

Rewriting Rosewater: Revealing Jewish Ambiguity Through a Disproven Legacy

by

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Abstract

For over a century writers have described Edward Rosewater as an example of a abolitionist Jew during the American Civil War. They tell of his friendship with President Abraham Lincoln and other abolitionist leaders and his role in transmitting the Emancipation Proclamation to the rest of the United States to read. Yet his own diaries disprove almost all of his alleged contributions and instead reveal an even more important role. Throughout the first seven years of his telegraphy career, Rosewater travelled from abolitionist strongholds in the north to the planter dominated politics in the south, only to return north in the middle of the Civil War. In this journey he adapted to local politics and racial ideas, realigning himself depending on his location and who could benefit him more. Yet unlike many examples used by historians Rosewater always sought to stay on the fringes of politics only exposing himself when he needed to assert his loyalty. Edward Rosewater provides a rare and detailed example of Jews who stayed out of sight, who made up the majority, but who receive much less attention.

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Introduction

In 1957 the American Jewish Committee partnered with CBS to publish a short film on the early life and contributions of Edward Rosewater who lived from 1841-1906. The film starts with Rosewater, a devout Jew, staring into the void during a Passover sermon with memories of his past rushing back to him. It then shows that Rosewater previously worked as a telegrapher in the Antebellum South, where he defiantly expressed his abolitionist views to caricatures of the abusive southerners who flaunted their support of slavery. These beliefs to be a key part of Rosewater's Jewish upbringing in Cleveland, Ohio. After another brief time skip, Rosewater is tracking the results of the 1860 Presidential election for the town. Rosewater learns of the results from the telegraph line and reveals it to the listeners by confrontationally boasting about Abraham Lincoln's victory. Afterwards the film implies that the town expelled Rosewater for his actions. The film skips ahead again with Rosewater now working in the Washington D.C. telegraph office. Here he works directly under a fatherly President Lincoln. Like in the south, Rosewater is outspoken about his abolitionist views and even confronts the president on his inaction in regards to slavery. Lincoln responds that "wars are won on men's lives and not morals" and that he "wants the slaves free as much as anyone else but needs a military victory to back it up." Eventually, Rosewater himself personally receives the report of McClellan's victory at Antietam and sends a messenger to notify Lincoln of the victory he needed. After another time skip, Rosewater is shown to be packed and ready to leave for Omaha, Nebraska. Lincoln asks him to deliver one last message which is read aloud and revealed to be the Emancipation Proclamation. The film ends back at the Omaha Passover service, as Rosewater is still staring

and remembering his past. He finally approaches the rabbi with a message: Lincoln had been assassinated.¹

This film tells the traditional and highly fictitious narrative of Edward Rosewater's contributions to the United States, albeit with even more exaggeration and dramatization. Encyclopedias such as the Jewish Virtual Library and the American Jewish Archives tell of similar contributions to the Union telegraph service and also highlight his role in publishing the Emancipation Proclamation. In recent years, scholars have also continued to reproduce the same narrative. In 2004, Kathryn Hellerstein, a descendant of the Rosewater family, wrote an article examining the thoughts and emotions of Rosewater through his letters to his future wife.² Her article started with a family history that leaves no room for doubt about Rosewater's friendship with Lincoln and his contributions to the Emancipation Proclamation. She recollected that she had "always known that my great-great-great grandfather, Edward Rosewater, was the telegrapher whom Abraham Lincoln assigned to transmit the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863."³ Meanwhile Jonathan Sarna also confirmed Rosewater's historical contribution and contrasted his "staunch" abolitionism with the caution of Isaac Mayer Wise and the white supremacy of Isaac Leeser.⁴

Yet this recollection of Rosewater's past is contradicted by Rosewater's own words recorded in his detailed diary written from October 1859 to October 1864. It traced his life across the United States and contained details about his difficulties, successes, and the vast changes that

¹ *Ready Mr. Rosewater* (CBS and AJC:1957)

² Although he corresponded with her regularly throughout the Civil War, Rosewater did not marry Leah Colman until November 1864.

³ Kathryn Hellerstein, "A Letter from Lincoln's Jewish Telegrapher," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 94, no. 4 (Fall 2004) 625-636.

⁴ Jonathan Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews: A History* (New York: St. Martin's Books, 2015)

the country felt throughout his career as a telegrapher. The evidence in the diary draws a drastically different picture than how later authors sought to portray Rosewater. In recent years, two historians have explored the diary to explore religious activity and to show the complexities of studying Jewish military history. Shari Rabin uses Rosewater's travels and life in the frontier to show how religion, especially Judaism, functioned on the outskirts of established religious communities. After all, Judaism holds many strict requirements for its followers that can be difficult to achieve without a large support network.⁵ She explains Rosewater's importance as he represents an example of a larger number of "nones" or Americans who believe in a religious authority, but do not belong to any organized sects.⁶ Meanwhile Adam D. Mendelsohn disproved Rosewater's alleged participation in the Emancipation Proclamation locating him out of the office using Rosewater's own entry for the day.⁷

This project seeks to move past simply disproving Rosewater's involvement in Abraham Lincoln's legacy. Instead, it uses Rosewater's diary to shed new light on his life in the South and eventually the Confederacy. Rather than expressing loyalty towards the Union or righteous abolition, Rosewater lived several years in the south eventually establishing himself as a trusted member of the local white community. However, Rosewater did, as Sarna and Hellerstein accurately depict, serve several years in the Union War Department.

These contradictions raise broader questions about American Judaism and how its followers adapted to race and political ideology before and during the American Civil War. Throughout his travels from North to South and back to the North again, Rosewater changed his

⁵ Some rituals require a minimum number of followers to be performed.

⁶ Shari Rabin, *Jews on the Frontier: Religion and Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2017) 1-3.

⁷ Adam D. Mendelsohn, *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War: The Union Army* (New York: New York University Press, 2022) 4-5, 258-259.

politics and views on race to match the ideas of influential white leaders. He preferred to watch from afar, adapting to communal ideas when it benefited him to do so. Just as Rabin views and uses Rosewater to represent the religious “nones,” I would argue that this description also covers Rosewater’s political affiliation. He followed local politics but tried to avoid attention when possible. Previous historians have preferred to examine Jews who enter politics or expressly show their views in public. Yet they also recognize that most Jews stayed out of sight both politically and in a literal sense as surviving documentation is scarce at best. Edward Rosewater’s diary allows us to analyze an example of these Jews who stayed out of sight, who made up the majority, but who receive much less attention.

In recent decades, scholars of American Jewish history have started to pay more attention to nineteenth-century Jewish racial and political ambiguity in relation to the communities that surrounded them. For example, by examining some of the most extreme cases of racial violence in the Gilded Age, Leonard Rogoff provides clear evidence of how white southerners viewed Jewish racial ambiguity at the time. In an article titled “Is the Jew White?,” Rogoff traced the racial perceptions of American Jews from the later antebellum years to the conclusion of the Gilded Age. Americans separated race alongside the folk beliefs that presented white as virtuous and black as representing evil. Yet Jews did not fit in either category according to the early racial purists. Eventually, Jews found allies in racial “scientists” such as Josiah Nott and Samuel Morton who recognized Jews as of the “Caucasian type” and whose tanned skin was only a “temporary change.” Yet at the same time, Jews were still considered a separate race which left open the possibility for their white to be challenged. Rogoff explains that Jews also encountered prejudice due to their alleged participation in financial misdeeds. Although some attributed these

misdeeds to the Jewish “race,” other whites still viewed such a race as mostly white.⁸ As Rosewater never fully explored the racial views of the period, these definitions of race will be used to explain Jewish whiteness.

Rogoff published another article about a decade later that examined Jewish participation in the infamous white insurrection of Wilmington, North Carolina and another city with heightened tensions, New Bern, North Carolina. The insurrection in Wilmington is notable for being the only successful overthrow of a democratically elected government in the history of the United States. Yet rather than being absent or intentionally avoiding the crises, there were Jews participated on both sides of the racial conflict. In both cities, Jews often blurred the racial divide by catering to both white and Black customers and some eventually even served in various representative offices. Wilmington elected Soloman Fishblate as the white Democrat mayor while Meyer and Joseph Hahn served various roles as Republican representatives in New Bern. Yet the Hahns were exceptions, and Rogoff reveals that over the years, most Jews in the area willingly aligned themselves with the white Democrats who offered them acceptance in return for loyalty and better opportunities in general.

