

# Cincinnatus Popularized: The Heroization of William Henry Harrison during the Election Campaign of 1840

## Introduction

William Henry Harrison does not belong to the pantheon of American presidents. He is no Washington, Lincoln, or Kennedy. If he is remembered at all today, it is because he delivered the longest inaugural address and then served the shortest term of all presidents so far. During his almost two-hour-long speech, he caught pneumonia and died 31 days later. But if his presidency was thus rather uneventful, the campaign that preceded it was truly remarkable – not only because the expression “O.K.” emerged as a “political war cry” for Harrison’s opponent, Martin Van Buren, whose nickname was Old Kinderhook (Gunderson 234), or because “booze” was popularized as slang term for alcohol (Collins 99). Much more importantly, the campaign was a turning point in American politics: “Replete with party nominating conventions, campaign songs, torchlight parades, and overblown electioneering rhetoric, the Presidential campaign in 1840 set the standard for all elections to follow” (Watson 12). In fact, breaking with the principles of eighteenth-century republicanism that forbade presidential candidates to promote their own cause directly, Harrison eventually became an active part of the campaign and delivered various speeches in order to counter accusations of febleness and lay out his understanding of the office.

This transformation of campaign culture was the logical result of developments of the 1820s and 1830s. Under the presidency of Andrew Jackson, the right to vote spread “beyond the propertied elite” to all white men (Collins 93), so that candidates no longer had a small number of gentlemen to convince of their qualities, but had to appeal to masses of voters, most of whom belonged to the lower classes. Moreover, because of increasingly fierce opposition to Jackson’s

Democratic-Republican Party, a number of parties were founded during these years whose candidates ran against the Democratic-Republican ones in local, state, and national elections. During the early 1830s the Whig Party emerged over the outcry over Jackson’s war against the Bank of the United States, which many regarded as an act of “executive usurpation” and thus a violation of republican values (Watson 158). Initially, the Whig Party was only loosely organized and internally divided. In the presidential election of 1836, for example, it ran four candidates against Jackson’s vice president, Martin Van Buren, who therefore won comfortably. Under the impression of this defeat, the Whigs regrouped, ran only one candidate, Harrison, for the 1840 election, and defeated Van Buren after a campaign in which, as former president John Quincy Adams complained, “everything [...] reach[ed] a new level” (qtd. in Collins 94).

Anticipating the way in which, 160 years later, George W. Bush, the offspring of a wealthy New England family, would be transformed into a Texas rancher, General William Henry Harrison, the son of a Virginia planter who had signed the Declaration of Independence, was turned into a poor Western farmer who lived in a simple log cabin and enjoyed nothing more than a glass of hard cider. To remind voters of these characteristics constantly and to exploit the opportunities they offered, Whig campaign events invariably featured models of log cabins that were carried around by supporters or placed on floats, and enormous quantities of hard cider were given out for free. The Whigs’ enormous efforts to win and the Democrats’ equally organized attempt to retain the presidency mobilized voters to such an amazing degree that voter turnout increased dramatically from 58 percent in 1836 to 80.2 percent (Collins 113). Van Buren, who won only 60 electoral votes compared to Harrison’s 234, received almost 400,000 more votes than in the

previous election, which he had won (Peterson 29). The new forms of campaigning had truly mobilized the masses.

Because of the blatant rebranding of Harrison and the spectacle the Whigs orchestrated, most historians have not been kind in their evaluations of the campaign. Robert Gray Gunderson, who has studied it in more detail than any other scholar, concludes that the Whigs' electioneering was based on "a contemptuous evaluation of the intelligence of the people" (Gunderson 109), and Dorothy Burne Goebel argues similarly that the campaign was successful because it offered entertainment to people suffering from a "dearth of amusement" (Goebel 352). This assessment has proved so powerful that, in her recent biography of Harrison, Gail Collins still calls the campaign "one of the most ridiculous [ones] in history" and reiterates the claim that "the Whigs had no platform" (Collins 4, 89). This, however, is not true, as Harry L. Watson and Michael Holt, among others, have shown. As Holt puts it, "[The Whigs] constantly reminded voters that there was a depression, that the Democrats had caused it, that Van Buren argued that the government should do nothing about it, and that a Whig triumph was necessary to end it" (Holt, *Rise* 107). Moreover, "the salvation of liberty and republican self-government constituted the Whigs' second important theme. Their portrayals of Van Buren as a dissipated, effete monarch reminded voters that Democrats represented executive despotism" (ibid. 109). To offer an alternative, the Whigs "portrayed themselves as the party of probity, respectability, morality, and reason" (ibid. 118). All in all, then, the Whigs suggested that they were on "a crusade to save not only the prosperity but also the liberty and the morals of the people" (ibid. 109). Thus, Holt concludes that "the contention that there were no issues in the 1840 election is untenable" (Holt, *Election* 31): "Whigs did demonstrate real genius in generating enthusiasm for Harrison, but they deployed far more than hoopla" (Holt, *Rise* 90).<sup>1</sup>

In this essay I contend that "enthusiasm of Harrison" and the issues at stake were inextricably linked. I investigate how the representation of William Henry Harrison during the campaign served to communicate these issues, how, in other words, the values claimed and the promises made by the Whigs were embodied by the persona they constructed for their presidential candidate. I argue that Harrison was cast as the legitimate successor to George Washington and that he was heroized as a farmer-soldier in the tradition of the Roman Cincinnatus, to whom

Washington himself had frequently been likened since the 1790s. This specific heroization was crucial for the success of the campaign because it turned Harrison into a representative of exactly the republican values of disinterested politics and commitment to the common good that the Democrats had allegedly violated and that the Whigs claimed for themselves. His election thus held the promise of returning to these principles and remedying the corruption associated with Van Buren. Hence, Michael Holt's claim that "no matter who the Whigs ran for president in 1840, he was going to win because the presidential victory was simply a facet of a genuinely sweeping party victory" (ibid., *Election* 54) is exaggerated, to say the least. He is right that the Whigs did not only win the presidential election but triumphed throughout 1840 in local and state elections as well, but that was because Harrison provided a success formula for Whig candidates at all levels. Holt disregards that candidates at the state and local level fashioned themselves as Harrison did from 1839 onward. They could not claim heroism for themselves as they did for Harrison, but they sought to present themselves as embodying the same virtues that Harrison exemplarily represented. As Gail Collins has put it, "everybody was going *log cabin*" (Collins 96).

