
The Family Factor

Congressmen, Turnover, and the Burden of Public Service in the Early American Republic

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On February 15, 1818, Congressman Thomas Hill Hubbard wrote a heartfelt missive to his wife Phebe in Hamilton, New York. “I love to read your letters,” he began, “tho’ they always make me home sick.” Although he longed to be with his family, Hubbard found himself hundreds of miles away, toiling away at the business of government in the nation’s capital. “Principle and duty only,” he said, “reconcile me to Washington, while every thing that is delightful to the recollection forces me . . . to sigh for the joys of home, the dear society of ‘wife, children & friends.’” Serving his country came at a high price. He “regretted [his] ‘folly,’” he said, “in consenting to leave my family.” Hubbard was far from alone in these sentiments. At the boarding house where he lived, “The same regrets are every day repeated by almost every member of our Mess.” Hubbard did not have to complain for long. Before the next election, he decided not to stand for reelection, left Congress voluntarily, and went home to his wife and family.¹

During the first decades of the new nation’s existence, the decision to serve in Congress imposed immense personal sacrifices not only on those who were elected but also on the members’ wives and children. During

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1. Thomas H. Hubbard to Phebe Hubbard, Dec. 5, 1817, Thomas H. Hubbard Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter LOC).

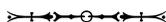
this era, a class of professional politicians had not yet emerged. In order to attend meetings of Congress, elected representatives had to leave their farms, families, homes, and businesses and live for long periods in distant capital cities. For a variety of reasons, most congressmen did not bring their loved ones with them to the seat of government. Without the emotional moorings of home, members often experienced their time in Congress as a kind of exile. Surrounded by hostile antagonists and intractable controversies, they did not have the solace of domestic life to cushion them against the blows of the political arena. Back home, wives were left to fend for themselves, having acquired the full responsibility for managing the farm, running the business, disciplining servants or slaves, and raising the children without their husbands' assistance.

From 1789 to 1828, Congress experienced one of the highest periods of turnover in its history: over one-third of all members did not return to their seats from one session to the next. What is even more surprising, many more congressmen retired voluntarily than left for other reasons. In fact, during this era more than two times as many members of Congress chose to walk away from their seats in the nation's highest legislature than were defeated at the polls. The decision to depart voluntarily had a pronounced effect on character of congressional careers. Those who left by choice served a significantly shorter time in Congress than those who departed for other reasons. They left, moreover, at a key period in the nation's political development.²

Previous studies have stressed the political, partisan, and institutional

2. Statistics on voluntary retirements are derived from my original analysis of data derived from the Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of the United States Congress, 1789–1996: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803) in the database from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997). See Appendix for a full explanation of the methodology and findings. Other scholars have found comparable rates of voluntary retirements in the early Congresses. See James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800–1828* (New York, 1966), 87–109; Allan G. Bogue, Jerome M. Clubb, Carroll R. McKibbin, and Santa A. Traugott, “Members of the House of Representatives and the Processes of Modernization, 1789–1960,” *Journal of American History* 63 (Sept. 1976), 295–96; H. Douglas Price, “Congress and the Evolution of Legislative ‘Professionalism,’” and Morris P. Fiorina, David W. Rohde, and Peter Wissel, “Historical Change in House Turnover,” in *Congress in Change: Evolution and Reform*, ed. Norman J. Ornstein (New York, 1975), 3–57.

variables that contributed to the high rates of voluntary retirement in Congress. Yet these narrowly political explanations are far from satisfactory or complete. None has definitively proven why turnover changed from session to session or why turnover remained so high for so long. They have also not explored regional differences in turnover rates or the importance of other, extrapolitical factors affecting turnover. Deploying insights from women's history and gender studies, this study takes a different tack. Drawing on sources such as correspondence between congressmen and their wives, the debate over congressional compensation that occurred in 1816, and an original statistical analysis of data from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research database (ICPSR), this essay argues that family considerations affected a member's willingness to continue his service in Congress. The growth of a companionate notion of marriage, an increasing sensitivity to familial responsibilities, and the emergence of a new masculine ideal had a pronounced role in influencing members' decisions. Ironically, at the very moment when the new national government desperately needed talented leaders, a significant proportion of congressmen chose to put the needs of their wives and families ahead of their willingness to serve the public good or advance their own political careers.



In the wake of the Revolution, American men and women soon began to realize that the business of governing presented a Herculean task, requiring an immense commitment of time, energy, and wisdom from a large number of individuals. The nature, size, and scope of the federal government had drastically changed. The new national government not only had greater authority but also required many more people to serve in its many elected offices and appointed positions. Under the new U.S. Constitution, Congress would now be a much larger body than it been under Articles of Confederation. When the first Congress met in 1789, the House of Representatives contained sixty-five members while the Senate had twenty-six members. As new states were added and the population grew, the size of Congress increased dramatically. By 1828, the House had acquired 202 members while the Senate had forty-eight.³

3. Young, *Washington Community*, 31, 87–109; Cynthia D. Earman, “Messing Around: Entertaining and Accommodating Congress, 1800–1830,” in *Establish-*

In contrast to the colonial era, government service in the early republic was open to individuals from a wider variety of social and economic backgrounds. Before the American Revolution, only the wealthiest men in the community who met high property requirements as well as certain religious tests were able to hold office. In contrast, the new Constitution did not require members of Congress to possess either a certain amount of wealth or of property, or to profess allegiance to any religion. Candidates simply needed to meet basic requirements related to their age, citizenship, and place of residence. It was also assumed that these individuals would be white and male.

The provision granting members a salary meant that those who were not independently wealthy might now be able to take a position in the federal government. By 1830 over 900 different men served in one or both houses of Congress. Then as now, a variety of complex factors impelled people to seek public office. Some sought fame; others pursued fortune; still others acted out of a sense of duty and commitment to the public good. For many, it was a complicated mixture of motives. “Character, attachment, [and] the desire of securing future honours,” noted one orator, “. . . press upon the public servants to a faithful discharge of their duties.”⁴

Whatever their reasons for wanting to serve, many members did not stay in Congress for long. A significant number left voluntarily after serving only one or two terms. As a result, for many years Congress had trouble attracting and retaining a stable, committed set of leaders who knew how the institution functioned and understood its unwritten norms. Although the precise rates waxed and waned over time, during the first half of the nineteenth century turnover averaged over 30 percent throughout the entire period. To put it another way, in the new nation’s early decades at least one member out of three did not return to take his seat in the next subsequent Congress. Turnover peaked in 1816 and then again in 1850, when nearly two-thirds of all sitting members did not return to the next session. For a variety of complex reasons, however,

ing Congress: The Removal to Washington, D.C., and the Election of 1800, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling and Donald R. Kennon (Athens, OH, 2005), 128–47.

4. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York, 1991), 287–305; William Tudor, *A Gratulatory Address, Delivered July 5th, 1790, before the Society of the Cincinnati, of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts; Published by their Order* (Boston, 1790), 12; Earman, “Messing Around,” 128.

after 1850 congressional turnover entered into a long period of decline. By the last decades of the twentieth century, the problem was no longer too much turnover but too little. In recent decades, congressional turnover in Congress has become almost negligible, averaging 10 percent or less in most elections.⁵

During the era from 1789 to 1828, many political leaders regarded high turnover among members in Congress as a serious problem. Although some saw it as a form of rotation in office, many others believed that the new federal government was not attracting the firm, strong leadership that the country needed in order to establish itself as a powerful nation. The authors of the Constitution, it should be noted, had not adopted term limits for any of the country's major offices: president, House of Representatives, or Senate. After the upheavals of the Confederation years, they concluded that too much turnover generated instability in governing bodies and undermined popular confidence in government. Continuity in leadership would create institutional memory, promote consistency in public policies, and instill greater faith in the new government's capacity to handle crises. Thus at a time when the new federal government was just getting underway and Congress was in desperate need of talent, high turnover posed a potential challenge to the new government's success.⁶

5. Bogue, et al., "Members of the House of Representatives and the Processes of Modernization," 295–96; Price, "Congress and the Evolution of Legislative 'Professionalism'" and Morris P. Fiorina, et al., "Historical Change in House Turnover," 3–57; "Turnover in Congress Hits an All-Time Low," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac 1988*, 44th ed. (Washington, DC, 1989), 55–56; "Turnover in Membership," *Guide to U.S. Elections*, 5th ed. (2 vols., Washington, DC, 2005), 2: 827–31.