This conditional support is all the more surprising as Rogoff explains that North Carolina initially barred Jews from holding office until 1868, decades after Catholics had been allowed to serve, and only passed by the Republican government during Reconstruction.⁹ Tensions from the recent financial panic and the disruptive politics of the populists heavily influenced the white Democrats of Wilmington and New Bern. In Wilmington, the election quickly devolved into a

⁸ Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew." *American Jewish History* 85, no. 3 (1997): 195-230.

⁹ Leonard Rogoff, "A Tale of Two Cities: Race, Riots, and Religion in New Bern and Wilmington, North Carolina, 1898," *Southern Jewish History* 14 (2011) 41.

race riot and massacre with Fishblate leading the white mobs and a few other local Jews joining in. Meanwhile, tensions in New Bern calmed down with the success of the Republican fusion ticket. The Hahns represented half the four whites openly supporting the ticket and became pariahs in the white press. Yet rather than being seen as Black or racially inferior, the Democrats saw them as white “race traitors” and made no mention of their Jewishness.

In the aftermath of both elections, Rogoff reveals a greater number of Jews that watched from a distance, refusing to join either side of the racial conflicts. He points out “that only eight Jews signed the White Declaration of Independence,” with the majority opinion being difficult to trace. Rather than being a united force that supported a specific side of the racial divide, Rogoff argues that Jews generally followed the political trends of local white residents. Some took part on both sides, but the majority preferred to stay on the periphery. Yet with the Jews that did become involved, their numbers still support the surrounding whites as most Jews joined with the white supremacists while a smaller minority support the Republicans.¹⁰

Stuart Rockoff finds the same Jewish participation present during some of the most contentious years of Reconstruction. Furthermore, he also points out that the ideologies traditionally used to study the period -whether it’s the Dunning school or more recent revisionism- fail to analyze or even recognize Jewish participation in the era despite playing key roles in the new Reconstruction economy. Rockoff wishes to correct this omission by studying Jewish participation in Reconstruction. His study takes him to Donaldsonville in Ascension Parrish, Louisiana where a small community of Jewish merchants found some of its members in the middle of a racially contentious election. Three local Jews partook in local politics with

¹⁰ Leonard Rogoff, “A Tale of Two Cities,” 37-75.

varying ideologies and levels of success. Marx Schoenberg and Morris Marks travelled South to take advantage of possible emerging markets and joined the local Republican party due to the large numbers of newly freed Blacks. Soloman Weinschenk represented a local Jew who volunteered for political service to support local businesses. Each Jew embraced the fluidity of their racial and political images to further their own opportunity in the community.

Schoenberg and Marks, two brothers-in-law, curried favor with the ruling Republicans to attract large government contracts, with Schoenberg becoming attracted to the moral mission of the Republican Party. He aligned himself with the radical Republicans while Marks gradually realigned himself with the local white Democrats. Due to his alignment, Schoenberg eventually found himself at the center of racial violence where an outburst led to his and a rival's untimely deaths during a Black rally. Although his rival likely provoked the violence, the blame was placed on the Black voters. Ironically, the white Democrats who previously despised Schoenberg quickly shifted their opinions and turned his death into a rallying cry for white supremacy. Meanwhile his brother-in-law aligned himself with the white supremacists and proceeded to enjoy a lengthy political career with the spoils system, only losing power when the Republican party found itself entirely expelled from the South during the "Redemption" of Louisiana.

While the two Jewish outsiders grappled with how to garner support from the Republican party, Soloman Weinschenk served as a representative of both local white Democrats and Republicans. A long-time resident of Donaldsonville, Weinschenk had a history of supporting local politics and even held his own slaves at one point. He found himself recruited by local Republicans to fill a vacancy as mayor, with the one appointing him possibly being a former slave. Afterwards, during a local dispute between two Republican factions, Weinschenk was nominated by both parties during an election and became the alderman after facing no opponent.

He once again filled a mayoral vacancy one last time before Redemption ended his political career as well. Local newspapers failed to find problems with his race or Jewishness and held positive obituaries upon his death in 1881. Rather than serving actively, local political parties used Weinschenk as a compromise candidate to please all sides.¹¹

Just like Rogoff, Rockoff points out that these Jews shaped their politics to benefit themselves and gradually grew to represent their larger communities. He also shows that they were just a few examples, while many other Jews in the region preferred to stay out of view. Finally, just like with the Republican Jews in New Bern, the white Democrats of Donaldsonville and Ascension Parish saw the Jews as white race traitors rather than a separate racial category. The Jewishness of the subjects rarely came up and when antisemitism did occur, it appeared passively as an occasional insult rather than a violent or physical outburst.

Rather than examine multiple Jews or multiple political parties, Jacob Morrow-Spitzer uses the backdrop of a Jewish mayoral campaign to explore the changing view of Jews in Reconstruction Louisiana. He uses the detailed press from both local whites and Blacks over the period to show gradual changes in the opinion of Jews and their political alignments. Morrow-Spitzer starts his article by exploring the changing views in the white and Black press at different stages of Reconstruction. White newspapers paid surprisingly close attention to the actions of Jews and often held contradictory opinions of them. Articles praising Jewish participation in politics were often preceded or followed by segments ridiculing imagined Jewish caricatures. Similar contradictions within the Black press. In some pieces they would ridicule and denounce Jewish financial misdeeds but in others they framed Jews as a relatable people who faced the

¹¹ Stuart Rockoff, "Carpetbaggers, Jacklegs, and Bolting Republicans: Jews in Reconstruction Politics in Ascension Parish, Louisiana." *American Jewish History* 97, no. 1 (2013): 39-64.

same struggles in Exodus. During the later years of Reconstruction, as Jews aligned themselves with white Democrats, the opinions found in newspapers shifted to reflect these views. The white press started publishing less negative material while many Black journalists felt betrayed and grew disillusioned with their Jewish neighbors.

Morrow-Spitzer then moves to explore the election and career of the Jewish mayor, Edouard Weil. During the Civil War, he served in a Confederate cavalry regiment achieving the rank of Sergeant and solidifying his reputation as a loyal southerner. Unlike Rockoff's subjects, he also actively served in Jewish organizations throughout his life. As time progressed, Weil eventually started serving in the Democratic Party and other political organizations, like the local Masonic Lodge. In 1874, he ran for the office of mayor and found support from two regional newspapers, one of which, the *Caucasian*, served as the regional voice of white supremacy. The support from such a newspaper offers historians a look into the larger political alignment of Jews as it explicitly confirmed Jewish participation in the Democratic Party. With further help from the Louisiana White Leagues, an organization that used violence and intimidation to control their opposition, Weil secured a victory in the election. In the immediate aftermath, the White League, or another pro-Democratic faction, significantly damaged a local Republican press. Weil refused to act, signifying a cooperation or understanding with the attackers.

Morrow-Spitzer shows how a community that used to ridicule Jews eventually grew to accept them as "white" after receiving their support during the later stages of Reconstruction. This support expanded to include violence by white supremacists against the opponents of a local Jew during the shifting elections of the "Redemption" of the region from the Republican Party. Like Rogoff and Rockoff, he shows how some Southern Jews gradually grew to embrace the white supremacist politics of the South and gained recognition as "white" once it benefited the

Democratic Party. Furthermore, unlike other authors, Morrow-Spitzer gives the free Blacks a voice by examining their changing perceptions of Jews and how it matched the changes in the white Democratic press.¹²

While Morrow-Spitzer, Rogoff, and Rockoff examine southern Jews after the American Civil War, Gary Phillip Zola and Emily Bingham examine Jews several decades before the war. Zola turned his attention to an early Jewish leader and reformer named Isaac Harby. Born in Charleston, South Carolina during the later stages of the eighteenth century, Harby spent his youth in a local golden age of education and liberal philosophy. Despite sporadic bursts of antisemitism, Jews mostly found themselves being accepted as white in Charleston. They felt comfortable defending themselves from such ridicule and wrongness and found themselves able to freely associate with non-Jews in the public and behind closed doors in institutions such as the local Masonic Lodges.¹³ Harby closely followed local political and social trends and inserted himself into communal discussions. He became well educated in western philosophies and joined several secular academic clubs. Upon reaching adulthood, Harby sought to establish himself both as a local academic and a government-sponsored printer and publisher. Although he had some political preferences, he shelved the more controversial ideas in order to achieve his goals.¹⁴ Just like with later Jews, Harby sought to reflect the ideas of the majority to further his own career. His Christian neighbors also responded the same way. Rather than view him as inferior or different, they accepted Harby and his fellow Jews as mostly equal. This is supported by the lack of antisemitic violence, and more so through attendance and support of Harby's day school.