While it would be a valuable endeavour to investigate the appropriation of this specific habitus by other Whig candidates, the focus of this essay is much narrower. I restrict myself to the heroization of Harrison and concentrate on his representation in popular songs because they were arguably the most important element of the campaign. This popular form, I wish to argue, had a profound impact on the image of Harrison. He was projected as a Cincinnatus figure but not in the still rather aristocratic fashion of George Washington, who had been predominantly heroized in neoclassical poems. Instead, the Cincinnatus model was popularized in two different yet interrelated ways. First, the Roman roots of the heroic model were downplayed because many of the voters the Whigs were addressing were men without classical education. While there are songs and poems that explicitly mention the Roman hero, others do without this reference and simply project Harrison as a farmer who leaves the plough to do his duty. Second, the Cincinnatus model was popularized in that Harrison was not cast as a gentleman farmer, as Washington invariably was around 1800, but as a common farmer who was poor rather than rich. On the one hand, this 'simplification' must be understood as a conscious attempt to appeal to lower-class voters; on the other, it reflected a larger

cultural trend. Even Washington, as we will see, was increasingly imagined as a simple farmer during these years.

My argument unfolds in the following way. I begin by discussing the importance of popular songs for the campaign. While presidents and presidential candidates had been celebrated in songs from the 1790s onward, the campaign of 1840 was the moment where songs replaced poems as the prime medium of heroization. Having established this shift, I then turn to the heroization of Harrison, who was already considered a military hero prior to the campaign and thus lent himself to further heroization. I first discuss how some songs associated him with Andrew Jackson in order to attract disaffected Democratic supporters and then how a much larger number of songs linked him to Washington. Afterwards I explore in detail how Harrison was cast as a popularized Cincinnatus. A quick discussion of how Van Buren was represented in the songs will then lead me to the conclusion that it was Harrison's heroic image that gave the Whigs the mass appeal they needed to win the election.

### From Neoclassical Poems to Popular Songs

Looking back at the 1840 campaign a couple of years later, the editor of a Democratic journal remarked:

Some of the songs I shall never forget. They rang in my ears wherever I went, morning noon [sic] and night. [...] Men, women and children did nothing but sing. It worried, annoyed, dumbfounded, crushed the Democrats, but there was no use trying to escape. It was a ceaseless torrent of music, still beginning, never ending. (qtd. in Cleaves 326)

Putting it even more pointedly, Philip Hone, mayor of New York in the 1820s, whose diaries are a rich source for historians, wrote that Harrison "was sung into the Presidency" (qtd. in Gundersen 123). These and other observers highlighted the omnipresence and apparent impact of campaign songs because they were such a novelty. Collective singing had been an important part of the political rites of the republic since its inception, but in 1840 it reached a completely new level, as the number of campaign songs increased exponentially and the form became the dominant genre for the heroization of the candidate.<sup>2</sup> Before 1820, when there was, with the exception

of the clash between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans at the turn of the century, little competition between parties and little campaigning because suffrage was still limited, poems were much more important than songs for glorifying presidents or presidential candidates. They were published, usually anonymously, in one of the many local newspapers and then, if others found them appealing, reprinted in others. Often paratextual information suggested a melody to which the poem could be sung, but it was primarily intended to be read. As far as form is concerned, virtually all poems on presidents from that period follow neoclassical conventions. They are usually written in an elevated style and make frequent use of archaic words and phrases. Many of these poems can be classified as odes, and as is typical of this genre, apostrophes and exclamations abound, and so do references to the muses and to ancient history and classical mythology. The following poem, which was published in the *Political and Sentimental Repository* from Dover, New Hampshire, in June 1791, is representative of the form and content of these poems:

And thou, great WASHINGTON! immortal sage!  
Pride of the world! thou Phoenix of thine age!  
Whose awful name the tyrant dreads to hear,  
And startled envy drops the bloody spear,  
Say, can the Muse confess the rap'trous fire,  
Nor sound thy praises on the tuneful lyre?  
Thrice grateful task! thy God-like deeds to sing!  
What flowing numbers should adorn the string!  
When first from Britain's shore involv'd in blood,  
Black war rush'd vengeful o'er the billowy flood!  
When death, behind, display'd his horrid head,  
And the grim furies left their iron bed,  
Round these fair climes, where peace, unknown to arms,  
And freedom, sacred freedom spreads her charms;  
Hurl'd their black shafts from hell's unbounded store,  
And desolation crimson'd all the shore;  
Then WASHINGTON arose to grasp the shield,  
And flew like lightning to the gloomy field.  
The murd'rous crew, aghast, confess'd the alarm,  
Nor dar'd the vengeance of his wasting arm,  
Round every plain unerring fate he sends,  
And death turns traitor to pursue his friends,  
Peace reigns again: And see from smiling skies,  
Returning freedom to Columbia flies.  
Science comes down to wake her native fires,  
And WASHINGTON to Vernon's shades retires. (*Extract*)

Even when suffrage was gradually extended to finally include virtually all white men during the 1820s and 1830s, the neoclassical poem remained the dominant way to celebrate, and usually also heroize, presidents and presidential candidates. The reasons for this need to be

explored in a different essay, but it is remarkable that the vast majority of verse written on Andrew Jackson, who fashioned himself as a common man, is still rather traditional poetry. The 1828 *Ode, Prepared by the Chief Marshal for the Celebration of the 4th July at the Factory Village in Wilton, N.H.* exemplifies this tendency well, and it is also representative of presidential poetry (and songs) more generally in that it casts the new or future president, in this case Jackson, as the legitimate successor of the first president and greatest hero of American culture at that time, George Washington:

Hail godlike Hero [i.e., Washington]! Born to save!  
 Ne'er shall the deathless laurel fade,  
 But that brow eternal wave,  
 And consecrate blest Vernon's shade.  
 Thy spreading glories still increase,  
 Till earth, and time, and nature cease.  
     Oh, may that spirit on thee shed,  
 America's truest, noblest friend,  
 On thy successor's honor'd head  
 In copious, double showers descend;  
 This charge to JACKSON be consign'd,  
 Be thou the second of mankind! (l. 31-42)

In fact, poems written in this manner never entirely disappeared until the Civil War, but they became increasingly rare with the 1840 campaign. Only a handful of the 118 poems and songs on Harrison that I am familiar with are written in this fashion, among them *To Gen. Harrison*, which was originally published in 1836, when Harrison was one of several Whig candidates for the presidency, and then republished four years later. This poem still displays all the characteristics identified above. It begins as follows:

Stand up! thou time-worn veteran!  
 As proudly as of yore,  
 When o'er thy country's banner,  
 Portentous clouds did lour:  
     When the life-blood of her gallant sons  
 Stained many a flowery plain,  
     And "the stars and stripes" were waving o'er  
 Old ocean's stormy main! (l. 1-8)

The vast majority of texts on Harrison, however, are songs that differ markedly from such traditional poetry because they use simple and often repetitive vocabulary and paratactic syntax; each stanza is usually only a few lines long and followed by a refrain. Moreover, they were usually sung to familiar melodies and were thus probably easy to memorize (Goebel 348-349; Gunderson 25). The *Harrison Song*, for example, was sung to the tune of *Yankee Doodle*:

Come, here's a health to Harrison,  
 The old Log Cabin farmer;  
 When he commands the ship of State,  
 The Tories cannot harm her.  
 Chorus: Yankee Doodle fill a mug,  
 A pewter mug of cider;  
 When he commands our gallant ship,  
 No evil can betide her.  
     Old Tip's the man, we guess as how,  
 The people all unite in,  
 He SAVED them true in Council Hall,  
 He SAVED them well in fightin'.  
 Chorus, &c.  
     When Washington sent Wayne out west  
 The war to put an end on't,  
 He took young William by the hand,  
 And made him first Leftenant [sic].  
 Chorus, &c. (l. 1-18)

What is more, unlike the few songs on Jackson, with which they have a lot in common in terms of form, the Harrison songs were usually published neither in newspapers nor on broadsheets but in "songsters" – cheaply printed books of usually 40 to 140 pages that assembled dozens of songs on Harrison, vice presidential candidate John Tyler of Virginia, and the Whig Party more generally. Songsters had been made possible, that is, affordable, by advances in print technology such as the invention of the "rotary steam press in 1830" (Watson 27), and the Whigs were the first to use them to collect political songs (Collins 97). Their successful heroization of Harrison was undoubtedly eased, and to a certain degree made possible, by the widespread distribution of their campaign songs in songsters such as *The Log Cabin & Hard Cider Melodies*, *The Tippecanoe Song Book*, or *Songs for the People*. At the same time, the existence of these songsters testifies to the enormous appeal of the Whig campaign, at whose center stood the figure of Harrison. His heroization followed established patterns – the song just quoted links "young William" by way of alliteration to Washington, just as the traditional ode quoted earlier associates Jackson with the first president – but it also transformed them. Before I turn to this popularization on the level of content, though, it is necessary to quickly sketch the image of military heroism that Harrison already brought to the campaign and to discuss the various links that songs constructed between him and Andrew Jackson and George Washington.

## The Hero of Tippecanoe

General William Henry Harrison was an attractive candidate for the Whig Party in 1840 for two reasons. First, he agreed with all major positions that the Whigs assumed in this campaign: “Voters could deduce from his [Harrison’s] history and public comments that he believed in economic development, federal road projects, and public schools, and that although he would never celebrate slavery he would never do anything to restrict it either” (Collins 111). Second, Harrison “possibly could be made to fit the hero-candidate concept” popularized by Andrew Jackson (Peterson 17), who was the first presidential candidate since Washington to have had a significant military career prior to his political one and who could thus be cast as a legitimate holder of the office that was still powerfully associated with Washington. In fact, military heroism had been an integral part of Harrison’s public persona since the 1810s.

On November 7, 1811, troops led by Harrison remained victorious in what became quickly known as the Battle of Tippecanoe against a tribe of Native Americans living in what was then the Indiana Territory. The tribe was rumored to be in league with the British, who, in violation of the Treaty of Paris, still had troops in this area. The victory was, by any definition, not at all heroic, as Harrison, who did not think that the Indians would attack his camp during the night, was caught by surprise when they did so. Only when the sun went up did his troops manage to win the upper hand against an opponent vastly inferior in terms of numbers and equipment. After they had repelled the attack, the Americans destroyed the tribe’s village. As so often, however, facts mattered little, and the label “Tippecanoe” quickly came to represent not a minor fight but “all the Indian wars and the War of 1812 combined” (Collins 101). Harrison’s fame spread rapidly throughout the country and was confirmed when he defeated an actual alliance of British and Native American troops led by Colonel Proctor and Chief Tecumseh in the Battle of the Thames in 1813 (ibid. 55). As a consequence, by the late 1810s “William Henry Harrison was a military hero second only to Andrew Jackson in the nation’s heart” (ibid. 56) and was glorified in poems such as 1817’s *The Hero of the West*.