6. Fiorina, et al., "Historical Change in House Turnover," 32; Samuel Kernell, "Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers: Ambition, Competition, and Rotation," *American Journal of Political Science* 21 (Nov. 1977), 669–93; Robert Struble, Jr., "House Turnover and the Principle of Rotation," *Political Science Quarterly* 94 (Winter 1979–80), 649–67. For contemporaneous expressions of concern about high turnover in Congress during the 1790s, see Jack N. Rakove, "The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George Washington," in *Beyond Confederation: Origins of the Constitution and American National Identity*, ed. Richard R. Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill, NC, 1987), 261–94. Note that Struble argues that the reasons for high turnover during the era of the first party system differed from those of the

The issue, however, was not simply the high rate of congressional turnover. Even more problematic was *why* so many members chose not to return. Evidence that may help explain this development can be derived from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) database. This online resource contains comprehensive information on the composition of each Congress along with biographical information on individual members (when available). This information has been aggregated and translated into quantitative form in a way that can be manipulated using standard statistical programs. Using this database, it is possible to identify which particular factors did—or did not—contribute to the high rate of voluntary departures that typified the congresses of the early national era. (See Appendix.)

From 1789 to 1828, the period from election of George Washington to the election of Andrew Jackson, more than two times as many members left Congress voluntarily than were forced out for other reasons. Fifteen percent of all departures from the Senates and House of Representatives can be considered “involuntary,” that is, the result of a member not being renominated for office or having suffered defeat at the polls. In contrast, an astounding 33 percent were the result of a member’s choice to leave of his own accord, either by resigning his seat or refusing to seek reelection. Unfortunately, because of a lack of biographical information, data for the remaining 52 percent of the departures is unavailable. Statisticians often assume that the unknown evidence would conform to similar patterns as the known data. If, however, the unknown cases are put aside, nearly 70 percent of all departures from Congress were voluntary rather than the result of electoral defeat.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the House of Representatives, the popular branch elected directly by the people, had a significantly higher rate of voluntary retirements (34 percent) than the Senate (20 percent), which was elected by the state legislatures and whose members served longer terms. Despite this disparity, the rate in both chambers was relatively high compared with other periods in American history. In practical terms, the high rate of voluntary departures meant that a significant

post-Jacksonian years, when, he argues, the spoils system changed the reasons for rotation in office. See Struble, “House Turnover,” 661–63.

number of congressmen simply walked away from their positions of national power and chose not serve in the next Congress.⁷

The high rate of voluntary retirements had a significant impact on the trajectory of congressional careers in the early republic. Those who left Congress voluntarily served an average of only 4.12 years as opposed to 5.24 years for those who left for other reasons. Although this difference may not seem large in numerical terms, the disparity attains the level of statistical significance. In other words, members who left Congress of their own volition had distinctly shorter careers than those who were defeated at the polls or left involuntarily for other reasons. At a time when Congress needed as many talented members as it could get, these defections represented a significant drain on the pool of talented individuals serving the nation at its highest levels.⁸

Traditionally, historians and political scientists have attributed the high voluntary departure rate to various political, structural, or institutional factors at work in the early national era. Some point to the new federal government's lack of prestige or Congress's lack of institutional privileges. Others point to the greater attractiveness of serving in government at the state or local levels. Still others point to the growing competition between Federalists and Republicans and the negative effects of partisanship on members' willingness to serve. Finally, historians such as Ronald Formisano have maintained that high levels of turnover reflected a decline in deference toward established elites and the emer-

7. For the period 1789–1828, the database contains 2,556 cases in which the reason for leaving is known and 1,498 cases in which the reason is not known. Note that this method counts *each time* a member leaves Congress as a separate “exit” or “retirement.” Thus the number of departures is larger than the number of individual Congressmen who served during this period. The precise figures are 33.5 percent of the members (House and Senate) retired voluntarily during the first twenty Congresses from 1789–1828. Only 14.7 percent left involuntarily. Statistics are derived from the database from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, and Carroll McKibbin, *Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of the United States Congress, 1789-1996: Merged Data* (ICPSR 7803), 10th ICPSR ed. For a complete description of the methodology used in this article, see Appendix.

8. This figure is derived from the 738 cases called “last known exit,” a smaller group than the 2,556 cases for whom the reasons for departing Congress are known. Statistical significance is achieved at the .05 level.

gence of a more participatory form of politics. None of these explanations, however, fully accounts for why voluntary departures became as important as they did during the first decades of the new nation's existence.⁹

In recent years, scholars have begun to explore the role of women and the importance of gender constructs in shaping the political culture of the early republic. They have also embraced a more capacious definition of politics that includes cultural practices, traditions, and activities that extended well beyond the realm of official electoral politics or institutional boundaries. Drawing on these insights, it is possible to provide an alternative explanation for the high voluntary retirement rate that takes into account larger social and cultural considerations. What political scientists have called "family factors" may have played a significant, and hitherto unexplored, role in the high rate of voluntary departures that characterized political life in the nation's first twenty congresses from 1789 to 1829.¹⁰

Analysis of quantitative evidence from the ICPSR database helps differentiate between factors that did have a statistically significant effect on voluntary departure rates from those that did not. The results are sometimes surprising. For example, the evidence indicates that a member's age at retirement was irrelevant to the decision to leave Congress voluntarily. Although a larger percentage of members in their 30s and 40s chose to depart voluntarily than members who were older, the differences were not statistically significant. The length of congressional sessions also did not have a significant effect. During the period between

9. Fiorina, et al., "Historical Change in House Turnover," 3–57; Kernell, "Toward Understanding 19th Century Congressional Careers," 669–93; Nelson W. Polsby, "The Institutionalization of the U.S. House of Representatives," *American Political Science Review* 62 (Mar. 1968), 144–68; Struble, "House Turnover and the Principle of Rotation," 649–67; Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s–1840s* (New York, 1983), 41–54; Ronald P. Formisano, "Deferential-Participant Politics: The Early Republic's Political Culture, 1789–1840," *American Political Science Review* 68 (June 1974), 473–87; Stephen Erickson, "The Entrenching of Incumbency: Reelections in the U.S. House of Representatives, 1790–1994," *CATO Journal* 14 (Winter 1995), 397–420.

10. Diane Kincaid Blair and Ann R. Henry coined the term "family factor" in their article on a modern state legislature in "The Family Factor in State Legislative Turnover," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 6 (Feb. 1981), 55–68.

1789 and 1828, each session of Congress tended to last for a fairly substantial amount of time, ranging from three to six months. The single longest meeting lasted for over eight months, extending from early November 1811 to July 1812. The Fifth Congress (1797–1799) actually held three separate sessions that collectively took up most of a year. Despite variations in length, however, the number of days in a session did not produce any statistically significant changes in the rate of voluntary departures from Congress from term to term.

Even more surprising, party affiliation did not produce a discernible impact on the rate of voluntary retirements. Although the period from 1789 to 1828 was an era of fractious party conflict, members of both parties departed Congress voluntarily at similar rates: 38 percent for Federalists and 34 percent for Republicans. Contrary, then, to what one might expect, Federalists did not leave Congress voluntarily simply because they were fearful of facing difficult electoral battles against their surging Democratic-Republican opponents. At the same time, despite their growing political power and popularity, Republicans chose to depart Congress voluntarily at rates that were comparable to those of their political adversaries. If growing party competition did indeed influence the decision to retire voluntarily, it affected members of both parties equally, suggesting the importance of extrapolitical factors in shaping the members' choices.

