), 19.

³¹ Contemporaries of Clay's sometimes commented on the connection between his policy positions and his personal interests, as when cotton producers complained that the tariff of 1824 served "to enrich Mr. Clay's pets," but scholars tend to deemphasize his personal

This context helps explain Clay's bellicose tone in his nationalistic defense of American shipping interests.³² Kentucky's tenuous access to Atlantic markets via the Mississippi continued to feature prominently in the worldview of regional leaders; Clay warned his colleagues that should the government "Abandon all idea of protecting, by maritime force, the mouth of the Mississippi" the commerce of Kentucky would be "placed at the mercy of a single [British] ship."³³ Opponents of naval expansion mocked his belief that Kentucky's prosperity depended on aggressively protecting access to distant markets and wondered why a westerner would be so concerned with international trade.³⁴ Yet, Clay's detractors failed to perceive something Clay acknowledged directly during the last decade of his life: that local and personal interest motivated his early support for tariff protections and militant defense of shipping rights. He hoped to see the success of "American Hemp—Kentucky Hemp—Ashland Hemp" and he believed that success relied upon access to Atlantic markets.³⁵

motivations with assurances like "Clay's advocacy of the American System was more than crude economic self-interest." See John C. Fitzpatrick, ed., *The Autobiography of Martin Van Buren* (Washington, D.C., 1920), 240 and Clement Eaton, *Henry Clay and the Art of American Politics* (Boston, 1957), 45. Along the same lines, the recent political biography of Clay by James Klotter nods to the global economic context framing hemp operations at Ashland, but does not engage in sustained analysis of the nexus of personal economics, hemp culture, and government trade policy, that Clay navigated throughout his career. See James Klotter, *Henry Clay: The Man Who Would Be President* (New York, 2018), 276–77.

³² Henry Clay, "Naval Establishment" *Annals of Congress*, House of Representatives, 12th Cong., 1st sess., 909–27. Clay's desire to see the U.S. Navy use domestic hemp for their rigging and sail cloth also factored into his support for a larger naval force.

³³ Clay, "Naval Establishment" *Annals of Congress* House of Representatives, 12th Cong., 1st sess., 916.

³⁴ Tennessee Congressman John Rhea response to Clay, *Annals of Congress*, House of Representatives, 12th Cong., 1st sess., 920. The *Go By* incident of 1804 mentioned above also demonstrates that international shipping interests were not always distinct from those of the seemingly landlocked Kentuckians. Living in the Bluegrass did not preclude participation on the Atlantic economy, whether directly or indirectly.

³⁵ August 8, 1842 letter to John M. Clayton, *Henry Clay Papers* vol. 9:754. Other members of the Clay clan looked to tap into the growing trade between Kentucky and the new cotton regions, such as Henry's brothers John and Porter who both moved to New Orleans soon after the Louisiana Purchase and conducted a brisk trade with those left behind in the Bluegrass. See David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *Henry Clay: The Essential American* (New York, 2010), 42–43.

Access, it should be noted, extended to other American products with ties to Kentucky hemp, including southern cotton. The cotton produced on new southwestern plantations fueled not only textile factories in Lowell, Massachusetts, and Liverpool, England, but also the hemp industry in Kentucky. Bluegrass entrepreneurs turned to manufacturing to add value to the commodity prior to export, and within a few years of the Louisiana Purchase, developed a thriving industry geared toward the burgeoning southern market. A group of Kentucky manufacturers submitted a memorial to Congress in 1809, which argued their region already manufactured bailing products “sufficient for the consumption of the greater part of the cotton country,” and predicted a further expansion of “what promises to be [Kentucky’s] staple article.” They believed “She is capable of producing hemp for the whole supply of the United States.”³⁶

While never the sole player in the market that some predicted, the Kentucky hemp industry expanded dramatically by tapping into the growing cotton trade. By 1844, for example, an estimated forty million pounds of clean hemp were manufactured in the state, with approximately 95 percent processed into bagging or rope.³⁷ The vast majority of these hempen products stopped briefly in the lower South where they were wrapped around bales of cotton—giving form to units of a quintessential Atlantic commodity—before continuing their journey. The ravenous appetites for cotton that developed in the industrializing corners of the Atlantic World stimulated a similar hunger for hemp in the cotton South.

³⁶ John Allen, “Protection to Manufacturers,” June 7, 1809 in *American State Papers*, Vol. VI, (Washington, D.C., 1832), 367–68.