Unsurprisingly, the Whigs tried to capitalize on this image during the 1840 campaign. His military achievements were invariably mentioned by all campaign speakers (Gunderson 119) and

usually held up against the alleged cowardice of Van Buren, who, as the satirical *Little Vanny* put it, “never was seen in battle” (l. 5). In turn, Democratic campaigners sought to undermine Harrison’s heroism by offering alternative but hardly more truthful accounts of the battles of Tippecanoe and the Thames (Gunderson 222), but the notion of Harrison’s military heroism was so firmly rooted in the public mind that they had no chance to shake it. The nickname “Old Tippecanoe” was quickly established for Harrison early in the campaign and functioned until its end as a constant reminder of his military exploits without spelling them out.

Probably because the Whigs could take Harrison’s military heroism for granted, his deeds are addressed explicitly in only a few campaign songs. Frequently, though, they are implicitly evoked by references to him as “Old Tippecanoe”. For example, the first lines of *Tippecanoe – A Sucker Song*, which was sung to the tune of *Bonnets of Blue*, declare: “The people are rising in might; / They have taken the ‘second thought’, too; / Reform is their watch-word, their banners unfurled, / And they point to old Tippecanoe” (l. 1-4). The actual battle is never described, but by the end of the third stanza Harrison has become “the Hero of Tippecanoe” (l. 24), and the song ends with the affirmation “We’ll stand by the Hero, who periled his life, / At the Battle of Tippecanoe” (l. 47-48).

One of the few songs that provides a narrative of his time as a soldier and thus actively heroizes Harrison in this regard is *Bold Tippecanoe* from the *Tippecanoe Song Book*. This song describes all major battles in which Harrison participated in great detail. The stanza about Tippecanoe, then, makes the purpose of this heroization impossible to miss, as it projects Harrison as “Commander-in-Chief! at the head of his men, / He marches to meet the fierce savage again” (l. 23-24). Another song that centers on his military exploits is *Oh, Say, Who Is He?* from the same songster. This song, though, does not offer a narrative of events but focuses on Harrison’s heroic persona, and, highlighting atmosphere and character, casts him as the protector of women and children, who, among other heroic deeds, “restores, gaily smiling, her babe to [a mother’s] arm” (l. 14). Significantly, *Oh, Say, Who Is He?* was sung to the melody of *The Star-Spangled Banner*, whose original text celebrates the heroic resistance of American soldiers to British troops during the siege of Fort McHenry in the War of 1812. Combining a melody associated with the fight against the British with lyrics that glorify

Harrison's deeds in the Indian Wars projects the presidential candidate as somebody who has always fought on all fronts for Americans' rights and liberty and will continue to do so in the future. Even the songs that revel in Harrison's military heroism of the past, then, do so to underline his claim to the presidency in the present.

## A New (and Better) Jackson

Slightly more frequently than explicitly highlighting Harrison's military deeds, the campaign songs forge a connection between Harrison and former president Andrew Jackson, as whose vice president Harrison's opponent, Martin Van Buren, had served before he was elected president. It is highly probable that songs that created such a link were employed specifically in those parts of the country where voters were skeptical about Van Buren but still admired Jackson. Aware that many small farmers, middle-class planters, workers, and Westerners in general would likely vote for the Democrats "because of a strong personal devotion to General Jackson" (Gunderson 9), the Whigs attempted to fashion Harrison as the true successor of Jackson for this part of the electorate. In fact, "[Harrison's] similarity to the Jackson of 1824 and 1828 made him particularly appealing to Westerners and Antimasons" and thus had been a major factor in his choice as a candidate in the first place (Holt, *Rise* 41). Once he had been selected, the Whigs tried to nickname him "Old Buckeye" in order to associate him in the minds of voters with Jackson, who was generally known as "Old Hickory" (Collins 94-95). Since this attempt failed and the name did not stick, songs and poems took over the function of linking the two.

Quoting 2 Corinthians 6:17 and thus casting the supporters of Van Buren as sinners, the twelfth stanza of *Old Tippecanoe*, for example, declares: "Among the supporters of brave General Jackson, / There are many Republicans, honest and true, / To such we say 'come out from among them', / And 'go it for' Tyler and 'Tippecanoe'" (l. 45-48). In similar, but more secular fashion, *Our Own Cincinnatus* appeals to "noble Conservatives", in this case a clear reference to the Democrats (l. 22), to join "the old and young Whigs of the nation" in "rally[ing] around with proud exultation, / The Hero of Tippecanoe" (l. 21, l. 23-24). The *Song of the Old Jackson Men* even assumes the perspective of a group of Jackson supporters who are highly critical of Democrats who question Harrison's military heroism and

slander him because of his allegedly humble lifestyle: "His enemies call him a coward, / And sneer at his poverty to, / But a true-hearted Jackson-man never, / Will slander the brave and the true" (l. 5-8). Unsurprisingly, the song goes on to celebrate his poverty, to confirm his heroism, and to contrast his and Jackson's military service with Van Buren's behaviour. Reminding singers and listeners that Van Buren did not fight in the War of 1812, the song aligns Jackson and Harrison when it says about the incumbent: "He shirked it off on to brave Jackson, / And the Hero of Tippecanoe" (l. 19-20).

Campaign poems, too, tried to win the votes of Jackson supporters. Employing the same rhetorical strategy as *Song of the Old Jackson Men*, *The Last Loco Foco's Lament* assumes the perspective of a Van Buren supporter who has to admit that "my friends and companions of 'Hickory' days, / All too are singing these new-fangled lays" and who eventually decides to turn Whig (l. 15-16; emphasis in the original). Harrison must be the true heir to Jackson, the poem thus suggests, because he is acknowledged as such by many Jackson supporters. The poem *The Difference*, finally, which compares the "little king" Van Buren (l. 7), once more unfavourably to the soldier Harrison, pretends to have been written by "A thorough-going Jackson man – but no Van Burenite."