Of all the variables tested, the one that had the most pronounced effect on voluntary retirement rates was the distance between the member's home state and the national capital. Although the correlation was not perfect, and there was one important regional exception, in general members from regions farther away from the capital departed voluntarily from Congress at significantly higher rates than those who hailed from areas closer to the seat of government. It is important to understand, however, that the national seat of government was itself a moving target. From May 1789 to December 1790, Congress met in New York City; from December 1790 to May 1800, in Philadelphia; and after November 1800, in the nation's new permanent capital at Washington, DC.¹¹

As early as the second Congress in 1790 it was becoming clear that many members—27 percent, in fact—had made a voluntary choice not

11. Fergus M. Bordewich, *Washington: The Making of the American Capital* (New York, 2008).

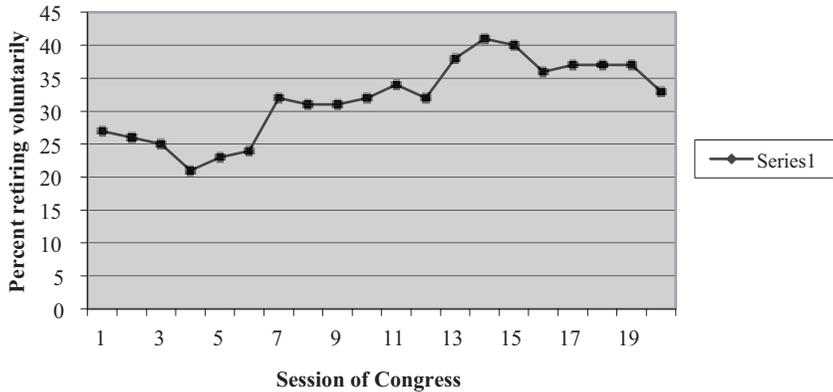


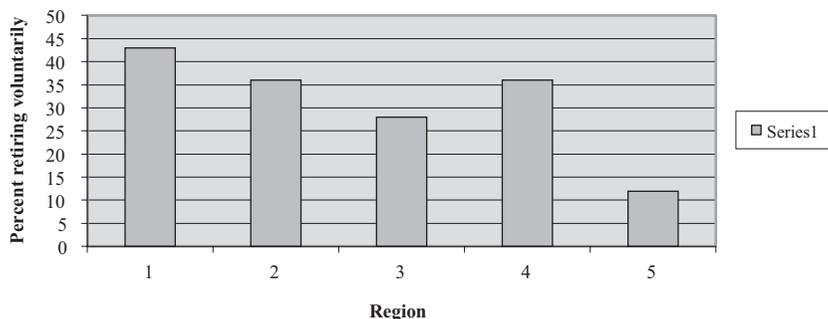
Figure 1: Voluntary Retirements in the U.S. Congress (Senators and Representatives 1789–1828)

Information derived from the Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of United States Congress, 1789–1996: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803) in the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research database, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997).

to return to the next Congress. Throughout the 1790s, the percentage of voluntary retirements hovered around 24 percent; that is, about one out of every four members voluntarily chose to leave their seats and not return for the next session. After 1800 when the government moved to Washington, DC, this pattern became even more pronounced. During the Seventh Congress from 1800 to 1802, the first full Congress that met exclusively in Washington, the voluntary retirement rate accelerated dramatically, jumping from 24 percent to 32 percent, a statistically significant difference. Although the voluntary retirement rate fluctuated somewhat in the following years, it generally continued to increase, peaking at 40 percent in 1817 and remaining fairly high until 1850, when it reached another peak, and then began a slow decline. (See Figure 1.)¹²

This regional pattern of voluntary retirements suggests that distance itself played a key role in influencing the choice to depart voluntarily. Members from states closest to Washington, DC, were among the least likely to retire voluntarily from office while those who lived farther away

12. Bogue, et al., “Members of the House of Representatives and the Process of Modernization,” 295–96; Price, “Congress and the Evolution of Legislative ‘Professionalism,’” and Morris P. Fiorina, et al., “Historical Change in House Turnover,” 3–57.

Table 1: Voluntary Retirements in Congress by Region, 1789–1828

1 = New England states (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont)

2 = Middle states (New York, New Jersey, Delaware, Pennsylvania, Maryland)

3 = Old South states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky)

4 = Northwest Territory states and Missouri (Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Missouri)

5 = New South states (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee)

Information derived from the Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of United States Congress, 1789–1996: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803) in the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research database, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997).

were, in general, more likely to do so. In the so-called “Old South” states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Kentucky, the voluntary departure rate was only 28 percent during the period from 1789 to 1828. In contrast, members from states that were slightly farther from Washington had slightly higher retirement rates. In what has been called the “Middle States” region and “Northwest Territory” region, voluntary retirement rates averaged 36 percent. Most significantly, members from states that were more remote from the seat of government, in the “New England” region, had the highest voluntary departure rate, averaging 43 percent for the period under consideration. (See Table 1.)

The relationship between distance to the national capital in Washington, DC, and voluntary retirement rates is even more dramatic when comparing individual states. Between 1789 and 1828, only 24 percent of those from Virginia, which shared a border with the federal district, left voluntarily while about 60 percent of the members from far-distant Maine—over 500 miles away from the seat of government—chose to retire of their own volition. Although only 29 percent of nearby Maryland’s members departed, 50 percent of the delegates from New Hamp-

Table 2: Voluntary Retirement Rate among Members of Congress by State (1789–1828) (rounded to nearest whole number)

Maine	60%	Illinois	32%
New Hampshire	51%	Georgia	29%
Ohio	48%	Maryland	29%
Connecticut	43%	South Carolina	26%
Massachusetts	42%	Kentucky	25%
New York	41%	Virginia	24%
Vermont	40%	Alabama	18%
Pennsylvania	37%	Louisiana	14%
North Carolina	36%	Tennessee	11%
New Jersey	35%	Indiana	0%
Rhode Island	34%	Missouri	0%
Delaware	33%	Mississippi	0%

Information derived from the Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of United States Congress, 1789–1996: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803) in the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research database, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997).

shire—over 400 miles from DC—left Congress voluntarily during this period. Similarly, representatives from Delaware, residing only 100 or so miles from Washington, departed voluntarily only 33 percent of the time, while members from Ohio who lived 300 or more miles away chose not to return 48 percent of the time.

Nevertheless, one important regional exception to this pattern did emerge. Members coming from the states of the so-called “New South” region (Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee) retired voluntarily only about 12 percent of the time, even though they often lived in places that were 500–1,000 miles away from Washington. Despite this exception, which will be discussed later in this essay, the distance between a member’s home state and the seat of government represents the most salient variable in explaining voluntary retirements in the early congresses. (See Table 2.)

In fact, distance can be considered a proxy for the burdens imposed on congressmen as a result of their separation from hearth and home. In the early years of the new republic, those elected to Congress often had to travel long distances to the national capital and live for months at a time at a place far away from their homes and families. During the nation’s first decades, travel was time-consuming and expensive, easier by water than by land. Roads were often little more than rutted dirt paths. On the best road in the nation, the post road between Boston and

Baltimore, travelers could not expect to travel more than fifty or sixty miles per day. Thus representatives from many parts of the country resided in places that were days or weeks away from their homes and families. Even for those living in more proximate locations, it was hard to find time to go home while Congress was in session. Nonetheless, most members did not bring their wives and families with them. The inconvenience of travel, the cost of supporting two residences, and the need for someone to maintain the family farm or business made the idea of relocating the whole family for the duration of congressional meetings undesirable or impractical.¹³

As challenging as it might have been for a member to bring his family with him when the seat of government was located in fashionable capitals such as New York or Philadelphia, it became almost impossible once the seat of government shifted to Washington, DC. Created out of the wilderness, Washington would be for many decades a skeletal city, lacking in the basic amenities of a comfortable urban existence. Houses were scarce, rudimentary, and expensive. Food and servants were difficult to obtain. Rain or snow turned the wide streets into muddy rivulets, making travel within the city cumbersome and unpleasant. The place was a breeding ground for disease, especially malaria and dysentery.¹⁴

Conditions in Washington appalled many new congressmen. On arriving in 1801, Representative Ebenezer Mattoon of New Hampshire wrote to a friend, “If I wished to punish a culprit, I would send him to do penance in this place, [and] oblige him to walk about this city. [C]ity do I call it? This [is a] swamp—this lonesome dreary swamp, secluded from every delightful or pleasing thing—except the *name* of the place [Washington], which to be sure I reverence.” As late as 1824, Ohio congressman Duncan McArthur told his daughter in Ohio that although there were “some pretty good buildings” in the capital, they were “in

13. Henry Adams, *The United States in 1800* (1889; repr., Ithaca, NY, 1974), 8–10; Charles O. Paullin, *Atlas of the Historical Geography of the United States* (Washington, DC, 1932), plate 138a. Information on length of congressional sessions from Charles Lanman, *Dictionary of the United States Congress, Compiled as a Manual of Reference for the Legislator and Statesman* (Washington, DC, 1866), 430–31.

14. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Washington: A History of the Capital, 1800–1950* (Princeton, NJ, 1962); Young, *Washington Community*, 22–26; Ihna Thayer Frary, *They Built the Capitol* (1940; repr., New York, 1969), 55–59.

such detached clumps, and so much vacant or unoccupied ground between them, that it scarsly deserves the name of a City.” After meetings of Congress had ended, most members usually fled the place. Not surprisingly, after the move to Washington the rate of voluntary departures from Congress increased significantly, jumping from 24 percent to 34 percent. Significantly, too, after 1802 voluntary retirements remained over 30 percent almost until the Civil War.¹⁵

Only a few members dared to bring their wives into such conditions. In 1807–1808, for example, only nine members out of 130 Representatives and 34 Senators brought their spouses to stay for the duration. This pattern was slow to change. Even in 1845, fewer than half of the Senators and only one-third of the Representatives brought their wives or families with them to the capital. While Congress was in session, some wives did manage to arrange a short visit to see their husbands or attend events during the social season. Few, however, stayed for long. After a couple of weeks or a month, most left in order to attend to matters back home. Despite their relatively small numbers, women in Washington did have a presence and exert an influence that far exceeded their numbers. They attended meetings of Congress, where they sat in the public galleries and avidly followed the debates. As hostesses, they sponsored parties and held dinners, which created opportunities for members to interact with each other in less politicized, more congenial settings. They also used their informal influence to secure jobs and patronage appointments for friends and family members. Women thus provided the social glue that made Washington society cohere.¹⁶

Yet because most Congressmen came to the capital without their wives and families, most of them essentially lived as bachelors. Some rented houses; others lived in one of the many boarding houses scattered

15. Ebenezer Mattoon to Thomas Dwight, Mar. 2, 1801 Sedgwick Family Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston; Duncan McArthur quoted in Robert Tinkler, *James Hamilton of South Carolina* (Baton Rouge, LA, 2004), 50; Frary, *They Built the Capitol*, 55.

16. Green, *Washington*, 155; Earman, “Messing Around,” 134; Martha Jefferson Randolph, Nov. 23, 1807, *The Family Letters of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Edwin Morris Betts and James Adam Bear, Jr. (Charlottesville, VA, 1966), 315–16; Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville, VA, 2000), 4–10.

throughout the city. In 1807, over half of all congressmen lived in such settings. Even as late as 1828, about one-fourth of the members still resided in boarding houses, the conditions of which, according to Representative John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, resembled nothing so much as “a boarding school, or a monastery.” Expressing his displeasure at returning to Washington alone, Theodore Sedgwick of Massachusetts complained that he felt like “a prisoner returning to his confinement.” Others echoed this sentiment. Jeremiah Mason told his wife, “I live a hermit’s life here.” Harrison Gray reported that as a result of his living conditions he had turned into a “disconsolate old Bachelor.” Many senators and representatives thus regarded congressional service as a kind of self-imposed exile, a duty to endure rather than a path to fame, glory, and greatness.¹⁷

One of the most common themes in the members’ letters was their loneliness and homesickness. Although the men’s jobs kept them busy, they missed their wives and families. “The perusal of your letters,” Thomas Hubbard wrote to his wife, “is the greatest pleasure I can possibly enjoy while separated from my dear family. It is now 4 in the Evening and I can see you all in imagination seated around the fire talking of our dear little Children! Oh! How I long to see them and you and all who reside under your roof.” Nothing really compensated for their loss. “I seek a substitute for wife and children, in vain,” Louis McLane of Delaware remarked. “The brilliant displays of the drawing room, and the gay and lively scenes of the French Minister’s Saturday night parties, afford me but little pleasure, and I go more as a duty, and gratify my curiosity than from any other motive.” John Steele of North Carolina explained the dilemma to his daughter: “The truth is, My dear child, I am perfectly tired of living from home. . . . If I move the family here I can save no

17. Young, *Washington Community*, 71, 89, 101, 268n44; Earman, “Messing Around,” 128–47; John Randolph in *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, 14th Congress (Washington, DC, 1854), 1158; Jeremiah Mason to Mary Mason, Dec. 4, 1814, in *Memoir and Correspondence of Jeremiah Mason*, ed. George Stillman Hillard (Cambridge, MA, 1873), 108; Harrison Gray Otis to Sally Foster Otis, Nov. 20, 1797, in Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis, Federalist, 1765–1848* (2 vols., Boston, 1913); Theodore Sedgwick quoted in Timothy Kenslea, *The Sedgwicks in Love: Courtship, Engagement, and Marriage in the Early Republic* (Boston, 2006), 24.

part of my salary. If separated from them, I am unhappy. What then is best?"¹⁸

Members of Congress were not, of course, the only federal officials who were separated from their families because of their positions. Federal judges, cabinet officials, and members of the bureaucracy also often left their families behind to serve in the new national government. They too experienced the emotional distress of separation and the pains of distance. Nonetheless, the issue was particularly poignant for senators and members of the House of Representatives. Congressmen had to face repeated scrutiny from voters or state legislators: every two years in the case of representatives and every six years in the case of senators. In addition, many more members of Congress were married than were single. For example, among the members of the first House of Representatives, 84 percent (54 of 65 members) had spouses. If a bachelor did make his way to Congress, the ladies of the capital quickly went into action, arranging matches and trying to marry him off. For most members, then, separation from hearth and home was a dismal but inevitable fact of congressional life.¹⁹

With each election, members of Congress had to revisit their decision to stand for office and decide whether the sacrifices they made were worth it. For example, soon after arriving in Washington for the first time, Abijah Bigelow of Massachusetts admitted to his wife that he was "almost home sick." Yet he bravely reaffirmed his commitment to public service and vowed to "make myself as contented as I can" for the dura-

18. Thomas H. Hubbard to Phebe Hubbard, Dec. 5, 1817, Thomas H. Hubbard Papers, LOC; Louis McLane to Kitty McLane, Jan. 19, 1818, Louis McLane Papers, LOC; John Steele to Ann Steele, Jan. 3, 1801, John Steele Papers, Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill (hereafter UNC). On the general theme of homesickness in U.S. history, see Susan J. Matt, *Homesickness: An American History* (New York, 2011).

19. For example, many of the same themes regarding homesickness and isolation can be found in the life and career of William Wirt, who served as Attorney General under James Monroe and John Quincy Adams. See Anya Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic: Elizabeth and William Wirt and the Companionate Ideal* (Baltimore, 1998). For figures on the number of bachelors in the first Congress, see Rakove, "The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George Washington," 283. For a discussion of attempts to find spouses for unmarried members of Congress, see Earman, "Messing Around," 146.

tion. Nonetheless, a year later, he was as dejected as ever. Expressing his feelings in verse, he wrote, “Whether alone, and musing in my room,/In Congress hall, or round this place I roam,/Nature’s attractive powers my thoughts control,/My wife, my children occupy my soul.” These feelings led some members to question whether their personal sacrifices to serve the public were worth it. Pained at leaving his beloved wife behind in Boston, Congressman Harrison Gray Otis realized “that my habits were naturally domestic and . . . my happiness was to be found only in the bosom of [my] family.” Contemplating whether he would leave his seat in the House of Representatives after his term was over, he told his wife, “I must . . . consider my separation from you under any circumstances, as a chasm in my existence, which no honors can fill up; and which having once passed, I shall not consent to . . . by leaving you again.” If being apart from wives and families caused emotional distress, the thought of voluntarily submitting to additional years of personal unhappiness was often too much for members to bear.²⁰



Particular social and cultural factors existing in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries may have intensified the experience of separation for both husbands and wives. At this time, sentimentalized notions of domesticity as well as a commitment to companionate marriage were on the rise. By the late eighteenth century, the older notion of marriage as primarily an economic union between spouses was giving way. The newer ideal of companionate marriage emphasized the desirability of affection between husband and wife and a sense of partnership between spouses. Although not all marriages were love matches, husbands and wives were encouraged to treat each other with tenderness and compassion, displaying sensitivity toward their partner’s needs and feelings. The notion of patriarchy was also changing. Companionate marriage promoted a vision of mutual respect and partnership between men and

