

AFD Ep 457 Links and Notes - 1IR: The Boston Associates Part III: The Doomed Whigs
How some of the most powerful, wealthy political players in antebellum Massachusetts went from controlling state politics completely to hopelessly funding the Constitutional Union Party in 1860.

This is the third and final episode of my series on the Boston Associates of the First Industrial Revolution in Massachusetts. Having previously covered the business ventures of these merchants turned textile mill owners and examined their philanthropy, we now turn in our 3rd episode to the 3rd chapter of the second part of the book “Enterprising Elite: The Boston Associates and the World They Made” by the late Robert F. Dalzell Jr (formerly a longtime professor of American Culture at Williams College), Harvard University Press, 1987. This chapter, and our final episode, covers the political alignments of the Boston Associates in Massachusetts and national politics in the period of roughly 1820 to 1860.

1. ...
2. ...
3. Political power
 - a. In private writing by the Boston Associates and in public speeches by their political agents, always top of mind was a resistance to class warfare and class division in the political and social spheres. They were concerned about the early signs of potential workers’ parties emerging across the Atlantic. Sectional divides within the US geographically were also to be papered over. Their political ideology was to promote harmony. (Yet again I’m seeing parallels between the capitalism and ideology of the Boston Associates and the Chinese Communist Party’s state capitalism...)
 - b. The preferred political vehicle of the Boston Associates (after the fall of the National Republicans) was the Whig Party, established at the end of 1833 in opposition to the controversial populist autocratic politics of Democratic President Andrew Jackson. The Whigs would come to prominence as a credible national political force in the aftermath of the Panic of 1837, which occurred under Democratic President Martin Van Buren. Whigs were completely dominant in Massachusetts politics – governors, legislators, Congressmen, and Senators – and they acted to protect the interests of major corporations like those owned by the Associates. Of the 283 Bostonians worth more than \$100,000, nearly 250 of them were Whigs, while 26 of the 27 millionaires in that category were Whigs. Not a single person categorized among the ranks of the Boston Associates was ever a Democrat during the Whig era, as far as any evidence has ever shown. (p.165)
 - c. The Boston Associates engaged in Whig politics through political contributions to the party, newspaper bankrolling with editorial control, and lobbying on policy. Nathan Appleton and Abbott Lawrence were high-level Whig Party leaders. This did not mean that the Whigs always supported the exact things the Associates were hoping for, however, because they still needed mass appeal in elections, and some of those policies weren’t popular (or at least weren’t salient) with the electorate.
 - d. In Massachusetts politics at least, the Whigs were the direct heir to a much longer political tradition back through the Federalists and even back through the colonial-era legislatures where some factions represented the interests of wealthy merchants and so on. The Colonial Governors and members of the Governor’s Council had usually been rich merchants at least in the 18th century when Puritan religiosity was less controlling of political and policy outcomes. The

function of the colonial government had been, and the independent Massachusetts government would subsequently continue in this role, to create and distribute special economic privileges and rights to specific merchants (and later to specific chartered corporations). The factions or political networks had arisen within this political arena to increase the chances of various associated friends and colleagues or merchants with common interests getting what they wanted at the expense of rivals and competitors. During the revolution, the new merchants typically backed independence in order to kick out the entrenched merchants who remained loyal. After independence, some wealthy factions had become Federalists, while other wealthy factions had embraced the Jeffersonian Republican opposition instead. As had played out in the lead up to the revolution, the latter typically were motivated by anger that they had lost out on the various distributions of privileges and monopolies after independence was secured. This pattern recurred over and over through the years, with old money rich guys supporting the status quo unfairness in their favor and the new money rich guys attacking these setups until the next crop of new money rich guys popped up to attack them in turn. Thus a two-party system remained strong or reappeared after transitional periods of weakness during reorganization of the factions and privileges. Additionally, both before and after independence, rural voters in and their representatives from farm country could be a decisive political force, often holding the balance of power between the rival merchant factions. The farmers on the one hand tended to favor conservative stability and the status quo, which would put them in alignment with old money coastal political factions, but on the other hand they tended to oppose some of the economic privileges of the same and rejected any authoritarian interferences in their lives, which thus put them into alignment with the new money coastal men. That meant a delicate balancing act for either side to appeal to them for decisive support.