¹² Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, "Free From Prescription and Prejudice: Politics and Race in the Election of One Jewish Mayor in Late Reconstruction Louisiana." *Southern Jewish History* 22 (2019) 5-41.

¹³ Gary Phillip Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston 1788-1828: Jewish Reformer and Intellectual* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994) 5-15.

¹⁴ Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston*, 48-60.

Although mostly Jews attended the school, several Christian families also enrolled their own children as students.¹⁵ Finally, during his brief activity in reforming the Jewish faith, Harby found support from Christian outsiders even though many other Jews critiqued it.¹⁶ Throughout his life, Harby aligned himself with the politics of Charleston and also found the same acceptance that later Jews found during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age.

Unlike most authors who examine the racial and political ambiguity of American Jews in the nineteenth century, Emily Bingham examines the journey of an entire family rather than an individual man or woman. Her work focuses on the Mordecai family of Virginia who originally journeyed to the South during the early nineteenth in search of mercantile opportunities, but eventually established a notable secular day school instead. Prior to the move, the father, Jacob Mordecai, received warnings from his father-in-law that Virginia would not be as welcoming for Jews as Philadelphia.¹⁷ Yet this message proved to be mostly untrue. Upon their arrival to the town of Warrington, Virginia, the Mordecai family became the only Jewish family in town and faced inescapable attention. Yet no notable prejudice or ill will towards their Jewishness followed them. In fact, after their small store had to shut down over poor finances, the community trusted the family to run a school for all the local children. This school became the main occupation and legacy of Jacob Mordecai and his family over the next few decades when they finally sold out of it and moved to their own plantation outside Richmond.¹⁸

Yet the Mordecai family also stands out among other examples of nineteenth-century Jewish families because, while the family found itself being mostly accepted by their Christian

¹⁵ Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston*, 49-54,76,77.

¹⁶ Zola, *Isaac Harby of Charleston*, 128-130.

¹⁷ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2003) 12-13.

¹⁸ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai*, 35-43.

neighbors, they were rejected by other Jews in Richmond and Philadelphia. Throughout their lives, different members of the Mordecai family faced identity crises over being viewed as not Jewish enough. It all started with the father, Jacob Mordecai's mother Esther. Born Elizabeth Whitlock, Esther converted to Judaism after marrying into a Jewish family. Many Jews believed conversion to be improper and refused to view her as Jewish. This prejudice then spread to her children who were not born from a Jewish mother.¹⁹ One son, Sam Mordecai, found himself repeatedly abused by his uncle who employed him as a merchant. The uncle, Samuel Myers, refused to pay him a fair salary after years of profitable and loyal service.²⁰ Bingham shows this stark difference in treatment throughout the book, and forces historians to recognize that Christians were not always the ones inflicting pain and prejudice on American Jews during the nineteenth century. In some cases, other Jews inflicted more damage and hardship out of malice and their own views of Jewishness.²¹ Although Bingham traces their Jewish life in the North and South, the differences cross over several decades, and the book focuses more on the treatment of Jews and their religiousness rather than their political and racial views and geographical differences between the two.

In all, the current historiography does a great job exploring the ambiguous racial opinions of Jews -especially when viewing these experiences in the South- and how Jews realigned themselves to respond to these changes. Yet there are still some gaps that can be filled. Edward Rosewater's experiences stand out from other examples, as he crosses the Mason-Dixon line on multiple occasions during one of most contentious political periods in U.S. History. Furthermore, throughout his journey he adjusted his views on racial and political issues to insert himself into

¹⁹ Judaism is traditionally passed down through the mother.

²⁰ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai*, 30

²¹ Emily Bingham, *Mordecai*, 6

his new communities. His work as a telegrapher led him to travel constantly, finding a new home almost every year, and forcing him to flow in and out of opposing political communities. By examining these changes, historians can obtain a better understanding of Jewish racial and political fluidity. Finally, unlike most articles that look at the few examples of Jews entering the forefront of politics and attention, Rosewater provides a look at the Jews who preferred to stay behind the scenes and adapted to the ideology of the white majority in their region.

Chapter 1 The Oberlin Adaptations

Edward Rosewater's diary starts on October 18, 1858. It shows him travelling across the American midwest from Sandusky, Ohio to St. Louis, Missouri, looking for work as a telegrapher and practicing when he could. Most entries reflect these two goals throughout the year with Rosewater sending letters to telegraph companies across the country seeking any job he could find. Of the few companies to write him back, one came from an office in Alabama from a manager named A.E. Trabue, who said he would hire Rosewater once he could secure a recommendation.²² Unfortunately, Rosewater had no such thing at the time. Eventually, on April 1st, 1859, Rosewater succeeded in obtaining his first job in Oberlin, Ohio.²³ A little over a week later, Rosewater received news that another, more experienced operator, might eventually arrive and take his place. He took note in his diary that he expected to stay for about three months.²⁴

In his book *The Town that Started the Civil War*, Nat Brandt describes the growth of Oberlin into one of the most prominent Abolitionist strongholds in the Midwest. The town grew around the establishment of a seminary school that eventually expanded past theology and became Oberlin College. To help with funding the new school, the board sought to attract the support of wealthy abolitionists in New England. They hired a revivalist minister by the name of Charlse Grandison Finney to teach theology and eventually made him president of the school. Little did they expect how much of an influence these abolitionists would have. Students started to view the fight against slavery as a religious obligation.²⁵ Their actions led many across the

²² Daily Journal, March 9, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

²³ Daily Journal, April 1, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

²⁴ Daily Journal, April 10, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

²⁵ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990) 38, 45.

country to despise the small town as a primary contributor to slave revolts and slave escapes. However, these antislavery ideals did not make the town antiracist. Students and teachers alike despised the notion of sharing classrooms and lunch halls with Black students and even went so far as to segregate most Black residents from white neighborhoods.²⁶ Yet this did not stop a large migration of both free Blacks and fugitive slaves from migrating to Oberlin. This combined community of abolitionists and free Blacks led Oberlin to be one of the biggest crossroads of the underground railroad. Brandt points out that proslavery advocates were right to point fingers at Oberlin as at least “six well-established routes of the underground railroad ran through” the town with “as many as three thousand slaves” finding refuge or passing through.²⁷ By the time Rosewater arrived in Oberlin in 1859, the town held a nationally recognized role in the antislavery movement.²⁸

While in Oberlin, Rosewater paid close attention to a local court case that received national attention. A few months prior to his arrival, slave hunters kidnapped an escaped slave named John Prince who was living in Oberlin. Local residents followed the captors to the neighboring town of Wellington where they forcefully broke the captive out of prison and returned to Oberlin with him. The residents quickly secured him transportation to the safety of Canada. These actions violated local laws in Wellington as well as the contentious and despised federal Fugitive Slave Act. When a federal marshal arrived to enforce the Fugitive Slave Act, Oberlin residents arrested the marshal. In the negotiations that followed, the locals agreed to send

²⁶ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 36.

²⁷ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 41, 43.