It is important, however, not to overemphasize the tendency to construct explicit connections between Harrison and Jackson. Only a handful of the more than hundred songs and poems written about Harrison for the campaign actively forge this link. The overwhelming majority does not mention Jackson at all and focuses on Harrison only or compares him to Van Buren. The strategy behind this is obvious. The Whigs were, after all, campaigning for votes not only from those who had voted for Jackson in two elections but also from those who had always objected to him. Thus, to generally fashion Harrison as Jackson's true heir would have been counterproductive. It made far more sense to heroize Harrison in a fashion that allowed supporters of Jackson to see him as a copy of their idol and opponents to see him as somebody who had much in common with Jackson but lacked his alleged dictatorial tendencies (Peterson 17). In this regard, linking Harrison to George Washington was crucial because Washington was admired by everyone. To supporters of Jackson it signaled that, like the Tennessean before him, Harrison would uphold the republican principles associated with Washington,<sup>3</sup> and to Jackson's

opponents it promised a return to these principles after they had been corrupted by Jackson and Van Buren.

## A New Washington

It is of course hardly surprising that the Whigs tried to associate Harrison with George Washington. The first president had been the young nation's towering hero since its inception, he had defined what Americans expected of a president, and as party competition increased during the first half of the nineteenth century, he became, as Vivien Green Fryd has put it, "a central symbol of unity" (Fryd 66). Consequently, "His successors tried to cast themselves in the same image" and invariably were cast by their supporters in this fashion (Watson 7). The Whigs did this through a variety of rituals, for example by drinking first to the people, then to Washington, and then to Harrison when the time for the formal toasts which were an important part of Whig gatherings during the campaign had come (Gunderson 139), thereby implicitly aligning the two and casting their candidate as Washington's successor. The Democrats undoubtedly did the same for Van Buren, but for a variety of reasons, Harrison could be particularly successfully projected by the Whigs as the "next Washington", as both *The Hero of Tippecanoe* (l. 107) and *Ye Whigs of Colombia* (l. 25) put it.

To begin with, there were parallels in their military careers. Both Washington and Harrison had been involved in battles against both the Indians and the British. Washington had fought first the Indians during the French and Indian War and then the British during the War of Independence, while Harrison encountered a combined force of both in the Battle of the Thames. Indeed, the War of 1812, of which the battles at the Thames and Tippecanoe were part, was widely regarded as a repetition of the first conflict with Great Britain, as a Second War of Independence (Collins 49), and hence the "Hero of Tippecanoe" could be made to appear as a veritable copy of the first president, as a second Washington.

What is more, the Whigs highlighted a direct link between Washington and Harrison: "When William Henry expressed a willingness to join the military, President George Washington himself signed off on the commission" because he knew and respected Harrison's father (Collins 13). Various songs emphasize this connection to legitimize Harrison's claim to the presidency.

While the poem *The Hero of Tippecanoe* published in the *Haverhill Gazette* simply reports that "young Harrison joined the brave Anthony Wayne [another Revolutionary War hero as whose aide-de-camp Harrison served in 1793], / For Washington sent him their rights to maintain" (l. 29-30), other songs credit Washington with not only approving of the commission but playing a more active role in the making of Harrison. *Our Own Cincinnatus*, for example, merges the beginnings of Harrison's time in the army with his most famous victory, thus suggesting that Washington enabled Harrison to become a hero: "When Washington made him an ensign, / To Wayne's gallant army he flew; / And won for himself the proud title – / The Hero of Tippecanoe" (l. 5-8). The effort to represent Harrison as somebody who is exactly like the heroes of the War of Independence comes to the fore here particularly pointedly.

A third parallel that Whig songs and poems repeatedly stress is that Harrison was, like Washington, born in Virginia. This is remarkable insofar as, apart from that, the campaign consistently presented him as a Westerner. That it acknowledges his real origins in order to link him to the first president shows how crucial this association was for success. The argument that songs that emphasize Harrison's Virginian heritage make in different degrees of explicitness is that the spatial proximity of their birthplaces proves that their characters and values are identical. This idea is most obvious in the rather traditional poem *The Hero of Tippecanoe*, which also credits Harrison's father with instilling the right values in him:

He was born very near to the same spot of earth  
That gave the illustrious Washington birth;  
His father is one of the patriots dead  
Who declared Independence at risque [sic] of his head,  
And early held up to his son's imitation  
The Sage of Mount Vernon, the pride of the nation,  
And formed the man for a patriot true,  
A statesman and hero of Tippecanoe. (l. 11-18)

In these lines, the repetition of the word "patriot" condenses the values that Harrison, a "statesman and hero", embodies – values that are exactly those that Washington stood for. In similar fashion, the song *The Voice of Virginia* describes Harrison as "worthy of our country's sire" (l. 15), and this "sire" is of course Washington. Later, the song reiterates this point by declaring that in Virginia "our honored Harrison, / Like the sainted Washington, / Honest hearts has proudly won" (l. 21-23). By contrast, the *Gathering Song*

associates not only Harrison with Washington but also their respective opponents when it states in the third stanza: “The Locos [a derogatory term for the supporters of Van Buren] combine with their *friends*, British Tories, / To tarnish the fame of Virginia’s son: / They slander the name of our Hero victorious, / And carp at the glory which Harrison won” (l. 17-20). The claim that Van Buren had British allies was of course wrong, but it was effective as it cast the upcoming election as a repetition of the War of Independence and thus underlined the idea that Harrison was a second Washington. Arguably most important in this regard, however, was that Harrison was like Washington presented as a Cincinnatus.

### Cincinnatus and Cider

Since the newly founded United States self-consciously modelled itself after the Roman Republic and its values, the figure of Cincinnatus – the Roman statesman who left his plough when called to help his countrymen and resigned immediately after the invasion had been defeated – served as a template for many of the American republic’s heroes from the start. As Garry Wills has demonstrated in great detail, George Washington was widely hailed as the American Cincinnatus because he did not strive for power but stepped down voluntarily both as commander of the Continental Army and later as president and returned to private life in Mount Vernon twice. Since Harrison had also resigned his commission and returned to his farm near North Bend, Ohio, after the War of 1812 and had only left it since then to serve as a member of Congress and first governor of Indiana for a couple of years, his story lent itself to being heroized according to the Cincinnatus model.