- e. The most constant point of friction in New England between the interior yeoman farmers and the coastal men of banking and trade was that the latter refused to see that there was a severe shortage of money in circulation in the interior and routinely worsened the problem by expecting and demanding debts to be repaid in hard currency faster than was physically possible based on these rural circulations. This was a key cause of the infamous Shays' Rebellion, but it would remain a concern in the era decades later of the Suffolk Bank, which was discussed in our first episode on the Boston Associates. That Bank vacuumed up hard currency from farm country all across New England and brought rural paper currency into par with less widely accessible coastal paper currency notes. But on the other hand, it was a more moderate approach that treated that rural paper money at its face value, rather than steeply discounting it as other banks had traditionally done. Likewise the aftermath of Shays' rebellion had seen the state government and banks ease up on public debt payment schedules and so on, in order to reduce the rural tax burden after having sparked the revolt by insisting there could be no flexibility on these points.
- f. The Whig approach to reformism was moderation in all things. By offering modest but meaningful concessions and reforms, enough voters could be placated to maintain the broader status quo. But nothing radical to upset the apple cart could be contemplated, just as refusing to yield at all was recognized to be an unwise course because it would provoke mass unrest.
- g. The Massachusetts Whigs rejected the smoke-filled rooms of the Democratic Party, although they certainly had their own inner circle players too, in favor of state party conventions and town or county party committees. These local

committees, along with Whig newspapers, could communicate opinions from general party supporters across the state. (p.175) There was also a youth wing.

- h. Two major political issues in Massachusetts in the early 1830s destroyed the National Republican ruling party and paved the way for the emergence of the Whigs instead. First was the total collapse of organized state religion as the Congregationalists splintered into a traditional trinitarian minority and a unitarian majority. Official churches had a lot of property and resources associated with them collectively and it was a political problem how these should be redistributed. Second: Anti-Masonic conspiracy theories, which arguably represented a sublimated class resentment, were also becoming a political force to be contended with or accommodated. The National Republicans of Massachusetts tried to fight both change movements in favor of an unaltered status quo and were wiped out. The Whigs, with their fondness for making concessions to stabilize the situation, accepted the new religious disestablishment as a *fait accompli* and enthusiastically went about shutting down the Masons, even though many of the Boston Associates were themselves Unitarians and/or Masons. They then set about steering the Whigs and these swing voters onto safer terrain such as personal attacks on the alleged corruption, cronyism, and authoritarianism of the Democratic Party politicians as opposed to class conflict or other topics of social upheaval.
- i. The Democrats embraced competition over monopoly charters, generally, although they did not have a clear policy on big business. The Whigs tried to find a new moderate, compromise position that rejected monopolies but still enshrined certain corporate rights into law. (For example, patent protections or other temporary and limited monopolies, like those granted to railroads so they could try to recoup their construction costs in shipping fees.) “[Nathan] Appleton had no taste for lost causes. He also had a limited stake in monopoly rights, since most of his own resources were invested in the Waltham-Lowell system, which required no such protection. Indeed, as a group the Boston Associates had little to gain from insisting on the more grandiose features of vested-rights doctrine. It became, then, a matter of working out practical alternatives, ways of protecting the group’s interests that a majority of voters could be expected to approve.” (p.185) However, they did not support the movement for self-incorporation laws that would allow companies to be formed without specific legislative charters, and that particular debate dragged deep into the 1850s. This meant that even if there were no official anti-competitive practice happening in most corporate charters anymore, anyone seeking to form a corporation would still have to play ball with the powers that be and secure the expensive political connections and favors needed to win a charter from the state legislature, which de facto reduced the amount of competition outside of the well-connected Boston Associates network. (p.185) But they did support the 1830 reform of the Limited Liability Act to shield shareholders from most of the fallout of a corporate collapse. (p.186) That did somewhat increase the number of joint-stock corporations being chartered, but in general most industrial capitalist startups outside the Boston Associates remained small partnerships or sole proprietorships. Democrats who favored the emerging industrialization came to represent the interests of these smaller, less capitalized producers, while the Whigs openly championed the benefits of large-scale corporations in this new economy. (p.188)
- j. Whig legislatures eventually embraced direct state loans to and state share purchases in struggling railroad projects