²⁸ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*, 41-49.

two leaders to stand trial for the rescue. One was a local white man named Simeon M. Bushnell, and the other was a free Black leader named Charles H. Langston.²⁹

Although he missed the eventful capture and rescue, Rosewater was present for the trial and aftermath. Shortly after his arrival in Oberlin, Rosewater detailed the “excitement”³⁰ surrounding the case and taking note of the many “dark brethren” in town.³¹ This line and later entries indicate that Rosewater felt at least a little sympathetic towards local feelings. Even more, it shows how Rosewater took great care in reading the attitudes of his new home, taking note of what residents found important. Throughout the next few weeks, Rosewater kept a close eye on local political feelings and attended many public gatherings about the incident. He never mentioned taking any clear stance but did take notes on the trial and how the community responded. At one point he even conversed with one of the Langston brothers over a brief dispute with another telegraph company but gives no indication of any involvement with the trial or aftermath.³² Even though Rosewater does not list which Langston he met, Charles Langston and John Mercer Langston represented both the local abolitionist community and the Blacks residents of Oberlin.³³ This shows that Rosewater had at least some interaction with local abolitionist leaders. Despite these connections, he still refused to take sides and immediately abandoned the town once a new opportunity arose.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Oberlin-Wellington trials, Rosewater received an offer for a full-time job in Murfreesboro, Tennessee from A.E. Trabue. The two had been exchanging

²⁹ Nat Brandt, *The Town That Started the Civil War*

³⁰ Rosewater uses the phrase “great excitement” to describe topics popular among residents.

³¹ Daily Journal, April 11, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

³² He does not specify which Langston he talked with.

³³ Daily Journal, May 17, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

letters throughout Rosewater's stay in Oberlin and finally agreed upon a contract after Rosewater obtained a few months of experience.³⁴ Upon confirming his employment in Tennessee, his tone towards the Oberlin Black community shifted drastically. Upon his arrival he had used the words "dark brethren" to describe them. During the last week of his stay -almost immediately after receiving a job offer in the South- he started referring to them as "N----" with one entry containing a final farewell message; "Goodbye N----town."³⁵

One might think his shift in language and politics would end with this statement. Yet this is not the case. During his first few months in the South, Rosewater again shifted his tone to sympathize with an enslaved child. He disapproved of her sale and called the owner a "regular brute."³⁶ This entry came after Rosewater toured and spent the night on a plantation without mentioning any negative experiences. Instead, he described the night as "very good."³⁷ These events tell historians that Rosewater almost certainly shifted his views based on the regional stances rather than him developing a personal stance over time. The peculiar institution failed to spark any emotions or opinions until it forced Rosewater to recognize some of its more brutal forms. The sale of an isolated child sparked a response in the usually uninterested Rosewater who possibly disliked slavery all along but shelved this opinion in order to further his own career. This could also explain his sudden shift towards explicit white supremacy as these views might not have been as acceptable in an abolitionist stronghold that was going through a major trial over the Fugitive Slave Act. Once he confirmed his exit, having differing opinions on race would bring no issues.

³⁴ Daily Journal, April-May 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

³⁵ Daily Journal, June 6, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

³⁶ Daily Journal, July 2, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

³⁷ Daily Journal, June 9, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Rosewater's adaptation towards local ideologies shows his ambiguous views of race and politics. He became keenly aware of how locals saw race upon his arrival and tracked the progression of the Oberlin-Wellington rescue. He must have noticed the overwhelming support for the two men going to trial and aligned himself accordingly. Upon receiving a more permanent job offer from a southern telegraph company, Rosewater immediately started embracing white supremacy. Yet this is not necessarily a natural progression of racial ideology because he once again shifted his opinion when met with the harsh realities of slavery upon his arrival in Tennessee. This adaptation towards local ideas shows Rosewater trying to live in the peripheries of local politics and racial ideology, only joining in if it benefited himself to do so.

Chapter 2 “If You Were a White Man”

After leaving Ohio, Rosewater quickly found himself involved in a controversy that threatened his new career. At first Rosewater made good progress establishing himself in Tennessee. He befriended or made an acquaintance of another telegraph operator named Thomas with the two lending and exchanging money on occasion.³⁸ Not much else was mentioned in detail until a “big Russian Jack Jarrett accosted and beat” him with no reason being given. Both men went to trial the following day with their own witnesses. Thomas testified on Rosewater’s behalf while another man introduced as Brooks attempted to testify against him. Rosewater successfully blocked Brooks’ testimony as “he was not present” and recalled him being a “mean puppy” who was “awfully mad” about the trial.³⁹ The court fined Jarrett and Rosewater agreed to drop some other charges. Brooks is later revealed to be a worker in training whilst Jarrett was never mentioned after the trial.

The aftermath and escalation of the trial threatened to change Rosewater’s life. About a month later, Rosewater wrote that Brooks broke into the office to practice using the telegraph. This time, Thomas took the side of Brooks and declared that “he would whip” Rosewater “if he was a white man” and that if he had money or influence, he would fire Rosewater and hire Brooks instead. In response, Rosewater seized two key pieces of the telegraph machine and forbade both men from using it in the future.⁴⁰ Afterward, Rosewater reported the incident to

³⁸ Daily Journal, July 5-12, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

³⁹ Daily Journal, July 14-15, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁴⁰ Daily Journal, August 16, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

A.E. Trabue, his superior, who forced him to back down and let the two back into the office.⁴¹ Rather than end the conflict between Rosewater and Brooks, it only escalated even further.

A few weeks later, Rosewater, now running his own office in Stevenson, Alabama, visited Murfreesboro for unspecified reasons. Upon his arrival, Rosewater found himself being fired after allegedly being something. Unfortunately for historians, the word is blacked out in the diary with no further details given about the accusation. Whatever it was, Rosewater denied all accusations and asked around for his accuser. He eventually found Thomas, who admitted to being the source of the accusation. With few other options, Rosewater wrote to several former employers in Murfreesboro, and a man named Captain Ross and proclaimed his innocence.⁴² Ross requested that Rosewater see him in person but, unfortunately, Rosewater's reports of the incident did not provide any further details. After skipping a week, the diary restarted, and Rosewater was once again employed by the telegraph company.⁴³

Rosewater continued his diary as normal, recollecting work, weather, and anything interesting that might have occurred. This reporting continued until about a month after the incident, when one of his former managers from Murfreesboro visited Stevenson. Rosewater mentioned how they had a chat about "general matters" and that the "Murfreesboro affair" did not come up.⁴⁴ A week later, Rosewater found himself back in Murfreesboro helping with some of the downed lines. While there, Thomas and Brooks sent him a message over the telegraph line

⁴¹ Daily Journal, August 23, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁴² Rosewater does not list what this Captain Ross does or why he might have been able to help.

⁴³ Daily Journal, September 5-15, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁴⁴ Daily Journal, September 27, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

requesting reconciliation. Rosewater agreed on the condition that “they treat me like a man.”⁴⁵ Shortly after, he met up with Brooks in person during a Thanksgiving celebration and even gave him a gift. Later that afternoon, he also visited Thomas, finally mending their relationship as well.⁴⁶ Rosewater would visit Thomas one last time at his residence about a year later further proving the end of their conflict and the renewal of their relationship.⁴⁷

The incident in Murfreesboro was not the first time Rosewater found himself in court over a fight. A few months prior to his relocation to the South, Rosewater got into a fight with another telegraph company. He quickly made up with the operator and no escalation took place. Yet in the South, his fighting and defense of his actions led to questions about his whiteness. This questioning quickly jeopardized his career as the local office was ready to fire him immediately based on the testimony of a single individual who previously had a dispute with Rosewater. This must have hammered the importance of “whiteness” into Rosewater’s mind as he completely changed the way he presented himself in his diary over the next year. There would be no more questioning of local practices, and Rosewater only escalated his white supremacy.

Unlike his time in the midwest where he was allowed to identify himself politically ambiguous, Rosewater must have been forced to recognize a different reality in the South. He had to openly express his whiteness and its superiority over others unless he wanted to face ostracization at best and expulsion at worst. Following the insults from Thomas, Rosewater increased his usage of the term “N---” and differentiated the term from his few usages of “Negro.” He used “Negro” to describe slaves or free Blacks who provided a helpful service to

⁴⁵ Daily Journal, November 8, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁴⁶ Daily Journal, November 24, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 1, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁴⁷ Daily Journal, May 5, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

him. If he ran across either group on his travels, he usually demeaned them as “N----” followed by an insult of sorts.⁴⁸ The longer he stayed in the South, the more he insulted the free and enslaved Blacks. Furthermore, he never again mentioned any sympathy towards enslaved peoples following the incident in Murfreesboro.