20. “Letters of Abijah Bigelow, Member of Congress, to His Wife, 1810–1815,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 40, part 2 (1931), 365; Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, Dec. 25, 1814, Bigelow Family Papers, Folio 1, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA (hereafter AAS); Harrison Gray Otis to Sally Foster Otis, Dec. 3, 1797, in Morison, *Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, 1: 236.

women. While husbands and fathers continued to be regarded as the head of the household, spouses were expected to consult with one another on important matters and work together toward common goals.²¹

The letters between congressmen and their wives reveal the extent to which both men and women envisioned marriage in terms of the companionate ideal. The letters also show how separation from one's spouse made fulfillment of that ideal difficult, if not impossible. Wives experienced significant emotional stresses and strains while their husbands were away attending to the nation's public business. Hannah Gardner Bigelow, for example, referred to herself as being in a "Widowed State." Charity Mangum noted that although she kept busy with the couple's young daughter, she longed for the day when her husband would return to North Carolina. "When I think of writing to you I then feel my nothingness," she said. "Words are inadequate to express what I feel." Rebecca Faulkner Foster of Massachusetts expressed her wish that her husband's public career would be a brief one. As she bluntly told him, "This is but a Short life and I wish to enjoy it. But it is no way of enjoying it to be seperated from our best friends." Catherine (Kitty) McLane's sentiments were perhaps the most poignant. "I do not know how time passes with you," she wrote her husband in 1824, "but with *I, myself*, its swiftness is much retarded, by your absence. Every moment is busily occupied, tis true, but still I am all alive to the void & turning to look for you with the same faithfulness, 'as the sun-flower turns on her God.'" ²²

Letters from congressmen's wives also reveal the degree to which a husband's absence placed new, and often unwanted, burdens on his wife. Domestic life went on in the absence of the man of the house. Politicians' wives routinely reported the birth of children, conceived during their husbands' visits home, who would not see their legislator-fathers until

21. Jan Lewis, *The Pursuit of Happiness: Family and Values in Jefferson's Virginia* (Cambridge, UK, 1983); Cynthia A. Kierner, *Beyond the Household: Women's Place in the Early South, 1700-1835* (Ithaca, NY, 1998); Lisa Wilson, *Ye Heart of a Man: The Domestic Life of Men in Colonial New England* (New Haven, CT, 1999); Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*.

22. Hannah Bigelow to Abijah Bigelow, Dec. 27, 1812, Bigelow Family Papers, Box 1, AAS; Charity Mangum to Willie Mangum, Dec. 31, 1825, Willie P. Mangum Papers, #31179, Vol. 1, LOC; Rebecca Faulkner to Dwight Foster, Jan. 9, 1794, Foster Family Papers, Box 4, AAS; Kitty McLane to Louis McLane, May 4, 1824, Louis McLane Papers, LOC.

they were several months old. Congressman Stevenson Archer wrote to his wife, “I anticipate the birth of a lovely infant in whose countenance the image of Heaven is displayed.” Unfortunately, however, he would not be able to join her for the happy event. “I should start immediately [for home] were it not that an [important] question is before Congress, & I shall be [required] to remain until it is decided.” Mothers had to assume the sole responsibility for childrearing. Some men took an active role in providing instructions for how their children should be raised. Writing to his young daughter, William Wirt, a Virginia lawyer who later became the U.S. Attorney General, said, “Tell your dear mother that she shall do as she pleases, in every thing, except the school arrangements for her children.” Other politicians simply absolved themselves of their parental duties while they were away. Much to his wife’s dismay, James Hillhouse served in Congress for almost twenty years from 1791 to 1810. His wife, Rebecca Woolsey Hillhouse, remained in Connecticut to raise their five children, mostly on her own. Expressing her frustration with her difficult domestic situation, she told her husband in 1803, “If it is as difficult [to] act in national affairs, in proportion to their magnitude as it is in a family, I wonder things do not go worse.” Few women imagined, and even fewer enjoyed, the prospect of raising children without the children’s father to provide advice, assistance, and discipline on the spot.²³

Difficult or tragic events sometimes transpired during the husband’s absence which the wife had to handle alone. Family members got sick and sometimes died. After previously suffering the death of two children from smallpox, John Breckinridge of Kentucky commented to his wife, Polly, that he frequently opened her letters “with trembling Hands lest they should contain some distressing information of your Health, or some of the children.” From a distance, husbands could do almost nothing to assist their wives. As Benjamin Huntington told his sick wife, it was especially difficult to be separated “when you Stand in greater need of my Services aid & Support [more] than ever before.” In 1817, Congressman Daniel Webster reported that it had taken him four days to

23. Stevenson Archer to Mrs. Pamela Archer, Dec. 12, 1811, Ms. 1948, Box 1, Maryland Historical Society, Baltimore; William Wirt quoted in Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 115; Karen Kauffman, “James and Rebecca Hillhouse: Public and Private Commitments in the Early Republic,” *Connecticut History* 38 (Fall 1999), 105–26, quote on 113.

travel from Philadelphia to Boston. He arrived at home just in time to witness his young daughter's death. Such experiences took an emotional toll on both partners.²⁴

With their husbands gone for extended periods, women also had more duties of a practical nature to perform. Like Abigail Adams during the American Revolution, congressmen's wives had to assume day-to-day responsibility for managing the farm, overseeing the family business, and keeping the family financially afloat while their husbands were away. Much of the correspondence from husbands to wives concerns details about money matters, buying or selling land, the state of crops, disciplining of servants or slaves, or instructions regarding the family's financial affairs. John Steele, for example, instructed his wife about when to slaughter the pigs, how much corn to put up, and whether to whip or sell certain slaves. Mary Stanford of North Carolina decided to use the money sent by her husband in 1804 to purchase "grammers for the children, & leather for a band for the cotton machine." Such responsibilities, as one member acknowledged to his wife, were "great and perplexing." Whether or not they wanted to, congressmen's wives, then, were forced to assume the role of what Laurel Ulrich has called, "the deputy husband."²⁵

Some marriages weathered the separations better than others; some spouses functioned better apart than others. To be sure, not all congressional marriages were marked with tenderness and affection. In these cases, distance had deleterious effects, exacerbating underlying fears, suspicions, or resentments in the relationship. For the men, life in the nineteenth-century equivalent of a fraternity house presented many chal-

24. John Breckinridge to Polly Breckinridge, Jan. 18, 1804, Breckinridge Family Papers, LOC; Benjamin Huntington to Anne Huntington, Mar. 14, 1790, in *The Huntington Letters, in the Possession of Julia Chester Wells*, ed. W. D. McCrackan (New York, 1897), 92; Daniel Webster to Ezekiel Webster, Jan. 19, 1817, *The Papers of Daniel Webster*, ed. Charles M. Wiltse (14 vols., Hanover, NH, 1974), 1: 209.

25. John Steele to Mary Steele, Oct. 8, 1798, John Steele Papers, UNC; Mary Stanford to Richard Stanford, Jan. 25, 1804, Richard Stanford Papers, UNC; Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, Dec. 26, 1813, Bigelow Family Papers, Folio 1, AAS; Woody Holton, *Abigail Adams: A Life* (New York, 2009), esp. 144–55; Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York, 1982).

lenges and temptations. For those so inclined, Washington offered numerous opportunities for falling into grasp of an array of vices, including drinking, gambling, and prostitution. Although Washington's most notorious brothels would not appear until the middle decades of the nineteenth century, it was well known that if men chose to do so, they could find women of easy virtue in the nation's capital. After 1825, when Henry Clay's wife Lucretia declined to accompany her husband to Washington, reports of his womanizing swirled throughout the capital and beyond. Similarly, Elizabeth Wirt, wife of William Wirt of Virginia, the Attorney General under Presidents James Monroe and John Quincy Adams, also heard troubling rumors about her itinerant husband's infidelity.²⁶