Hence, during the 1840 campaign countless speakers cast him in this role (Watson 217), and he fashioned himself accordingly. In effect, he assumed this pose as early as 1838, when he repeatedly declared during a speaking tour that “he was not [...] responsible for being in the position of a Cincinnatus who might be called to leave the plow for the presidency” (Goebel 333). Even two years later when he broke with tradition and campaigned himself, Harrison managed to uphold this pose to a certain degree by pledging himself to a single term and talking about the necessity to curb executive power (ibid. 364). He thus violated the republican principle of self-restraint that Cincinnatus stood for, but did so in order to promote other republican values also associated with the Roman. In fact, he

maintained the Cincinnatus posture even during his inaugural address, which began with the words “Called from a retirement” (qtd. in Collins 120).

Harrison, then, presented himself as a classical Cincinnatus, but this is not how he was predominantly projected throughout the campaign, especially not in songs and poems. There is only one poem I am aware of, *Old Tippecanoe*, which uses a traditional form, a variety of references to antiquity, and conventionalized images such as the laurel to cast Harrison as a Cincinnatus in the classical fashion:

Let Greece praise the deeds of her great Alexander  
And Rome boast of Caesar and Scipio too;  
Just like Cincinnatus, that noble commander,  
Is our old Hero of Tippecanoe.

For when the foes of his country no longer could harm her,  
To the shades of retirement he quickly withdrew;  
And now at North Bend see the honest old farmer,  
Who won the green laurel at Tippecanoe.

[...]

And now from Retirement the People doth call him,  
Because he is Honest and Qualified too;  
And for One Term they soon will install him  
As President – “Hero of Tippecanoe.” (l. 21-28 and 33-36)

Apart from this text, however, the campaign poems and songs, in accordance with their popular forms, also project a popularized version of Harrison-as-Cincinnatus. Depicting him not as a gentleman farmer but as a poor yeoman who lives in a simple log cabin and drinks not wine but hard cider, they represent him in a fashion familiar from renderings of Washington-as-Cincinnatus at that time.

As Karsten Fitz has shown, the yeoman farmer became a “republican symbol” during the antebellum period for the simple reason that, since more than two-thirds of Americans worked in agriculture in 1840, the idea of “the democratic yeoman farmer was based upon reality” (Fitz, *Personification* 320). This development also affected representations of Washington, who was, particularly in drawings and illustrations, increasingly depicted as a farmer (Fitz, *American* 101-10). Whereas the Early Republic imagined him as a Cincinnatus who returned to private life in Mount Vernon, he was now envisioned as performing manual labor there himself. Since “the most central symbol for [the] agrarian philosophy [of republicanism] was the plough”, various images from this period show Washington using one (Fitz, *Personification* 319). Such depictions of course “completely ignored” that Washington



“was one of the wealthiest men in Virginia” and almost certainly never worked in the fields himself (Fitz, *American* 107, 106). Historical accuracy, however, did not matter; what mattered was that such images performed an “approximation of Washington to the common man” (ibid. 103).

Fitz’s examples are mostly taken from the 1840s and 1850s. It is therefore quite possible that the transformation of Washington’s image as Cincinnatus that he observes was at least partly fuelled by the way in which Harrison was represented during the campaign of 1840. As with Washington, the contradictions between image and reality were ignored and Harrison’s rather luxurious mansion on his 160-acre farm near the village of North Bend, fourteen miles from Cincinnati, was turned in visual and verbal representations into a humble log cabin. It is unclear, though, if Whig strategists intended to project Harrison as poor from the beginning or if they only recognized the opportunity after a Democratic newspaper slighted Harrison after his nomination and involuntarily provided the Whigs with the major symbols of the campaign: the log cabin and hard cider. “Give him a barrel of hard cider, and settle a pension of two thousand a year on him”, the newspaper quoted a disaffected supporter of Henry Clay, who had hoped to win the Whig nomination for himself, “and my word for it, he will sit the remainder of his days in his log cabin” (qtd. in Gunderson 74).

In any case, the Whigs quickly recognized the opportunity this sneer offered. Not only did the image of the simple log cabin candidate allow them to represent Harrison as a disinterested republican, a veritable Cincinnatus, who was without personal ambition but would heed the people’s call; moreover, as hard cider was a simple beverage that carried associations of poverty and domesticity (Watson 224), they could present Harrison as a common man and thus appeal to poorer voters – exactly the parts of the electorate, that is, that the Whigs had so far never won over. As Gunderson puts it, “In dramatizing their devotion to log cabins and hard cider, Whig strategists gave belated acquiescence to the principle that political success was dependent upon support of the masses, many of whom were newly enfranchised” (Gunderson 108). As a consequence, “Stories of his poverty and his love of farm work were widely circulated” (Goebel 350). And as songs were a good way to reach these masses, countless Whig campaign songs spread the image of Harrison as a Cincinnatus who was poor, ploughed his own fields, and drank nothing but hard cider.