On September 2nd, 1860, Rosewater returned north to visit his family in Cleveland. During his visit, Rosewater carried his adapted Southern ideals of white superiority with him. Much of the visit involved visiting family, friends, and starting a courtship with his future wife, Leah Colman. Meanwhile Cleveland threw a massive celebration over the anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie from the War of 1812. Unlike most other entries, Rosewater described the celebrations in great detail, highlighting the praised the “fine men” of the local militia and the expensive reenactments. Unfortunately, he had to leave early as he volunteered to help at the local telegraph office. This indicates that he still held close relations with other residents in Cleveland outside of his close family. Yet one more event attracted a lot of attention in Rosewater’s diary. A few days after the Lake Erie celebrations, Rosewater details himself attending a political rally from Stephen A. Douglas and takes unusually close notes of it.⁴⁹

Prior to his visit, Rosewater had made no mention of Douglas in his diary but thereafter followed his presidential campaign in Cleveland. He detailed Douglas’ arrival in Cleveland, the popular support for him, and even attended a rally for an hour, only leaving do to the “unbearable heat.”⁵⁰ Throughout his diary, Rosewater rarely, if ever, detailed the political stances

⁴⁸ Rosewater’s work on the telegraph saw him using the railroad often to reach different cities or towns that needed telegraph repairs. He makes note of slaves being transported a few times usually insulting them in the process.

⁴⁹ Daily Journal, September 9-11, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁵⁰ Daily Journal, September 21-22, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

of politicians he met or examined. He followed the same trend with Douglas by only detailing his popularity and the movements of his campaign. In order to understand Rosewater's interest, historians must examine Douglas' various positions and try to match them to various ideas present in Rosewater's diary. Douglas supported two major stances during the 1860 presidential election and used racism to incite panic in voters. His most vocal stance surrounded the idea of what he called "popular sovereignty," which, in theory, allowed the territories to vote on the legalization of slavery without federal interference.⁵¹ As Rosewater took a neutral stance on slavery, he likely did not care for this position. However, Douglas' second position supported the Unionism movement in the United States to prevent secession.⁵² Throughout the 1860 election and its aftermath, Rosewater followed Unionism closer than any other stance. In fact, despite the highly contentious election being centered on slavery, Rosewater made almost no mention of the issue. Going off the information in his diary, one would guess the 1860 election only involved the debate between "union" and "disunion."

As time passed in the South, Rosewater's adoption of southern whiteness seemed to have worked. His neighbors never again questioned his whiteness despite some minor disputes occurring. At one point Rosewater got into a fight at a local saloon during the 1860 election over his support of "Corporate Law."⁵³ The court fined both men, and his opponent apologized immediately after with no escalation.⁵⁴ Even more surprisingly, Rosewater accidentally inflicted a significant injury upon another without facing any sort of punishment. While visiting a local

⁵¹ Douglas R. Egerton, *Years of Meteors: Stephen A. Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, And the Election that Brought on the Civil War* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013) 8-16, 40-46.

⁵² James E. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 224, 231.

⁵³ This is the only time this language appears in the diary and Rosewater gives no indication what he means by "Corporate Law."

⁵⁴ Daily Journal, November 6, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

barber, Rosewater pulled the trigger on a shotgun on display thinking it was unloaded. Unfortunately for the victim, a man whom Rosewater called the “Dutchman,” the shotgun was in fact loaded and blasted off a few of the poor man’s fingers. Rosewater failed to mention any sort of punishment or fine and continued to work as usual with no trial or prison time.⁵⁵ In both cases, Rosewater got away with little to no punishment. This indicates that by 1860, Rosewater was seen as white and received equal treatment from both locals and the law.

Aside from his more violent encounters, Rosewater also found himself attending social gatherings and generally being accepted as white by those around him. For example, when word spread about possible slave revolts across the south, a local leader approached Rosewater with an invitation to join a militia.⁵⁶ Rosewater had previously taken note of the rising number of “Minute Men” and when a “Ragsdale” approached him with a pledge, Rosewater did not seem to hesitate to sign it. He wrote how “we elected Ragsdale Capt. and Modraham 1st Lieutenant,” but did not follow up with any more information on the militia. The very act of approaching Rosewater for his signature shows how his neighbors considered him white by the later months of 1860. For a community that almost fired him for a lack of whiteness, they quickly took to Rosewater and viewed him as their own in the following months and years.

In late 1860 and the early months of 1861, the secessionist movement swept across the South and forced Rosewater to make a choice about his future. Just like his time in the midwest, Rosewater started to keep a close eye on local attitudes towards unionism and secessionism. Eventually his region sided with the secessionists and so did Rosewater. Here Rosewater’s journey and beliefs took a drastic turn from what historians previously wrote about of his life.

⁵⁵ Daily Journal, July 6, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁵⁶ Daily Journal, November 20, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Rather than supporting the Union or abolition, Rosewater dove headfirst into Confederate politics and actively supported it during his stay in the South.

Rosewater closely followed the political debates during the early days of 1861 and decided to partake to defend his own self-interests. His first contributions to Confederate politics had Rosewater mailing a letter to Governor Moore of Alabama requesting a draft exemption for telegraph operators. Initially, Rosewater received a response that a draft in general was unnecessary as the state had more than enough volunteers.⁵⁷ However, in the following months, the Confederate Congress passed a bill that exempted telegraph operators from conscription. Rosewater would refer to this law as “my bill” in his diary.⁵⁸ Rosewater also found himself directly involved with Jefferson Davis at times. In January 1861, prior to his selection as the Confederate president, Rosewater mentioned meeting Davis on a train and conversing with him, complimenting him in his diary as “tall and lean” with a “sharp complexion,” and “being very much in humor.”⁵⁹ It’s also worth noting that no other politician received the same compliments in Rosewater’s diary. This detail could indicate that Rosewater felt that aligning himself with Davis and the South could be beneficial to his image or that he even briefly supported secessionism.

Rosewater’s most direct involvement in Confederate politics came in February 1861, when Jefferson Davis stopped in Stevenson to give a speech in favor of secession. Rosewater, alongside two others, found himself personally selected by Davis to transcribe the speech and

⁵⁷ Daily Journal, January 12, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁵⁸ Daily Journal, January 30, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁵⁹ Daily Journal, January 26, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

send it over the telegraph. Rosewater claimed he returned to the office, “as soon as possible,” in order to spread the news.⁶⁰ Rosewater bragged in his diary that he showed his copy to “most citizens here and they pronounced it as near correct as could be made.” He then told how others took his copy and were going to spread it across the South.⁶¹ A partially complete copy can be found in the *Nashville Union and American* and shows Rosewater’s work with his own introduction. It tells of Davis being “saluted with guns and fire-works,” who declared “your border States will gladly come into the Southern Confederacy within sixty days, as we will be your only friends. England will recognize us, and a glorious future is before us. The grass will grow in the northern cities where the pavements have been worn off by the tread of commerce.” Rosewater described Davis’s speech as “warlike,” and that the South would “carry war where it was easy to advance, where food for the sword and torch await the armies in the densely populated cities, and though they might come to spoil our crops, we could raise them as before, while they could not rear the cities which took years of industry and millions of money to build. He hoped for peace but was prepared for war.”⁶²

Rosewater’s transcription of Davis’s speech did not make him an advocate for the Confederacy. However, Rosewater’s participation in denouncing a Republican article might. The piece came from a Republican newspaper called the *Republican Banner* sarcastically titled, “Senator Jeff. Davis-Was he at Stevenson?” The *Banner*, as Rosewater called it, obviously opposed Confederate politics due to its Republican alignment, and felt insulted that Davis would assume the actions taken by the unaligned border states. At the time, Tennessee and several other

⁶⁰ Daily Journal, February 14, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁶¹ Daily Journal, February 15, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁶² “Speech from President Davis,” *Nashville Union and American*, February 16, 1861, 3.

states had not chosen a side yet. The *Republican Banner* doubted the existence of such a speech, as Stevenson only consisted of “four houses and the remnants of a blacksmith shop.” “Where the guns and fire-works came from, we are at a loss to divine, but presume it means- an “anvil,” columbiad, two flint lock shot-guns, and a pile of wood shavings in a glorious state of conflagration. If all of Stevenson were in flames, the conflagration wouldn’t make a respectable bonfire.”⁶³

Rather than being upset about the newspaper attacking his work or his new home in Stevenson, Rosewater indicated that he was more upset over the treatment of Jefferson Davis and his speech. He made no mention of Stevenson in the diary entry and only wrote of Davis being insulted, and his desire to write a response and have it published in the *Nashville Union and American*. This goal indicates that Rosewater at the very least supported Jefferson Davis and could even indicate that Rosewater felt some loyalty to his new Confederate government.