Aware of these pitfalls, some wives tried to keep a tight rein on their husbands, repeatedly reminding them of their domestic responsibilities and marital commitments. Hannah Bigelow, for example, cautioned her husband against overindulgence in cards and billiards, for which she knew he had a weakness. Mary Stanford, upon learning that her husband had "'denounced' all claim to religion," wrote to him in tears, reporting that she had wept all through the previous night for his soul. Mary Steele of North Carolina voiced concerns about rumors of her husband's infidelity. Attempting to allay her fears, John Steele replied, "The days of my youthful follies are gone. I could wish never to remember them but for repentance. I am now in the pursuit not of pleasure but of fame and wealth, and there is I do assure you not a woman in the world with whom I would rather share both than with yourself." Other husbands, however, chafed under their wives' rebukes. Job Pierson told his wife in no uncertain terms, "I hate scolding in a wife, even when 400 miles distant, and the lecture I received tho' the fault was not mine, is still ringing in my ears." Separations put enormous pressure on both partners. Problems that might have been suppressed or repressed at home sometimes came to the surface when spouses were apart. Whatever the case, the separations caused by attendance at Congress most certainly

26. Robert V. Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (New York, 1991), 72, 251–52, 358, 480–81, 765, 825; Elizabeth Barthold O'Brien, "Illicit Congress in the Nation's Capital: The History of Mary Ann Hall's Brothel," *Historical Archaeology* 39 (Spring 2005), 47–58; Jabour, *Marriage in the Early Republic*, 91; Earman, "Messing Around," 144–47.

diminished women's hopes that their own marriages would soon approach the companionate ideal.²⁷

Although the distress of separation was not unique to this period, men and women of the early republic may have experienced the emotions resulting from their separation in a heightened or especially intensive fashion. By the late eighteenth century, the growth of a sentimentalized vision of domestic life and a notion of masculinity that valorized emotional expression influenced the way congressmen and their wives perceived their relationship. During the first decades of the new nation's existence, newer ideals of masculinity were replacing the classical republican notion that emphasized martial ardor and aristocratic notions of honor. Under the influence of Enlightenment ideals of self-cultivation and benevolence, "men of feeling" were encouraged to revel in their refined sensibilities and seek heightened levels of emotional understanding. In addition, the growing popularity of novels such as *Pamela* and *Clarissa* led to greater scrutiny of the relationship between the sexes. When writing to their wives and children, members of Congress drew on this new language of "sensibility" to demonstrate the extent to which their own emotions were finely attuned to the feelings of others, especially those closest to them. Moreover, in order to affirm their identity as "men of feeling," congressmen may have wished to stress their domestic longings and pain at separation from hearth and home while deemphasizing their political ambitions, sense of competitiveness toward their political adversaries, or feelings of relief at being free of their family obligations. Yet even if their rhetoric was exaggerated, their deeds confirmed their words. As we have seen, an extraordinarily high percentage of congressmen left Congress voluntarily in order to return home, at least in part to be with their wives and families.²⁸

27. Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, Dec. 29, 1810, "Letters of Abijah Bigelow, Member of Congress," 312; Mary Stanford to Richard Stanford, Jan. 25, 1804, # 2096-2, Richard Stanford Papers, UNC; John Steele to Mary Steele, Oct. 8, 1798, John Steele Papers, UNC; Job Pierson to his wife, Jan. 17, 1832, Job Pierson Family Papers, # 61531, Manuscript Division, LOC.

28. G. J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 1992); Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Ruth H. Bloch, "The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13 (Autumn 1987), 37-58; Andrew Burstein, "The Political Character of Sympathy," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21 (Winter 2001), 601-32.

One region, however, substantially deviated from the overall pattern of voluntary retirements. Although the overall rate of voluntary departures for the period from 1789 to 1828 averaged 33%, members coming from the “New South” region, which consisted of Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Tennessee, voluntarily departed from Congress only 12 percent of the time. While members from this region had to travel very long distances to the seat of government (some parts of Louisiana, for example, were more than 1,000 miles from Washington) and be separated from their families for very long periods of time, more often than not they chose to retain their seats in Congress from session to session.

Why, however, were congressmen from the New South region less likely than members from other parts of the country to depart Congress voluntarily? A number of explanations are possible. First of all, during the period from 1789–1828, these states, which had recently been admitted to the union (Tennessee in 1796; Louisiana in 1812; Mississippi in 1817; and Alabama in 1819) had not yet sent as many congressmen to Washington as many of the other states. In fact, they had elected a total of only seventeen individuals by 1828. Thus the sample size was smaller for the New South than for other regions. It is possible that turnover effects may not have yet appeared.

At the same time, other more substantial explanations are possible. Slavery obviously had an impact on voluntary retirement rates. All of the states with the highest voluntary departures rates (above 30 percent) were north of Maryland; none possessed a substantial or rapidly growing slave population. In contrast, in states that had lower voluntary retirement rates (below 30 percent), all (with the exception of Indiana) had proportionately large slave populations or small but rapidly growing slave populations. (See Tables 1 and 2.)

After the Missouri Compromise, members from slave states—especially those from the newly admitted slave states of the “New South”—may have felt it behooved them to remain in Congress from session to session to defend their interest in human property. As they saw it, their states’ economic interests may well have superseded their own familial considerations or personal levels of distress. In a related

For a discussion of epistolary conventions in the eighteenth century, see Konstantin Dierks, *In My Power: Letter Writing and Communications in Early America* (Philadelphia, 2009) and Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Late Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2010).

vein, although norms of companionate marriage existed throughout the country, its power may have been somewhat attenuated in the slaveholding South. Given the imperatives of maintaining a slave society, southerners remained more hierarchical and patriarchal in their family relations than their counterparts in the North. As a result, members of Congress from the South in general and the New South in particular may have been less willing than those from other regions to bend their needs, interests, and ambitions to the demands of domesticity and sensibility. Southern men, moreover, may have defined masculinity more in terms of honor rather than feelings.²⁹

In broad terms, however, the domestic ideal did continue to influence congressional behavior. In 1816, Congress debated the question of increased compensation for its members. During this debate, many individual congressmen referred to the problem of separation from wives and families as a major reason for justifying a pay increase. Ever since the new Constitution went into operation, members had been paid a per diem of \$6 per day while Congress was in session. The fact that members received compensation at all was an important feature of the new Constitution, allowing those who were not independently wealthy to consider serving in the new federal government. Indeed, many members who served in the early Congresses did not come from the ranks of the traditional elite, nor did they necessarily possess sizeable fortunes. While committed to public service, they often found that a member's salary barely provided them with the means for their own subsistence. On its own, such compensation could never support an entire family in the nation's capital.³⁰

In addition, members found that the value of their compensation had

29. Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996); Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York, 1995); Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1998); Adam Rothman, *Slave Country: American Expansion and the Origins of the Deep South* (Cambridge, MA, 2005); Robert Pierce Forbes, *The Missouri Compromise and Its Aftermath: Slavery and the Meaning of America* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007), 33–120; Kierner, *Beyond the Household*, 169, 180–211.

30. Rakove, "Structure of Politics," 278–83; C. Edward Skeen, "'Vox Populi, Vox Dei': The Compensation Act of 1816 and the Rise of Popular Politics," *Journal of the Early Republic* 6 (Autumn 1986), 256–58.

diminished over time. By 1816, the nation's cost of living had doubled since 1789 and the currency in which members were paid was worth only 75 percent of its face value. In light of these factors, many members believed that they needed—and deserved—greater compensation for their service on behalf of the nation. In March 1816, a bill was proposed to change the compensation scheme from a per diem reimbursement to a straight salary of \$1,500 per session.³¹

As they debated the compensation issue, family factors played an important role in the discussion. As several members pointed out, congressional service imposed a burden on both the individual and his family. Not only did service in Congress impose economic hardships on those who had to leave their farms and businesses behind for months at a time, it also required immense personal sacrifices. These domestic issues, it was said, should be taken into account when considering the issue of congressional pay. As John C. Calhoun of South Carolina pointed out, “a majority of the members come from three to eight hundred miles. In serving the country, they are not only obliged to be absent a great part of the year from their families; but what is almost equally distressing, to be absent a great distance.” An inadequate salary made it impossible for most members to be able to afford to bring their wives and families to live with them in Washington. The results were dispiriting. As Joseph Hopkinson of Pennsylvania commented, “All hearts would acknowledge that the comforts of home and family were superior to what could be found here. The intervals between the daily sessions were spent in gloomy and solitary meditation, or in dissipation. This . . . would not be the case if we were enabled to bring a part at least of our families with us.” John Randolph of Virginia was even more forthright. Alluding to “a subject of some delicacy,” Randolph indicated that “the demoralizing effect of being separated from home for six months in the year” might lead to infidelity. In fact, rumors of liaisons between members of Congress and local women of ill repute frequently circulated throughout the capital. One observer pointedly told printer Matthew Carey in 1820 that many members kept mistresses and many others “fall but one degree short of that.” With sufficient compensation, the threat to members’ marital vows could be thwarted.³²

31. Skeen, “Vox Populi,” 256.

32. *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States*, 14th Congress, 1183, 1184, 1186. For a discussion of rumors reporting members’ infidelity, see Earman, “Messing Around,” 146–47.