- k. In contrast, the Whig governor during the Panic of 1837 allowed weaker banks to fail in favor of stronger Boston Associates-backed banks like the Suffolk and barely made any attempt to investigate the crisis or the causes of these collapses. The legislature blocked an effort to rein in the Suffolk Bank. They also easily shut down a Democratic governor's proposal to let basically anyone open a bank in Massachusetts with no restriction.
- l. Slavery:
 - i. Beginning around 1840, hard-line anti-slavery politics began slowly emerging as an increasingly salient issue for Massachusetts voters. Their local vehicle was a (western-New York-based) minor party called The Liberty Party. (p.190) The issue would increasingly agitate Massachusetts voters in the first half of the 1840s, as the possibility of annexation of slaveholding Texas into the United States became almost inevitable. (p.195) Later, voters so inclined, in much greater numbers, would join the Free Soil Party in 1848.
 - ii. This slow political shift posed a problem primarily for the Whigs because, although the Democrats were essentially already becoming a southern-dominated pro-slavery party, the Whigs were divided on the issue, with base voters and younger activists or candidates in places like Massachusetts being naturally hostile toward slavery and plantation owners, while the party leaders and financiers were often either growing rich from slave cotton or their families had become rich and powerful from participation in the slave trade historically. They also believed they needed enthusiastically pro-slavery candidates to have a shot at the presidency (p.221), to say nothing of obtaining the votes of pro-slavery Congressmen and Senators on import tariffs needed by Whig donors' factories. As an institution, the party was therefore extremely ambivalent on the issue on slavery – something which would eventually destroy the Whig Party, especially in Massachusetts.
 - iii. (As a side note I found on Wikipedia a note that [one of the Appleton cousins](#), who was outside the ranks of the Boston Associates and their huge wealth, was the 1842 Liberty Party nominee for Governor of Maine.)
 - iv. Eventual US House Speaker Robert Winthrop was an example of the incoherent slavery politics of Massachusetts Whig leadership, ferociously denouncing – his own wording was “uncompromisingly”– “the addition of another inch of Slaveholding Territory to this Nation” in the form of Texas annexation (p.195) but not actually supporting abolition where slavery already existed, which would in the end contribute to him taking L after L from Massachusetts voters and legislators in the 1850s and then also supporting General McClellan's 1864 presidential election bid against Abraham Lincoln. Classic Whig political suicide arc.
 - v. Lawrence Abbott was a firm opponent of the Whig Party embracing anything abolitionist. Many of the other Associates, however, were a bit more flexible, perhaps reading the political winds more effectively.
 - vi. At any rate the senior Whigs (including Boston Associates) who resisted Texas annexation moved on as soon as statehood was granted anyway, while the younger figures became increasingly hard-line and vocal against slavery anyway. (p.197)
 - vii. Members of the general public began finding themselves increasingly troubled by the obvious conflict of interest for cotton textile magnates on the slavery issue, using terms like “Cotton Whigs” or Conscience Whigs,”

especially after the anti-Texas Young Whigs clique in Massachusetts leaked letters from Abbott Lawrence and Nathan Appleton to Charles Francis Adams Sr., one of those Young Whigs (pp.197-198), who would eventually be a key diplomat in Abraham Lincoln's war effort.