Unfortunately for Rosewater, other Confederates took offense to his description of Davis’s speech. Rosewater followed his submissions and wrote that the *Nashville Union and American* refused to publish his response. He likely felt some disappointment as he would not have written about the rejection otherwise.⁶⁴ Even worse for Rosewater, the *Nashville Union and American*, one of Rosewater’s favorite newspapers, published a critique of his article written by another local named Ragsdale.⁶⁵ Unlike the article from Rosewater, the *Nashville Union and American* provided an introduction for Ragsdale by describing him as a “highly intelligent and

⁶³ “Senator Jeff Davis-Was he at Stevenson?” *Republican Banner*, February 16, 1861, 2.

⁶⁴ Daily Journal, February 18, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁶⁵ Daily Journal, February 20, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

reliable gentlemen.”⁶⁶ He declared Rosewater’s article to be “grossly misrepresenting every sentiment uttered by” Jefferson Davis and that he “made no war-like speech whatever.”⁶⁷

Rosewater must have accepted his failure as he did not follow up on Ragsdale’s article nor did he denounce him any time in the future. Instead, Rosewater continued to fulfill his job as the local telegraph operator, interacting with Ragsdale on several occasions after the newspaper exchange. One interesting occurrence had Rosewater deliver a letter from Governor Moore of Alabama to Ragsdale. It contained the new Confederate Constitution and orders for the local militia company to organize and move to Mobile. Rather than take it personally, Ragsdale had Rosewater visit the local Masonic Lodge to read the letter aloud.⁶⁸ Once again, Rosewater actively participated in Confederate governance.

Rosewater’s activity in the Confederacy complicates traditional narratives about his life in many ways. Firstly, he was clearly anything but a token example of Jewish abolitionism. While he did express a dislike of slavery on two occasions, he also constantly expressed local ideas of white supremacy and dehumanized enslaved Blacks just like most Southern whites. Furthermore, he aligned himself with Southern politics when it benefited his social and economic standing. After initially showing interest in the northern Democrats, he shifted his support to Jefferson Davis once Southern secessionism started to increase in popularity. He tracked the local politics in his diary throughout the 1860 election and its aftermath, taking notes on what regions supported whom. Although he preferred to stay on the periphery of politics, he took stances and aligned himself once he knew what the clear majority supported. Although his brief

⁶⁶ Rosewater later writes that Ragsdale got elected to lead the local company upon its acceptance into the Confederate Army.

⁶⁷ “President Davis’ Speech at Stevenson,” *Nashville Union and American*, February 20, 1861, 2.

⁶⁸ Daily Journal, March 18, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

career in Southern journalism failed to find a following, it established Rosewater as a local supporter of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy. This is a far step from being “a staunch opponent of slavery, who had every reason to be proud” of his involvement with Abraham Lincoln and the Union.⁶⁹

Following his brief and active participation in the early days of the Confederacy, Rosewater shifted his focus to cover news of the war. Interestingly, his entries failed to favor either side, preferring to present neutral coverage of the battles and major events. The Confederate troops were not complimented, nor did Rosewater suggest they represented him or his beliefs. In a similar vein, Rosewater never denounced the Union troops or labeled them as enemies. He also steadily kept up with laws regarding transportation between the Union and Confederacy and any information involving the telegraph service. At the same time, he lists many of these same entries as “no news importance,” or “news unimportant.”⁷⁰ He would also detail the secessionist movements and wrote of a man named “Saville” who found himself exiled from Augusta after refusing to swear loyalty to the Confederacy.⁷¹ Rosewater offered no opinions on the operator’s plights and simply mentioned meeting him as he passed through town.

Rosewater found himself forced to make a similar decision after the Confederates passed a law requiring all residents to swear an oath of allegiance. Rosewater must have felt torn as he sent a letter to his family for advice. A day later, they recommended he stay until the war ended as their own circumstances were “not good.”⁷² Afterward, Rosewater relocated to Kentucky for

⁶⁹ Jonathan Sarna and Benjamin Shapell, *Lincoln and the Jews: A History* (New York: St. Martin’s Books, 2015)

⁷⁰ Daily Journal, August 17, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁷¹ Daily Journal, June 7, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁷² Daily Journal, August 22, 23, 1861, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 3, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

work. He likely did not feel too much at risk as he noted that the Confederates would likely be attacking Washington soon. Rather than showing sympathy, Rosewater seemed more interested in the idea that such an attack could end the war. Unfortunately for historians, this is where the first half of the diary ends.

The last three months of 1861 and all of 1862 are missing from Rosewater's diary. And with them were likely the reasons that Rosewater left the Confederacy to join the Union War Department. His last entry, on September 16, 1861, showed him selling his key and preparing for a move to Kentucky.⁷³ Surviving documents in the National Archives at Washington D.C. show that Rosewater swore an oath of allegiance toward the United States on April 24, 1862.⁷⁴ The documents came from John C. Fremont's Mountain Department but fail to address where or why Rosewater made the decision. Eventually, Rosewater's diary restarts with him in serving the Union Army in Washington D.C.

Rosewater likely spent at least six months or so in Washington D.C., but his diary from that time was damaged and only covers approximately a month and a half of his stay. Within this brief period more information was lost as Rosewater suffered from an illness and ceased writing in his diary for several weeks.⁷⁵ Still, enough information is present for historians to draw at least a few conclusions about Rosewater's ambiguous ideas of race and politics during his time there. Just like his time in the midwest, Rosewater closely followed local politics and only aligned himself when needed. He started 1863 with a short, poetic prayer that expressed his personal wish for peace. Much of the prayer consisted of a brief poem detailing the passing of a new year

⁷³ It is unclear what key he is referring to.

⁷⁴ John C. Fremont, "Forwards List of Persons to Whom the Oath of Allegiance has been Administered," May 24, 1862, Record Group 94, File no. M652.

⁷⁵ Daily Journal, January 13-28, 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

but the second half focused on the challenges facing the United States in 1863. He wrote “the graves are filled with patriotic sons, the tears are shed by wives and little ones! What treasures spent, could purchase all the blood, from those who loved them? When will it end o God! Then let us pray that eighteen sixty three, may once more bless this land of liberty with peaceful homes! All strife may cease, and crown our efforts with a blessed peace!”

The most notable part of this prayer was the lack of any specific stances. Rather than demonizing the Confederacy or hoping for their defeat, Rosewater simply wished for peace. Just like his time in Oberlin and the South, Rosewater expressed a neutral stance towards divisive politics. Furthermore, no mention was made of the liberation of enslaved people or any opposition to the Confederacy. This fact further supports the idea that Rosewater enlisted in the Union army for the opportunities it offered rather than joining to support a specific ideology. Additionally, it further indicates he likely had no hand in the ideology behind, or the publishing of, the Emancipation Proclamation.

Following the prayer, Rosewater detailed the grand New Year procession at the White House and the large number of people attempting to get inside. Rosewater bragged about securing a spot and spending some time with the many dignitaries before heading out to meet some friends for dinner. They introduced him to their daughter and he played cards with her for some time until his shift began at 10:30 at night. He did mention the Emancipation Proclamation but only referred to a local newspaper publishing it in full.⁷⁶

Historian Adam D. Mendelsohn previously pointed to this entry as evidence that Rosewater did not have any part in the publication of the Emancipation Proclamation. Yet by

⁷⁶ Daily Journal, January 1, 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

examining his brief prayer on the same day, and the possessive wording he normally used when referring to his work, it is clear that Rosewater had no part in its publication and likely only made mention of the Emancipation Proclamation to trace the political attitudes of his neighbors and coworkers. With his previous published works, Rosewater tracked the responses and used possessive language when referring to his work. This language was not present in his few mentions of the Emancipation Proclamation. He only made a few mentions of the document before moving on to other events, never offering any strong opinions on it throughout the entirety of his diary.