³⁷ “Hemp in Kentucky” *Cincinnati Weekly Herald and Philanthropist*, March 20, 1844. The bulk of the hemp, 14,500 tons, or 72.5 percent of the total, was made into bagging and 4,500 tons, or 22.5 percent of the total, was made into rope. The remaining ton, 5 percent, was “Made into sail duck [cloth], twine, &c.” The fibers only made up a percentage of the total plant, something like six pounds of raw hemp for one pound of clean fiber. See Andrew P. Patrick, “‘Cotton Bagging and Bale Rope’: Technology of Hemp Culture in Early Statehood Kentucky, 1792–1830” at the New Paths in the Environmental History of North America and the Ohio Valley, October, 2015, available online at <http://filsonhistorical.org/wp-content/uploads/Patrick-%E2%80%98Cotton-Bagging-and-Bale-Rope%E2%80%99-Hemp-Tech-in-KY.pdf> for more information on processing the plant (accessed September 27, 2018).

In some ways, the hemp economy also supported the flow of enslaved labor from Kentucky to the south and west. Bluegrass slaveholders, merchants, and traders established the pattern before the end of the eighteenth century. John Wesley Hunt provides a clear example. Hunt operated a successful mercantile house in Lexington, selling much of the local produce to the south. When his partner and cousin, Abijah, relocated to Natchez in the 1790s to handle that branch of their operations, he quickly identified enslaved people as one of the most valuable commodities white Kentuckians could export. Abijah wrote back to Kentucky that “Negro men is in great Demand in this Country” advising John Wesley Hunt that “if you have any on hand or can get them in payment of debts you had better . . . send them to this place.”³⁸ No temporary uptick in demand, Abijah wrote the next year that slaves “of any description continue to be in demand & will bring a high price” in the southern markets and recommended that the Kentuckian “exchange any kind of property for them.”³⁹ The same system of slavery that supported the hemp industry in Kentucky supported the growth of a trade in enslaved bodies linking the Bluegrass to the planters of the Lower Mississippi Valley even before it became an American possession. Thus, hemp supported the institution in Kentucky while facilitating its diffusion. The advance of slavery, in turn, supported the hemp industry. Enslaved former Kentuckians were among those who carved out new plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi that helped produce the bumper crops of the “Cotton Kingdom.” Each new bale of southern cotton on the market, whether destined for Lowell or Liverpool, represented a potential sale for Kentucky hemp manufacturers.

Questions about white Kentuckians’ complicity in the rapid expansion of slavery in the old southwest typically focus on the ante-

³⁸ Abijah Hunt to John Wesley Hunt, November 9, 1798, Hunt-Morgan Family Papers, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington, Kentucky. On the family and business relationship between the Hunt family, see Karl Raitz and Nancy O’Malley, *Kentucky’s Frontier Highway: Historical Landscapes along the Maysville Road* (Lexington, Ky., 2012), 120.

³⁹ A. Hunt to John Wesley Hunt, September 19, 1799, Hunt-Morgan Family Papers, University of Kentucky Special Collections, Lexington, Kentucky.

bellum period, but these earlier instances show how long the pattern existed.⁴⁰ They also suggest the significance of the specific features of the slave-based agricultural system envisioned by the enslavers: hemp required bound labor, both for cultivation and processing, *but* that demand fluctuated throughout the year and never approached the level of demand seen in cotton or sugar production. Bluegrass enslavers adapted their institution to meet these particular needs through an extensive system of slave rentals that broadened white access to forced black labor and allowed it to be concentrated in the hemp industry, but they also sought profits by tapping into the growing demand to their south.

Viewed through the lens of the hemp industry, early-nineteenth century Kentucky was not an isolated inland region, but a connected part of the wider Atlantic World. Kentucky hemp growers and manufacturers were acutely aware of their position in an international web of economic connections. The necessity of competing in Atlantic markets influenced a wide range of developments, from the statehood movement and nationalistic enthusiasm for the War of 1812, to their support for protective tariffs and experiments in industrial manufacturing. Hemp also bound the state in a close relationship with the emergent cotton South since much of the fiber ended up binding southern cotton for transport onto national and international markets. Adopting an Atlantic perspective reveals the complex and far-reaching connections animating the region's initial agricultural development and the prominence of Kentucky hemp fields. It helps us see the ways in which hemp and Henry Clay helped bind the Bluegrass to the world.

⁴⁰ For examples of the typical focus on the post Louisiana Purchase slave trade originating in Kentucky see Thomas D. Clark, "Trade Between Kentucky and the Cotton Kingdom in Livestock, Hemp, and Slaves from 1840 to 1860," (MA Thesis, University of Kentucky, 1929); J. Winston Coleman, "Lexington's Slave Dealers and Their Southern Trade" *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 12 (1938): 1–23; and Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, "Slavery and Antislavery" in *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1997), 167–80.