- viii. The situation did not improve for the Whigs on the slavery issue when almost immediately after Texas statehood the US invasion of Mexico began and slavery expansion was clearly going to become a live question for many years to come. (p.198) Senior Whigs tried to stake out incoherent moderate centrist positions on the war itself, while the more junior Whigs found themselves absolutely unable to endorse the war or its implications.
- ix. Fanatical public opposition to the war in Charles Francis Adams' Whig newspaper would propel younger antislavery Whigs like Charles Sumner to national careers and ultimately out of the party, along with Adams himself, when the Free Soilers formed in 1848 after the war ended. Adams began relentlessly attacking the Boston Associates by name for their financial relationship to slave cotton (p.199). For more on this topic broadly, you should listen to friend of the show Patrick's January 2021 episode of his show "Conspiracy You Can Believe In" on the emergent public mass consciousness of the Slave Power Conspiracy's control of the antebellum United States:
<https://anchor.fm/conspiracy-believe-in/episodes/Episode-9-The-Slave-Power-ep8nv5>
- x. Eventually the party would split when the Whigs nominated Mexican War General Zachary Taylor, a pro-slavery southerner, for president in 1848, and Abbott Lawrence was a serious contender for Vice President until the anti-Slavery Massachusetts Whigs tanked his chances at the national convention as their Parthian shot before leaving altogether forever. Quitting the Whigs at last, former State legislator Charles Francis Adams became the Free Soil Party's Vice Presidential nominee. Adams evocatively and provocatively denounced the alliance "between the cotton-planters and flesh-mongers of Louisiana and Mississippi and the cotton-spinners and traffickers of New England – between the lords of the lash and the lords of the loom." (p.202) The Boston Associates were now firmly in the crosshairs or spotlight for their political power and their indifference at best on slavery.
 - 1. I think it is interesting to note that many of the key figures of the 1848 drama in Massachusetts Whig Politics were all from leading Boston dynasties, but once again not all these dynasties were Boston Associates. Adams, for example, was the son and grandson of the two US presidents, but that family was not in the Associates. Adams however was married to the daughter of a Boston Associate, Peter Chardon Brooks, a wealthy merchant. Another figure on his side of the party crackup was Congressman John G. Palfrey, a member of the Palfrey family, which is still a political dynasty in Massachusetts as recently as 2022, although his late mother had been a Gorham, a family which did include one Boston Associate.
 - 2. Taylor won the Whigs the presidency anyway on the strength of his personal brand but the party itself was headed for collapse now that the anti-slavery supporters had exited for good. Within

Massachusetts, the Free Soil candidate for governor in 1848 actually came second, ahead of the Democrat, and the Free Soil legislative candidates ended the Whig majority in the legislature. (p.205) The next year these Free Soilers would begin running in tactical alliances with the Democrats to maximize results. (p.206)

3. Adams seemed comfortable slightly embracing class warfare against the Boston Associates, criticizing his former political home as “the property party” (p.205), although he generally tried to hold the focus on the issue of slavery alone (p.206). Meanwhile Charles Sumner began attacking “the corruption of wealth” as a bigger danger than mob rule and specifically began making a target of “the tendency of the Commonwealth to consolidate wealth in corporations.” (p.206) Again, considering how unusual the corporate form remained in Massachusetts outside of the ranks of the Boston Associates, this was a fairly pointed shot, especially given his longstanding very close (but non-marital) personal ties to the Appletons. At this point some of the Associates and their political allies began to grow fairly concerned that “class prejudice” might actually become a serious threat that could not be overcome with patriotic appeals to national unity.
- xi. The Whig Party further signed its own death warrant by the party bigwigs and Webster getting firmly behind the Compromise of 1850, which included the explosively unpopular Fugitive Slave Act, requiring northern authorities and citizens to cooperate in apprehending and extraditing escaped southern slaves, which no northerner of any conscience at all could tolerate. Mass demonstrations erupted in Boston to protect escaped slaves and block the enforcement of the law. (Continuing not to read the situation with any acumen for survival, the Boston Associates warmly embraced the Fugitive Slave Act, with one – Amos A. Lawrence – even offering to personally assist in its enforcement. (p.211)) Only one new Massachusetts Whig Congressman, a Boston Associate himself, had actually voted for the package (p.207), with the failure of the rest to do so demonstrating a fairly clear collapse in institutional Whig control over their own remaining members. By the next year, the Whigs had been wiped out in Massachusetts altogether at the hands of the Free Soil-Democratic coalition. The Boston Associates had gone all hands on deck, pouring in their seemingly endless dollars, to try to prevent the coalition in the legislature from making Charles Sumner a US Senator, and they failed. In a ridiculous display, many Boston businessmen wore black armbands of mourning openly. (pp.207-208) Some people pointed out the irony that this result was only possible by a coalition between the anti-slavery Free Soilers and the consistently pro-slavery northern Democrats, but in the end as we all know Charles Sumner became known as an implacable leading opponent of slavery in the US Senate – and there were other issues in the Massachusetts economy and distribution of power that he grasped earlier than others were a point of common ground between Democrats and those inclined toward the anti-slavery cause. (pp.208-209) Whig whining about hypocrisy on the slavery question was never going to be an effective counter to voters and legislators with other economic concerns on their minds, which were often noticeably opposed by Whig funders. Those key players in the party appeared to have no interest in