In the days following, Rosewater continued to track the progress of the war labeling the opposing forces as the “Confeds,” and “our forces” or “our army.” This marks a noticeable change from his time in the South and from even his introductory prayer. For the first time, he aligned himself with a specific side in his diary. Yet it is also interesting that he failed to use slang or insulting nicknames for the Confederate army.⁷⁷ This is another clear view of Rosewater’s political ambiguity as he wanted to support his current occupation but likely feared taking a hardened stance. This pattern continued until Rosewater found himself in another controversy. Approximately a month later; he mentioned “considerable discussion about me boarding with a “Secesh.” This clearly upset Rosewater as he proceeded to blame another operator named Snow and revealed that he had been leaking out dispatches.⁷⁸ Interestingly, Rosewater never denied the claims in his diary as he had with previous information that led to

⁷⁷ Daily Journal, January-February 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁷⁸ Daily Journal, February 3, 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

trouble. In his firing over Thomas' accusations, Rosewater had immediately rejected the charges in his diary.⁷⁹ Yet this time, he did not.

Unlike the Murfreesboro Affair, Rosewater's diary did not contain any conclusion to his controversy in Washington D.C. Just like the last gap in his diary, Rosewater provided no indication what might have been contained in the missing pages. It's unlikely that Rosewater faced any major punishment over his personal company as his superior officer, Major Thomas Eckert, also started the war in the Confederacy before being chased out. Furthermore, David Homer Bates, whose 1907 memoir is the main source of both Eckert and the Union telegraph service, inserted a brief memorial of Rosewater in his book indicating the two had amicable relations at the very least.⁸⁰ Unfortunately for historians, there is no mention of Omaha or any motivation to leave the Union Army in the surviving pages of the diary. Historians can only make an educated guess based on Rosewater's good relationship with his coworkers and the possibility of a better offer in Omaha.

⁷⁹ Daily Journal, September 5, 1859, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁸⁰ David Homer Bates, *Lincoln in the Telegraph Office: Recollections of the United States Military Telegraph Corps During the Civil War* (New York: The Century Co., 1907) 27, 124-132.

Chapter 3 Standing Firmly by the Flag?

Rosewater's diary picked back up on October 1st, 1863, shortly after his arrival in Omaha. The first entry described how Rosewater settled an agreement with a local boarding house. Here he found a region with complex politics and issues outside of the American Civil War. By the later months of 1863, historian James E. Potter explains that the politics in Nebraska had shifted in favor of Unionism and Republicanism for several key reasons. As the war continued, many in the Nebraska Territory grew to view anyone who insulted Lincoln or that supported peace with the South as traitors. Furthermore, the ongoing Indian Wars caused the Nebraskan government to recall Union troops to help defend the territory and raised several new regiments to help them. As these troops consisted solely of volunteers, it meant that the state saw a constant presence of loyal Unionist troops. Many Unionists also started to respond violently to residents who showed sympathy toward the South. Finally, due to its territorial status, several key positions, such as the governorship, were filled by appointment rather than by elections. This meant that the Republicans held great power in the territory regardless of popular opinion. Still, the election of 1864 supported the appointments by filling the territorial legislature with fellow Republicans and Unionists. By the time Rosewater arrived, the state was firmly controlled by these factions.⁸¹

Rosewater's arrival in Omaha followed the same patterns as his settlement in other locations. He quickly established local connections and paid close attention to relevant topics and political motivations. By this point in October 1863, Rosewater fully supported the Union and denounced the Confederates as "rebs" and "secesh." A few days later he described seeing

⁸¹ James E. Potter, *Standing Firmly by the Flag: Nebraska Territory and the Civil War, 1861-1867* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012)

“political speeches under office window by so-called Copperhead Crows of drunken and unpolished men, cheering and yelling, they know not why.”⁸² He then disputed with a “foppish looking” man who was “claiming superiority to colored man under any circumstances” and wished for slavery to be introduced to the territory. He then followed the progress of several elections across the Midwest over the next few days, denouncing the Democrats and supporting the Unionists.

Just like with his arrival in the South, Rosewater initially realigned himself to fit the unionist and anti-Confederate politics of Omaha, Nebraska. While enlisted in the Union Army and stationed in Washington D.C., Rosewater failed to take a public stance despite following local politics closely. However, Rosewater also did not have his own office, a goal he pursued throughout his diary. Upon achieving such a post in Stevenson and later Omaha, Rosewater immediately aligned himself with his neighbors. Yet this does not mean Rosewater was embracing Republicanism, abolitionism, or racial equality. Only a month later, he described seeing a group of Sacs and Fox native Americans passing through to Omaha. He described some of them as looking “pretty savage” with the others “gaily dressed.”⁸³ Previously in the South, Rosewater had described a Native American delegation as looking “dark” and placed his own whiteness above them.⁸⁴ While not directly identifying this new encounter by skin color, he is still placing himself above them by describing them as “savage.” Yet this is again complicated as

⁸² In Nebraska, “Copperhead” usually referred to the faction of the Democratic party that sought peace with the south at all costs. For more information see *Standing Firmly by the Flag* by James E. Potter.

⁸³ Daily Journal, November 14, 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁸⁴ Daily Journal, January 13, 1860, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 2, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Rosewater stopped using derogatory terms upon his conscription to defend against a falsely reported Native American raiding party.⁸⁵

His views on politics were just as contradictory. Despite initially adapting to the ideals of the Republicans and Unionists, Rosewater quickly shifted to a more moderate stance and even insulted the Republican candidates. During a local celebration over the expansion of the local railway, Rosewater found himself being introduced to and conversing with several local political leaders. He critiqued just about all involved but formed a better relationship with a Democratic leader named George Train.⁸⁶ Shortly after the celebrations, Train visited Rosewater at his office where the two conversed “for some time” before Train had to leave for another fundraiser.⁸⁷ The two seemed to have a good relationship. Meanwhile Rosewater had no such relations with any of the Republicans.

In the early months of his stay in Omaha, Rosewater adapted to support the popular ideals of the community rather than any specific party. He argued with a resident over slavery and closely supported the gains of the Unionists politicians. Yet his reported interactions with local politicians showed him disinterested in Governor Alvin Saunders while enjoying the company of the Democrat George Train. Shortly after, Rosewater halted his critiques of the Democratic Party and ceased using the term Copperhead for some time. Once again, Rosewater backtracked and ceased expressing a strong political stance, once again in favor of political ambiguity.

These political relationships shifted drastically around the beginning of 1864. On New Years Day, Rosewater found himself visiting the house of the Republican governor, Alvin

⁸⁵ Daily Journal, August 23-24, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁸⁶ James E. Potter, *Standing Firmly by the Flag*

⁸⁷ Daily Journal, December 2-3, 1863, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Saunders. He had met Saunders when he met George Train but seemed unimpressed and did not mention meeting with the governor afterward. He had critiqued the public speaking of Saunders and spent much of the night with Train instead. Rosewater did not mention what he was doing at Saunders' house but there must have been a good reason for visiting him on New Years Day, especially without any mention of a celebration or party.⁸⁸ The next indication of a political shift came from a new friendship: while staying at a local boarding house, he befriended a man referred to as General Worth. Rosewater described him as a "sound Abolitionist" and spent time with him over the next few weeks conversing and playing chess with him.⁸⁹

Following his new connections with the local Republicans, Rosewater halted his examinations of local politics for the longest period found in his diary. For almost half a year, he failed to mention any specific political ideology, adaptations, or any news relating to politics. However, this all changed on July 4th, 1864. George Train did something that angered Rosewater. The diary entry started by mocking Train who was "blowing about colonization of Platte Valley." Who then "avowed himself a copper head with a soldier who gave him fit."⁹⁰ Potter mentioned how many Democrats wished to expand slavery into Nebraska and often targeted the Platte Valley as a possible location for plantations.⁹¹ Almost a week later, Rosewater again denounced Train who "got himself elected to represent Neb. In the Copperhead Convention at Chicago."⁹² For the next few months, Rosewater used Copperhead to describe the

⁸⁸ Daily Journal, January 1, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁸⁹ Daily Journal, February 1-11, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁹⁰ Daily Journal, July 4, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁹¹ James E. Potter, *Standing Firmly by the Flag*

⁹² Daily Journal, July 9, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Democratic convention of 1864. Yet right before the convention, Rosewater shifted his tone once again and started respectfully calling them Democrats again.⁹³

Throughout his entire diary, Rosewater never intentionally broke a connection with any acquaintances or influential figures. While in Chattanooga, Rosewater reconnected with Thomas after the man sought to end his career. Meanwhile in Stevenson, Rosewater accepted Ragsdale's sudden critique and denunciation of his work, despite previously receiving approval from him. Yet Rosewater chose to sever ties with George Train completely rather than sustain their relationship amidst controversy. The reason for this shift likely originated from Train's growing unpopularity and Rosewater's establishment as a loyal white community member. Furthermore, Potter explained in his book that the Republicans had started to win more seats in the Nebraska elections.

