

[Early Career Interview: Dr. Andrew Wiley and Conservatism in Civil War Era Indiana, 1820-1877](#)

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Hello H-CivWar subscribers,

Today we welcome Dr. Andrew Wiley to chat about his research project, *Battling Radicalism in the Old Northwest: Conservatism in Civil War Era Indiana, 1820-1877*. He is an [Assistant Professor of History at Cumberland University](#) and an Associate Editor of the [Papers of Martin Van Buren](#). He earned his PhD at the University of Calgary in 2019, and he tweets [@CWWyle](#).

Welcome, Dr. Wiley. Thank you for joining us at H-CivWar. Before we get started with specific questions about your research, I wonder if you could provide some details of who you are as a historian and how working on The Papers of Martin Van Buren influences this manuscript project? Also, could you explain how you got interested in this topic?

Thank you for interviewing me John. I started out looking at Know-Nothings in the 1850s and their growth but I quickly became more interested in conservatism. Nearly every politician and political party said they were conservative starting in the 1840s and continuing on until the 1870s. I wondered who the real conservatives were and what made them conservative. So I quickly shifted away from just the Know-Nothings to a study on conservatism in Indiana during the era. Although I am a Civil War era historian, my job at the Papers of Martin Van Buren has really enriched my manuscript project. Nearly every politician of the era wrote to Van Buren including those from Indiana. Although he wrote back to them, he didn't always remember the state they were from. We have one draft where he wrote Ohio rather than Indiana numerous times, then had to cross that out and write Indiana above each mistake. Because most of these sources come from the Jacksonian era, it really forced me to confront how that era set the stage for the sectional conflicts to come later, and how important those early settlers to the region, and the actions they took, were to my argument.

That sounds like a fascinating subject. Who was a "real" conservative during the era?

A conservative in the nineteenth century wanted to preserve the Union from the many sectional crises going on at the time. However, conservatives in different sections of the country defined the Union differently. For those in the western free states, since most had worked hard to build a society that excluded the indigenous and African Americans, white supremacy was integral to their concept of the Union. Unlike the many southern sympathizers and later copperheads, these western conservatives balked at slavery's expansion into the western territories before the war, and felt they could support emancipation and still maintain white supremacy at home during the Civil War. This explains why so many supported Abraham Lincoln in 1860 and 1864. It also explains why Republicans were still successful in the region at the beginning of Reconstruction. Although they worked to restrict rights for African Americans at home, most western conservatives supported the early days of Reconstruction because they thought a peaceful South would convince the newly freed slaves to remain in the South. Western conservatives only abandoned Reconstruction once Republicans pushed

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the 15th amendment through and granted voting rights to African American men nationwide, striking down many of those restrictions on African American rights in their own states.

Why should we know about conservatism in Indiana? What makes that place significant to understanding the larger concept of conservatism?

The national parties were convinced conservatives were the key to winning elections in the western free states and those states carried many votes in the electoral college. Believing this, the national parties twisted and contorted themselves into fitting that western conservative mold. When Republicans and many northern Democrats opposed the Lecompton Constitution in 1858 helping to set the stage for the Civil War, and when Republicans later backed off of Reconstruction in the 1870s, it was with an eye to keeping western conservative votes. Indiana offers a clearer window into these crucial voters than many other Midwestern states for several reasons. Because conservatism was sometimes connected with nativism or compromise over slavery, many immigrants and abolitionists balked at conservative candidates. With few immigrants or abolitionists in the state, Indiana politicians could go after conservative voters with little fear of losing others. In the process, they left a plethora of sources on what they thought western conservatives wanted. Indiana was also the sixth largest state population wise and carried thirteen and later fifteen electoral votes, making Indiana conservatives crucial voters in a crucial state.

You mentioned prior to our interview that “Northern conservatives shared a deep faith in institutions as safeguards on society, with the Union being the chief institution. However, the North was not a monolith, conservatism was different in the western free states because the people there had a different concept of the Union. Hoosiers had long worked to establish a society for whites only through Native American removal and prohibitions on African American settlement. As a result, most residents defined the Union as a Union for whites only.” [Jennifer Andrella at Michigan State is currently working on her dissertation that explores Reconstruction in Montana Territory](#). She explains how democratic ideologies -- specifically from ex-Confederates and democrats -- imagined Montana to form just as how you explain what is happening in Indiana. I wonder if you could delve into the broader conversations with making American space a white place, devoid of Indigenous people (or those considered the “other”) during and after the Civil War?

That is a good question. Many Hoosiers saw their new home as the best chance to build that white space when they settled in the region, and they carried that belief well past the Civil War. Unlike New England and the South where African Americans both free and enslaved lived, few African Americans lived in the Old Northwest at first. Hoosiers and many westerners thought they had a far better chance to build that mainly white society than they had had in their former homes. They first saw the indigenous people as the key impediment to their goal. Once they removed indigenous Americans, something most Whigs and Democrats in the state supported, they then saw African Americans as the key threat to their society. They really believed in the power of the vote, and, by the 1850s, African American men in some New England states had won that right. The ultimate nightmare for conservatives during and after the war was emancipated African Americans coming north, winning the right to vote, and striking down all those laws they erected against African American settlement. But that drive for white space came from their belief that with few African Americans in the region, and a will to push the indigenous peoples further west, the area north of the

Ohio River offered them the best chance to create that all white society.

Thank you for your responses. One last question, what's the most significant contribution you hope your book makes? Anything else you'd like to add before we conclude the interview?

I really hope that my book, along with others, helps restore the Midwest's importance during the Civil War era. Debates within the region over the rights of African Americans, and others, often foreshadowed the many disputes in Washington over the war's course and Reconstruction. Republicans needed the Midwest to win the presidency, and, once they got it in 1860, southerners seceded and the war commenced. In the following years, Republicans needed the region to maintain power and, once they realized they were losing it, they rapidly withdrew their support for Reconstruction. That region really was the bellwether for some of the most important events of the nineteenth century.

Thanks for joining us for another installment of our interview series. Keep an eye out for our next interview, featuring Dr. [Lauren Haumesser](#) and *Party of Patriarchy: Democratic Gender Politics and the Coming of the Civil War*.