answering the reality that dozens of reliably Whig-voting towns in rural Massachusetts were suddenly voting for Free Soil candidates in plurality, without even getting into tactical Democratic stuff. (p.209) Perhaps because these rich power players lived and worked in Boston, which continued voting Whig, they didn't fully grasp the seriousness of the situation outside of Boston in the rest of the state until it was too late...

- m. Random note: On pages 191-192, Dalzell appears to describe an ongoing pattern of bribery and gifts by many of the Boston Associates to Senator/Secretary of State Daniel Webster, the leading Massachusetts Whig, not so much to buy his votes but to placate him with tribute and shield him from his own money troubles, so that he would remain on side and also remain a contender for the presidency. Abbott Lawrence, once Webster's friend, ended up becoming a rival in Whig politics. On page 194, Dalzell references a scheme in 1845 whereby supporters of Webster's career were openly raising money in Massachusetts and New York to create an annual income fund for Webster, who was briefly between federal offices. I have no idea if this was common at the time for other politicians. In the US Senate Webster was the longtime leading champion of protective tariffs on imports of finished goods of the type being manufactured domestically by the Boston Associates. (pp.194-195) This tariff's political backing finally ran out, despite the Associates' preferences, in 1846. (p.194, 199)
- n. Nativism: In the episode on Boston Associates philanthropy, we covered how the sudden arrival in the 1840s of large numbers of Irish Catholic immigrants in Boston had changed the way charity and philanthropy was approached by wealthy Bostonians. But how did they respond politically via the Whig Party, which was also breaking up over the slavery issue?
 - i. Nativist anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic political reaction in Massachusetts began first in the areas outside of Boston, not in Boston itself where the immigrant slums were being established. This was a towns and countryside movement, not an urban movement. They also embraced temperance politics for various reasons, but linked this to their anti-Irish messaging among those reasons. (p.210)
 - ii. The Boston Irish themselves, quickly able to vote, eventually aligned with the Democrats, rather than the Whigs, but the Whigs were for now still the dominant party in Boston (p.210)
 - 1. There was a credible attempt, in 1852, to pivot the Whigs to being a pro-Irish, pro-alcohol party in Massachusetts, and they won the governorship for a single year, but in the long run it alienated prohibitionist or nativist Whigs outside of Boston. (pp.212-213)
 - 2. Abbott Lawrence deployed his money very liberally in mobilizing Irish Catholic votes and became close with the Bishop of Boston.
 - iii. In 1851 there was a battle over the state constitution to try to boost non-Boston representation and cut Boston's representation, reversing earlier balancings in the other direction. (p.210-211) This culminated in 1853 with immigrant voters in Boston tipping the state referendum against a constitutional amendment favoring the rest of the state at Boston's expense. (p.213) But again this short-term win simply opened the door for the shocking and infamous 1854 elections where the new Know-Nothings formation stormed to power in Massachusetts, winning control of the legislature, the governorship, and every US House seat in the delegation, on an anti-Irish, nativist platform that basically promised to defeat all the