Some of these songs still feature the name “Cincinnatus”, which indicates that it carried meaning even for the lower classes, to which these songs were geared. Indeed, the possessive pronoun in the title *Our Own Cincinnatus*, sung to the popular melody of *Rosin the Bow*, shows the appropriation of the model by exactly this group. The Cincinnatus narrative, though, is not taken up at all in the song and not explicitly applied to Harrison, who is celebrated, however, for always serving his country when needed. Constructing a strict binary between the rich elite and the rest of the people, the song, like countless others, claims that Harrison is the candidate of the people because he is one of them: “They say he lives in a log cabin, / And loves to drink hard cider too; / For this they are gravely opposing / The Hero of Tippecanoe” (l. 29-32). Exactly the same argument is made in *Should Good Old Cider Be Despised?*, which was sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* and in which the symbolic meaning of hard cider is even more pronounced. The lines “We’ve tried your purse-proud lords who love / In palaces to shine; / But we’ll have a ploughman President / Of the Cincinnatus line” (l. 17-20) once again project Harrison as a simple farmer who has a lot in common with the people and nothing with those who rule them at the moment and who, like his Roman predecessor, will leave his fields to do his duty. The following lines, “For old North Bend, my boys, / For old North Bend, / We’ll take a mug of cider yet / For old North Bend” (l. 21-24), then make the drinking of hard cider an affirmation of the values Harrison allegedly stood for and an articulation of support for him.<sup>4</sup>

The overwhelming majority of songs and poems, however, celebrate Harrison for displaying the virtues usually associated with Cincinnatus without ever using this name. In *The Reason Why*, for example, a father answers his son’s question “why men shout / So loud for HARRISON?” (l. 1-2) by emphasizing Harrison’s republican rejection of personal power: “Now this great man, whose name you hear / Proclaimed by every one [sic], / Has wielded power almost as great / As many kings have done; / And yet he never swerved a hair / From honor’s strictest laws; / He thought it recompense enough / to fight in Freedom’s cause” (l. 21-28; emphasis in the original). The same point is made in the song *The Hero of Tippecanoe*:

But,— did not this Harrison so rule the West,  
As, (like men now in office) to feather his nest?  
No, no; though he might, like some in high stations,  
By taking advantage in land speculations,

Have made himself rich – he resisted the charm,  
 And owns nothing more than a snug little farm,  
 He's a good, honest man, and a patriot true,  
 As well as the hero of Tippecanoe. (l. 83-89)

By contrast, the *Harrison Song*, to give one final example, stresses Harrison's readiness to leave his farm again when the people call for his help:

He is the people's candidate,  
 Because he is a farmer,  
 Should he ascend the chair of State,  
 He'll buckle on his armor,  
 And like a valiant patriot  
 He will commence his work, sir,  
 And with kind words defend his cause  
 Without the help of dirks, sir.  
 O log cabins – log cabins and hard cider,  
 O log cabins – old Tip will tap the cider. (l. 11-20)

In this stanza, the Cincinnatus echoes are particularly pronounced. The line “He'll buckle on his armor” has Harrison prepare for the execution of the office of president in the same fashion in which the Roman Cincinnatus must have prepared to fight the invasion that threatened his republic. And, again, the refrain focuses on the central symbols of the campaign, this time even imagining Harrison himself distributing the cider, while the first two lines of the stanza, “He is the people's candidate, / Because he is a farmer”, articulate a central tenet of republicanism. The same tenet is at the center of the argument made in the sixth stanza of *Gathering Song*, which simultaneously forges a connection between Washington and Harrison: “Mount Vernon once gave us a farmer to save us– / His mantle, when dying, he left at North Bend; / While Harrison wears it, no foe shall enslave us– / From Tyrants and Despots he still will defend” (l. 41-44). In fact, this idea – that Harrison is the right candidate and will do the right things as president because he is a simple farmer and will return to the farm after he has done his duty – can be considered the smallest common denominator in the heroization of Harrison. It is the part of the Cincinnatus model that is invariably retained even if all others are stripped away – because it allowed the Whigs to present Harrison as the exact counterpart of much-disliked incumbent Martin van Buren.<sup>5</sup>

### Heroic Farmer vs. Corrupt King

The Whigs' success in the election of 1840 hinged on the heroic persona they managed to

construct for William Henry Harrison. As I have demonstrated, Harrison was not only hailed as a military hero, but also as a Cincinnatus, as a farmer who would not cling to power but only use his position for the benefit of the people. Most importantly, though, he was projected as somebody whose heroic deeds were an integral, albeit exceptional, part of a life most voters were familiar with. He was successfully cast as “The People's Presidential Candidate”, as one campaign broadsheet's headline proclaimed (*People's*). He was not only hailed as a “Hero Farmer”, as the chorus of *Our Hero Farmer* repeatedly does, but also “a *brother farmer*”, as in *Harrison* (l. 52).

This heroization resonated with the electorate and lent credibility to the Whigs' claim that their administration would successfully tackle the effects of the economic depressions of 1837 and 1840 (Holt, *Rise* 108). The Whigs often wore badges and carried banners that declared Harrison to be the “Poor Man's Friend” or promised roast beef for everyone once Harrison was president (Gunderson 117, 141, 221). They also sought to firmly anchor this notion in the minds of the people by widely circulating stories of how he welcomed visitors, often veterans or men of the church, to his farm in North Bend, treated them kindly, and shared what little he had with them to remedy their more pressing poverty (Collins 86). Such anecdotes, which functioned as symbolic promises of how he would take care of all of the nation's poor once he was president, were also taken up in songs. For example, *One Poor Soldier More* claims first in general fashion that “if he [Harrison] has but one drink of hard cider in store, / The poor soldier gets it who stops at his door” (l. 10-11) and then exemplifies this by relating the melodramatic story of how a crippled veteran – “A poor wooden leg with the stump of an arm” (l. 14) – knocks on Harrison's log cabin in “a dark winter's storm” (l. 13) and how the presidential candidate takes care of him.