A few months prior to the dispute, Rosewater once again faced hardship regarding his career as a telegrapher. Despite working without controversy for several months as the manager for the Omaha office, Rosewater found himself being replaced. Clearly distraught, Rosewater mentions being once again "driven to move against my will" and immediately started to look for new opportunity. Yet despite finding a new office to manage, Rosewater weighed his options and decided to stay. He mentioned "believing in local opportunity" and negotiated a salary increase with his new manager.⁹⁴

The local opportunity likely referred to the Omaha community embracing Rosewater as one of their own. Throughout the previous and following months, the community took a liking to

⁹³ Daily Journal, July-August 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁹⁴ Daily Journal, May 1-9, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Rosewater. Shortly after his arrival, Rosewater had met and likely befriended a banker by the name of Kountze. He helped Rosewater invest in land throughout his stay and eventually helped him purchase and renovate his first home. Governor Alvin Saunders and his wife, who Rosewater never mentioned by name, grew fond of the young telegrapher and invited him over on many occasions.⁹⁵ Aside from these two powerful friends, many more unnamed individuals invited Rosewater to social gatherings, fund raisers, and even introduced him to young single women when he feared his courtship with Leah Colman was failing.⁹⁶ These reasons combined with Rosewater severing his relationship with Train show how Rosewater had established himself in the influential Republican community and had achieved the same acceptance that he had in Stevenson. Yet this time, he held valuable property and close connections with the local leadership. Finally, just like in Stevenson, Rosewater stopped expressing his politics once he had achieved acceptance. In the later months of 1864, Rosewater halted his critiques of the Democrats and simply followed the progress of their convention.

Rosewater also returned the same respect to the community that took him in. Shortly after Rosewater lost his managerial position, the new manager, a man by the name of Pomeroy, ran afoul of General Robert Byington Mitchell. A conflict arose over the payment of dispatches over the telegraph line. General Mitchell had Pomeroy arrested and threatened to seize control of the office. The dispute escalated and eventually made its way to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who initially sided with Rosewater's office before sending a letter denouncing them. Throughout the mess, Rosewater sided with the local Omaha office despite being upset over his demotion. He, along with the other operators, signed a letter of support for their new manager and sent it to

⁹⁵ Daily Journal, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

⁹⁶ Daily Journal, January- February 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Stanton. Unfortunately for them, the matter resolved in favor of General Mitchell, though Rosewater did not provide any further details.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Daily Journal, April 12-15, 1864, Rosewater Family Papers, MS503, box 4, folder 4, American Jewish Archives (AJC).

Conclusion Why Rosewater?

Edward Rosewater's journey both follows the traditional path of other Jews attempting to live on the peripheries of race and politics, but also stands out for his detailed journey between starkly different communities. Rosewater started his life and career in the abolitionist strongholds of Cleveland and Oberlin Ohio before embarking for the planter-dominated politics of the South. In both regions he tracked the politics and racial opinions of his neighbors and joined in when needed. While in Murfreesboro, Rosewater learned the importance of racial politics as he almost lost his job over it. Meanwhile, upon his return to Union lines, Rosewater found himself at odds with his coworkers over his amicable relations with southern sympathizers. By the time he settled in Omaha, Rosewater learned from his past experiences and realigned himself once again, this time abandoning past Democrat acquaintances for the company of the Republican leadership.

Meanwhile, throughout his stay in every community, the language in Rosewater's diary changed to match the predominant views of each community. This shows that each shift in political and racial view was almost certainly intentional and not a natural evolution. The brief stay in each region and the vast differences in ideas also support the intentional shifts. Furthermore, Rosewater consistently shrunk back to the periphery of politics once he found himself accepted in each location. He preferred to follow along, but not be at the forefront of local politics. Instead, he chose to follow the popular ideas and use them to further his own standing in each region.

Rather than being an example of Jewish abolitionism and a unique contributor to American history, Edward Rosewater provides a fascinating example of how Jews inserted themselves into new communities where residents might have been suspicious of these racial and

politically ambiguous newcomers.⁹⁸ Although historians have written about similar examples, Rosewater stands out among them for another reason. Unlike the examples provided by Rogoff and Rockoff, Rosewater travelled from North to South, to North again during one of the most politically divided periods in American history, tracing his journey and ideas along the way. He provides historians with a case study that transcends the racial and political divides between North and South rather than providing an experience with a singular community.

The question that remains is regards the legacy of Rosewater. From his entry on New Years Day, it's clear that he did not have anything to do with the Emancipation Proclamation. Furthermore, he is not an example of a Jewish abolitionist. Yet Rosewater's journey shows historians the racial and political flexibility of migratory Jews prior to Reconstruction. Rosewater quickly adapted to each new location, sometimes aligning himself before he even arrived. While in the abolitionist stronghold of Oberlin, Rosewater initially spoke highly of the Black residents. Upon receiving a more permanent job offer in the South, he quickly shifted his views of Oberlin, denouncing it as a "n----town." While in the South, Rosewater hinted at some personal reservations about slavery. Yet after an incident in which his whiteness was questioned, Rosewater started to express white superiority openly and never questioned the "peculiar institution" until his permanent migration back north. Finally, when realigning himself once again in the Republican stronghold of Omaha, Nebraska, Rosewater finally found a permanent community that saw him as one of their own and even abandoned an influential connection to stay within the graces of the local white community. Rosewater shows historians that Jews had to

⁹⁸ For more information about the perceptions of the Jewish "race," see Leonard Rogoff, "Is the Jew White?: The Racial Place of the Southern Jew." *American Jewish History* 85, no. 3 (1997): 195-230.

readjust themselves to achieve whiteness rather than rely on skin color alone. He, like other Jewish “nones,” adapted to local ideologies rather than embrace them.

While some gaps in the diary can be possibly filled by later books, memoirs, and his obituary, much of this information is contradictory or backed up by bad sources. Aside from falsely associating Rosewater with the Emancipation Proclamation, other sources claimed Rosewater participated in the Oberlin-Wellington rescue, befriending the local leaders along the way.⁹⁹ Meanwhile many obituaries published after his death listed Rosewater serving in the Union Army as early as 1861.¹⁰⁰ All of these claims can easily be disproven using his diary and surviving records from the National Archive. Yet this does not make the sources necessarily useless. Rosewater could likely provide a great example of how the past gets misinterpreted over time with actions being attributed to those who had no part. However this is a project for the another day.

Rosewater may not be the example of Jewish abolitionism or a contributor to key moments in American history, but he still established an impressive legacy with the friendships and acquaintances he made on his journeys. Furthermore, his detailed diary provides historians with an invaluable source for examining how Jews established themselves in new communities. Rather than being an example of a Jew at the forefront of politics, Rosewater provides a critical example of the Jews that preferred to live on the periphery, only expressing the politics of the majority when needing to.

⁹⁹ D.C. Dunbar, *Omaha Illustrated: A History of the Pioneer Period and the Omaha of Today, Embracing Reliable Statistics and Information, with Over Two Hundred Illustrations, Including Prominent Buildings, Portraits and Sketches of Leading Citizens* (Omaha: D.C. Dunbar and Co., 1888) 136.

¹⁰⁰ “Death Comes in the Way he Wished,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 1, 1906, 3.