- existing parties and for one year did just that. All but a few dozen Know-Nothing legislators elected had never held office before. (p.214)
- iv. Also back in 1851, the legislative coalition against the Whigs finally destroyed a key bulwark of Boston Associates policy, discussed earlier: they finally passed a law to allow self-incorporation without a special charter act of the legislature, making it much easier, faster, and cheaper for almost anyone to form a new corporation. (p.211)
 - v. Already in 1851, the writing was on the wall for the complete extinction of the Whig Party and its base of power in Massachusetts, and the Boston Associates seemed to not only have no idea how to fix it, but they didn't even seem to be able to understand that they needed to do something different if they wanted to survive in power! The 1851 Massachusetts Whig state convention adopted a resolution "that reform in whatever is bad, conservatism in whatever is good, progress for whatever is better, and economy in all things, are the cornerstones of Massachusetts Whig Policy." (p.212) By 1855, the Whigs got 10% of the vote in the state legislative elections.
- o. Abbott Lawrence had died just a few months prior. (p.214) Control of the effectively also now-dead Massachusetts Whig party passed to his nephew, the recent enthusiastic Fugitive Slave Act proponent who somehow still believed he could be an anti-slavery unionist, Amos A. Lawrence. (p.214) Suddenly realizing, with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and the end of the Missouri Compromise, that the north was about to become positively frenzied about the slavery question, Amos A. Lawrence suddenly pivoted hard against the Fugitive Slave Act and began putting his money into that cause and into the campaign to settle hard-line abolitionists from New England in the Kansas Territory in hopes of halting the spread of slavery there. (p.215) In short order he was buying rifles to send to Kansas anti-slavery settlers. That's why there is a Lawrence, Kansas, not just a Lawrence, Massachusetts. He also reconciled personally, if not politically, with Charles Sumner after the caning incident. Sumner had just helped establish the Massachusetts Republican Party – which was more comfortable with embracing free economic development and unrestrained industrial expansion than the Boston Associates had always resisted (pp.222-223) – and that was a wrap on the Whigs...
 - p. Several of the leading, remaining Boston Associates tried to form their own new "American Party" in opposition to the Republican Party, which they refused to join because they were committed to anti-sectionalism and by definition the Republicans were going to force the sectional crisis to a head (p.216). But the Associates were already declining in the money power that had previously underwritten their political power, and the Panic of 1857 meant that the idle rich mill owners of their ranks actually had to pay close attention to their struggling and increasingly uncompetitive mills, which had always been run more expensively than the lean, mean, small-capital mills flooding the market with competing textiles (p.217). None of these men were going to end the First Industrial Revolution with their wealth wiped out, but neither were they going to remain on easy street with set-it-and-forget-it profits rolling in every year. The Waltham-Lowell system had reached the end of its dominance, and they all knew it and acknowledged it at the time. Their era was over and the status quo had been overturned at long last. Plenty of other industries besides textiles were also springing up everywhere in Massachusetts now.

- q. The final political gasp of the Boston Associates was bankrolling – and providing the vice presidential candidate of – the idiotic and embarrassing Constitutional Union Party in the 1860 election, which after being organized in Boston, pulled less than 13% of the popular vote and just 39 electoral votes in 3 border states. As the Secession crisis unfolded in the months after that election, the Boston Associates tried to push for the so-called Crittenden Compromise to prevent Civil War. When that went nowhere, one of their most prolific investor members, Congressman William Appleton, then traveled on his own to South Carolina to try to negotiate a peace on his own before war might begin, and within hours of reaching Charleston the Firing on Fort Sumter had begun and he himself ended up telegraphing the breaking news to Boston from there. (pp.217-218)
- r. Notably Amos A. Lawrence, while regretting the war breaking out, did instantaneously leap to support the Union war effort, falling back on his knowledge from his part in the Bleeding Kansas pre-Civil War conflict (pp.218-219). I think this is worth mentioning because I'm not sure this position was shared by the wealthy elites of certain other major northern cities who did not support the war against the Confederacy.