This strategy was effective for two reasons. First, the heroization of Harrison was combined with constant reminders that the Democrats' decision not to interfere with the economy, and especially their anti-banking stance, “would prostrate the state's banking and credit system” and thus “destroy[] the credit poor men needed so badly” (Holt, *Rise* 108). Second, the Whigs further disqualified this political position by depicting President Martin Van Buren as corrupt, effeminate, and unrepugnant, as a tyrant who did not care about the suffering of the people. Congressman Charles Ogle's speech “The Royal Splendor of

the Presidential Palace” set the tone for this accusation early in the campaign. Its title already casts Van Buren as a king and thus as the ultimate nemesis of republicanism. The speech revelled in a minute, albeit completely imaginary, description of the riches that Van Buren had allegedly amassed in the White House, finally adding insult to injury by claiming that in the garden there had been hills constructed, “every pair of which ... was designed to resemble ... an amazon’s bosom, with a miniature knoll or hillock on its apex, to denote the n—pple” (qtd. in Gunderson 103). Articulating a tenet of republican ideology, that political and moral corruption are inextricably linked (Butter 44-49), Ogle’s speech represents Van Buren as the very opposite of what Harrison was said to stand for: heroism, manliness, decency, honesty, and frugality. As Gil Troy puts it, “the Whigs were as effective fitting Martin Van Buren into the Republic’s demonology as they were fitting William Henry Harrison into its pantheon” (Troy 26).

Countless songs and several poems contributed to the construction of this dichotomy, either by focusing on Van Buren alone or by contrasting his deficiencies with Harrison’s virtues. For example, the song *Hail to Old Tippecanoe* imagines “Van Buren sit[ting] in his marble hall, / And liveried slaves come forth at his call” (l. 1-2). Like King Belshazzar he dines in “royal state” with “golden fork and spoon” (l. 10, 12) and ridicules his opponents until a “handwriting appear[s] on the wall” (l. 18) and announces the end of his reign. Other texts have a slightly different emphasis and cast Van Buren as entirely effeminate. *Little Vanny* highlights that “he was never seen in battle, / [...] His nerves would be shocked with the rattle / Of a contest like Tippecanoe” (l. 1, 3-4) and even imagines him in a “silk stocking” (l. 17). In this song, the contrast to Harrison is only implied, but it is made explicit in many others, for example in *The Hero of Tippecanoe* (which is not to be confused with the poem of the same title that I quoted earlier), which constructs binaries between East and West, luxury and hardship, and self-indulgence and public service.

While Martin, well salaried, peacefully shone,  
Embosomed in charming repose,  
And with white cambric handkerchief wet with cologne,  
Delighted his delicate nose—  
In the far west, on the red battle-ground,  
Where the savage war-whoop and the canon resound,  
Oh! where was bold Harrison then to be found?  
“At the battle of Tippecanoe!” (l. 17-24)

Another text that capitalizes on the supposedly clear-cut differences between Harrison and Van Buren is the poem *New Year’s Address*, published in the *Connecticut Courant* in January 1841, that is, after the election but before the inauguration. It reiterates almost all accusations first made by Ogle, accusing “royal Van” (l. 23) of residing in “rich and lordly halls” (l. 60) and occupying the “nation’s throne” (l. 67), before celebrating Harrison’s virtues and congratulating the people for placing him now “in honor’s seat” (l. 91). Using the same imagery, the poem *Soliloquy of Mr. Van Buren*, in which he laments his inevitable defeat, has Van Buren refer to his “throne” (l. 5). The monarchical associations thus evoked contrast markedly with the republican connotations of *Harrison and Victory’s* appeal to place the hero of Tippecanoe in “the great Washington’s chair” (l. 8) and the celebratory concluding confirmation of the sonnet *To President Harrison, on His Inaugural Address* that “the seat of Washington is thine” (l. 14). That both the popular song and the sonnet use the same imagery and link Harrison to Washington shows once again that his heroic persona appealed to all parts of the electorate because it promised a return to the republican principles associated with Washington.

The Whigs, then, were successful in the campaign of 1840 because they finally managed to appeal to all kinds of voters. While they were, as in previous elections, particularly successful among “the economic and social elite”, they did well enough among artisans in the East and farmers in the West to secure a vast majority in the Electoral College (Holt, *Rise* 116; Watson 226). The party managed to present itself as capable of, on the one hand, leading the country out of the economic crisis and narrowing the growing gap between rich and poor and, on the other, bringing about a moral regeneration and a return to the republican values allegedly betrayed by the monarchical Van Buren and his aristocratic Democrats. The heroization of William Henry Harrison was crucial for communicating this agenda, as the specific heroic persona that the campaign constructed for him embodied the Whigs’ values and goals in prototypical fashion. Harrison, as I have shown, was heroized as a Cincinnatus, albeit in popularized form – not as a gentleman planter, as George Washington was during the Early Republic, but as a poor Western farmer. Moreover, his heroization hinged not so much on poems, as with earlier presidents, but on songs. The popularization of the heroic model went hand in hand with the deployment of a popular form.

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1 Watson makes exactly the same point. According to him, the Whigs campaigned for a “commercialized economy and the spread of evangelical virtues” such as frugality or domesticity (Watson 211).

2 This essay is part of a larger project that investigates the heroization of American presidents in poems and songs from the Early Republic to the Reconstruction Era. My observations are based on a corpus of roughly 3,000 poems and songs on American presidents and presidential candidates published between 1790 and 1870.

3 The song *Ye Who Fought with Washington* makes this genealogy explicit: “Ye who fought with Washington, / Ye who oft with Jackson won, / Onward now with Harrison, / On to victory” (l. 1-4).

4 Other songs that employ the word “Cincinnatus” are William Hayden’s *Whig Song* and *Tippecanoe For Ever*.

5 To give just a few further examples: The song *Harrison* calls on “Farmers all, [to] attend the call, / 'Tis working like a charmer, / Hitch on the team, and start for him, / For he’s a brother farmer” (l. 53-56); and a song in German, *Der alte Tippecanoe*, sung to the melody of *Kommt, Brüder, trinket froh mit mir* and obviously geared to the large German-speaking community in the West, declares: “Hoch lebe der Sieger von Tippecanoe, / Der Bauer, der Staatsmann, der Held, / Heiß schlagen ihm unsere Herzen zu, / Heiß dankt ihm die westliche Welt!” (l. 25-28).

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