Members also noted the relationship between low compensation, separation from the family, and high turnover in Congress. It was “a well-known fact,” according to Robert Wright of Maryland, “that many of the most valuable members of Congress, balancing between the painful separation from their families and the great expense beyond the means of men of moderate fortunes to sustain, had retired, and many more had contemplated it.” If congressmen could bring their wives and families with them to the capital, they might be willing to serve the public for longer periods of time. Henry Clay of Kentucky, a man of some wealth, commented that he had sometimes brought his family with him to the capital and at other times had left them behind. In either case, he said, he “had never been able to make both ends meet at the termination of Congress.” If he had trouble, then it was not surprising, he said, that men of more modest means were unable to bring their families with them. Increased compensation would not only improve the members’ morale, it would also strengthen their finances, help preserve their morality, and lower turnover rates. As John C. Calhoun saw it, these factors made the measure “highly republican.”³³

With bipartisan support, the bill passed the House and Senate in a mere four days. Unfortunately, the public was not as interested in preserving their representatives’ domestic lives as in preventing an increase in their own tax burden. Newspapers denounced the salary bill in vitriolic terms. State legislatures and town meetings passed resolutions demanding its repeal. Congressmen, it was said, were lining their pockets at the expense of ordinary citizens. New Yorkers, for example, insisted that the bill was nothing less than “a wanton sacrifice of *our* interest to their own private emolument.” Voters expressed their outrage at the polls during the next congressional election. Nearly two-thirds of all members of the previous House of Representatives did not return to the next session. Although many had been defeated for reelection, a larger number than usual stepped down voluntarily rather than face the voters’ wrath.³⁴

33. *Debates and Proceedings*, 1174, 1180, 1184. Samuel Smith of Maryland and his wife lived with his son and daughter-in-law for part of the year in order to make ends meet on his salary from Congress. See Frank A. Cassell, *Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic: Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752-1839* (Madison, WI, 1971), 225.

34. Skeen, “Vox Populi,” 259-66, quote on 260.

Reacting to the popular outcry, Congress repealed the law as soon as it reconvened. Yet the issue of low compensation continued to surface. In 1818, Congress passed a new bill that raised their per diem from \$6 to \$8 per day, with an additional \$8 per twenty miles provided for travel expenses. Although higher than the previous level of compensation, the new amount was far less than what many members considered adequate. “The Sacrifice of property & of feeling, which almost any Member of Congress suffers is immense,” insisted an infuriated Thomas Hill Hubbard of New York, “and nine dollars a day would not more than support him decently covering all incidental expenses.” Stung by the failure to enact a more generous compensation bill, Hubbard refused to stand for reelection and returned to his wife and family in New York.³⁵

The defeat of the more generous compensation bill meant that most members still could not afford to bring their families with them to Washington. In order to serve in the nation’s highest legislature, most still had to endure the burdens of separation from their loved ones. The issue often came to a head when the congressmen had to decide whether or not they would stand for reelection. At that point, many members sought the advice and counsel of their wives. When Louis McLane considered leaving Congress, he told his wife Kitty, “I am yet withholding my letter declining a return to publick life, till I can come to an understanding with you on the subject.” Similarly, Jeremiah Mason sought his wife’s opinion on whether or not he should continue to serve. “My inclinations alone,” he said, “must not govern.” Having already decided not to stand for reelection, Harrison Gray Otis of Massachusetts nonetheless consulted his wife about the possibility of returning home even sooner. “Whether I shall resign, before the next [session] depends much on yourself,” he said. “If health and inclination should render it eligible for you to accompany me, & suitable accommodations can be procured, it is probable that I may take you to Washington for one season; but I certainly will never go there without you.”³⁶

35. C. Edward Skeen, *1816: America Rising* (Lexington, KY, 2003), 82-95; Thomas H. Hubbard to Phebe Hubbard, Jan. 31, 1818, Thomas H. Hubbard Papers, LOC.

36. Louis McLane to Kitty McLane, Apr. 19, 1822, Louis McLane Papers, LOC; Jeremiah Mason to Mary Mason, Dec. 11, 1814, *Correspondence of Jeremiah Mason*, 109; Harrison Gray Otis to Sally Foster Otis, Feb. 4, 1800, in Morison, *Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, 1: 236.

Wives' reactions to their husbands' political careers varied widely. Some wives, such as Kitty McLane of Delaware, bore the sacrifices of separation cheerfully and without resentment. Others were tolerant, but impatient for their husband's return. "Could I have all the world laid at my feet," wrote Charity Mangum to her husband Willie Mangum, "it would not compensate me for your absense, no nor a thousand such worlds. If I could have old Mother eve here now, I think, I should be one of the first persons to have her ducked. I blame her for putting rambling and restless notions in mankind." Pamela Dwight Sedgwick of Massachusetts, however, was more equivocal. "If you could feel contented, satisfied, and happy in retirement, I should rejoice to have you quit [Congress]," she told her husband Theodore. "[But] if the interest of your country should so far occupy your mind as to make you really uneasy I should then wish you have never resisted a station in which you are so useful and highly respected."³⁷

Still others let their husbands know in no uncertain terms that they were needed at home. For over ten years, Rebecca Faulkner Foster beseeched Dwight Foster to relinquish public office and return to her and their three children in Brookfield, Massachusetts. As early as 1792, when Dwight was first elected to the state legislature, Rebecca discouraged his political ambitions, unwilling to sacrifice her family's happiness for the public good. "You have a dependant family that requires your attention at home and I [be]grudge the time you are absent," she wrote. "Will you say I am too selfish?—I think I am not." She continued her campaign for many years, during which time Foster was elected first to the U.S. House of Representatives and then to the Senate. Only in 1803 did Foster finally resign from the Senate and return to Massachusetts for good. As important as companionate marriage was as an ideal, the reality often fell short.³⁸

Nonetheless, it is clear that many senators and representatives did take family factors seriously when deciding on the trajectory of their career in public service. Each member had to determine for himself the proper balance between his duty to his country and his duty to his family. Each

37. Charity Mangum to Willie Mangum, Feb. 10, 1826, Willie P. Mangum Papers, LOC; Sedgwick quoted in Kenslea, *Sedgwicks in Love*, 23.

38. Rebecca Faulkner Foster to Dwight Foster, Feb. 6, 1792, Foster Family Papers, Box 4, AAS.

had to weigh his personal sacrifices against his political contributions. Each had to consider the relative importance of his own ambitions against the desire for a more normal family life. Yet between 1789 and 1828, voluntary retirement represented the single most important reason a member did not return to Congress. In declining renomination to the House of Representatives in 1814, Abijah Bigelow of Massachusetts commented, "I am more bound to consult the interests and happiness of my family, than that of my country. . . . There are many other things to be attended of no less importance." Turning one's back on high office could provoke surprise or criticism from the public. After leaving Congress in 1800, Harrison Gray Otis told his wife, "Nobody can imagine my motives for refusing what was never refused before, because nobody can conceive the joys of domestic life. . . . The command of ones own society and movements are . . . placed in the competition with the honor of the office." For many, the decision to retire provided relief. After having decided not to seek reelection in 1825, Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina commented to his wife, "I feel gratified that the time is approaching when I may leave here. . . . I hardly ever expect to see the place again. . . . I am tired of it. In being separated from my family, not only my interests are sacrificed but the life is one of the most uncomfortable kind that any man can imagine."³⁹

Despite the relief of returning to home and hearth, a surprising number of members actually did return to serve in a subsequent Congress. In fact, an astounding 66 percent of those who retired voluntarily later returned to Congress, usually to serve in the same chamber from which they had left. This fact challenges theories that suggest that those who left Congress were simply disgusted with political life or believed that service in the new national government did not offer sufficient prestige to warrant their sacrifices. While some of those who left their seats voluntarily may have done so to avoid a particularly noxious political opponent or to retreat from an especially antagonistic political situation, it is also possible that many members decided not to serve in the next Congress because they had pressing personal, family, or business obligations

39. Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, Feb. 2, 1812 and Nov. 18, 1814, "Letters of Abijah Bigelow, Member of Congress," 327, 399; Harrison Gray Otis quoted in Morison, *Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, 1: 237; Willie P. Mangum to Charity Mangum, Feb. 6, 1825, Willie P. Mangum Papers, LOC.

to deal with back home. When the home situation stabilized, they could run for reelection—and often won. Thus, for example, the frustrated and homesick Thomas Hill Hubbard of New York decided to stand for reelection—and was returned to Congress just two years after his initial departure. Harrison Gray Otis of Massachusetts promised his wife on leaving the House of Representatives in 1800, that he would never again “unless forced by necessity . . . quit your side for distant & tedious employments” in the federal government. For seventeen years, he successfully kept his pledge. Then, after his seventeen children were grown, he agreed to serve one additional single term, this time in the Senate. It should be emphasized that voluntary departure had important implications for Congress as an institution. Members who chose to leave Congress at any time during their careers had significantly shorter careers overall than those who left involuntarily for whatever reason (4.12 years as opposed to the 5.24 years). For these men, dedication to their domestic life significantly decreased the amount of time they served in Congress and deprived the nation of their talents at a critical juncture in its political development.⁴⁰



Traditional explanations for high congressional turnover in the early republic have not been fully adequate to explain the phenomenon. By understanding the complex social, emotional, and gender environments in which members made their decisions, the high rate of voluntary departures from Congress becomes more explicable. At a time when congressional service required extended separations from home, when distances could not easily be traversed, and when communications were undependable, family factors had a significant impact on an individual member’s willingness to continue to serve in the nation’s highest legislature. At the same time, the issue of congressional service has other implications beyond the political realm. As many historians have observed in other contexts, public and private spheres in this period should not be considered either as self-contained or mutually exclusive. Men’s and

40. Thomas H. Hubbard to Phebe Hubbard, Dec. 5, 1817, Thomas H. Hubbard Papers, LOC; Harrison Gray Otis to Sally Foster Otis, Feb. 4, 1800, in Morison, *Life and Letters of Harrison Gray Otis*, 1: 236.

women's rights, roles, and responsibilities sometimes overlapped and were intermingled. Just as women were not exclusively creatures of the private or domestic realm, so men did not necessarily belong in the public arena. Operating under the influence of a companionate vision of marriage, a sentimentalized notion of domesticity, and an ideal of masculinity that valorized the expression of feelings, members of Congress did not automatically or necessarily choose politics over their family life. Domesticity thus seems to have had its attractions, even for men.⁴¹

This more nuanced image of early congressmen challenges existing stereotypes found both in the traditional scholarly literature and in the standard text of the founding era, *The Federalist Papers*. Members of Congress cannot be understood simply as rational decision makers who calculated the value of various public policies or as wise and virtuous statesmen who unquestioningly devoted themselves to serving the common good. The legislators who sat in Congress during the nation's first decades were men who struggled to bridge the gap between public service and their private lives, between dedication to public good and their obligations to their wives and families. A poem called "The Home Sick Legislator," which first appeared in a Washington, DC, publication in 1827, perhaps put it best:

Alas! I was *not made to legislate*,
 I cannot flatter and I will not prate,
 Let those whose nerves are stronger than a chain,
 Who will not feel a kick nor wince at pain—
 Who love to bluster, prattle, and prepare
 Speeches to make the very natives stare—

41. On the interpenetration of public and private realms, see, for example, Linda K. Kerber, Nancy F. Cott, Robert Gross, Lynn Hunt, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Christine M. Stansell, "Beyond Roles, Beyond Spheres: Thinking about Gender in the Early Republic," *William & Mary Quarterly* 46 (July 1989), 565–85; Mary Kelley, *Learning to Stand and Speak: Women, Education and Public Life in America's Republic* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2006), 1–33; John L. Brooke, "Consent, Civil Society, and the Public Sphere in the Age of Revolution and the Early American Republic," in *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic*, ed. Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew W. Robertson, and David Waldstreicher (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 207–50.

Let such, kind Heaven, through legislation roam,
Give me my WIFE, my CHILDREN and my HOME.⁴²

Long before “family values” became a campaign slogan, it was a fact of American political life.

APPENDIX

Methodology and Findings: Based on an Analysis of the Roster of Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803*)

Methodology

Using a standard statistical program (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, or SPSS), I analyzed data for the period from 1789–1828 in order to examine members’ reasons for not returning to their seat in Congress. ICPSR database #7803 provides data on the composition of each Congress from 1789 to the present. It includes information on all members of Congress for which information could be found, including their party affiliations, dates of service as well as extensive demographic, biographical, and career data. NOTE: Although the New Nation Votes (NNV) database has a more comprehensive set of election results than the ICPSR database, the ICPSR enables researchers to correlate election results with other kinds of data, including the biographical data for members of Congress. This kind of cross-tabulation is not yet possible using the NNV database alone.

The focus on the period from 1789 to 1828, encompassing Congresses 1–20, yielded a total of 4,054 cases. NOTE: This method counts *each time* a member leaves Congress as a separate “exit” or “case.” Thus the number of cases is larger than the number of individual Senators and members of the House of Representatives who served during this period.

From the entire data set, I then isolated the cases from what the ICPSR database calls “Variable 49, Reason for Leaving Congress.” The

42. “The Home Sick Legislator,” *Mrs. A.S. Colvin’s Weekly Messenger* (Washington, DC), Feb. 17, 1827, 188.

* Roster of United States Congressional Officeholders and Biographical Characteristics of Members of United States Congress, 1789–1996: Merged Data (ICPSR 7803) in the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research database, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997).

following reasons for exiting Congress were listed: “0) Unknown; 1) Either defeated in a general election, unseated, losing a contested election, or having an election declared void; 2) Was not renominated or lost in the primary; 3) Died in office; 4) Either did not seek reelection, retired, or not a candidate for renomination; 5) Sought other elective office; 6) Accepted federal office; 8) Either resigned, withdrew, or was expelled.” (For some reason, the database does not include a variable numbered “7.”)

The first data analysis produced 2,556 cases in which the reason for leaving Congress was known; 1,498 cases in which the reason was unknown. Although the large number of “unknowns” is unfortunate, the creators of the ISPSR database simply were not able to locate biographical data on many individuals who served in the early Congresses. Although these cases were excluded from further analysis, statisticians assume that the missing data is randomly apportioned. In other words, it is assumed that findings for the known cases represent a fair approximation of what would be found in the other cases for which the evidence is missing.

Using the 2,556 cases in which the reason for leaving Congress was known, I performed a data analysis that calculated the overall turnover rate using the ICPSR data. These findings are generally consistent with the findings of other scholars who have calculated congressional turnover using a variety of methods (see footnotes 5 and 6). I then focused more specifically on the reasons why members left Congress. What I have called the “Involuntary Retirement Rate” is drawn from the cases that are included in: “Value 1) Either defeated in a general election, unseated, losing a contested election, or having an election declared void.” In contrast, the “Voluntary Retirement Rate” is drawn from the cases associated with “Value 4) Either did not seek reelection, retired, or not a candidate for renomination.” Other variables which contain reasons for leaving office that might be construed as “voluntary,” such as seeking another office or being appointed to a federal office, have been excluded from this analysis because they are relatively small in number and because they point to professional rather than personal reasons for leaving Congress. My very narrow definition of “voluntary” retirement tests the central hypothesis of this article: that personal and familial considerations rather than political or institutional factors contributed to the high voluntary retirement rate during this period.

Unless otherwise noted, the 2,556 cases in which the reason for leav-

ing Congress was known (whether the reason was voluntary or involuntary) provided the basis for further data runs and the basis for the analysis in this article. The reason for leaving was compared with several variables, including the age at which members retired, the length of congressional sessions, party affiliation, members' home states, and members' geographical region. Standard tests of statistical significance were applied to all data runs. Significance is achieved at the .05 level. The results of these correlations are reported in the body of the article.