“The Strange Case of Ichabod Smellfungus: Parody, Politics, and Party in the Early Republic”

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Amidst the usual filler in the April 25, 1839 edition of the North Western Gazette & Galena Advertiser was a bizarre little story about the doings of a lawyer in the Oregon Territory town of Fogville. The news clipping running in Galena, Illinois highlighted the work of one Ichabod Smellfungus, Fogville’s corporate counsel. Smellfungus, it seems, had been called upon to given his learned legal opinion upon a new charter recently granted Fogville by the territorial legislature. Before expounding upon the law, however, the lawyer felt compelled to offer a brief biography to deflect criticism that he was not competent to provide such an opinion.

Smellfungus first claimed descent from the revolutionary hero General Smellfungus who freed Americans from British oppression at the Battle of Hardscrabble. Some confusion had arisen, he confessed, from the fact that his descent from the hero came via his mother’s line and thus he had been born a Nincompoop rather than a Smellfungus. No bother, he explained, “before leaving the Bay State, I got my name changed by an act of the legislature.” Further, Smellfungus attended the same university from which “our illustrious JACKSON received the great honorary degree of L.L.D. A.S.S.” It was here that the lawyer learned the art of logic, “the science by which the true can be made false,” before reading law with a notable Gotham practice. Yet still, Smellfungus’s enemies claimed he had not even attended college, to which he could only assert that those in doubt were welcome to call at his office to examine the degree, “with the A.S.S. in capitals, the same as was put on the old hero’s.”
With his credentials thus established, Smellfungus turned to the troublesome corporate charter. It seems the Fogville trustees stumbled over one clause in particular:

And the President and Trustees of the Town of [Fogville] SHALL, at as early a day as practicable after the passage of this act, cause the same to be published in all the newspapers in Fogville, and, and by at least ten days’ notice call upon voters to vote for or against the acceptance of this act.

Smellfungus turned his attention to the word “shall,” a synonym for “will” and, in his educated interpretation, here referencing the free will of the people guaranteed by the Constitution. “Now, how could the Legislature presume to declare what our wills would be, either on this or any other subject, not knowing the motives that would influence our decisions,” he asked rhetorically. The clause was thus unconstitutional, he concluded, and Fogville’s officials were free to do as they pleased. The trustees accepted Smellfungus’s logic with cheers.¹

For contemporary readers of the *Gazette*, the satire inherent in Smellfungus’s exploits was clear. Beyond twice calling former president Andrew Jackson an ass, the Whig paper used the journalistic standards of the day to wink at its audience. Per a brief introduction, the extract reached Galena via a Wisconsin paper, the *Sinipee Herald*, which had received the Oregon sheet, the *Setting Sun*, directly. Unfortunately for posterity, the *Setting Sun* had been printed on raccoon skin, “on account of the scarcity of paper in that region,” and Pomp, the *Herald* editor’s pet dog, absconded with the original. In reality, the *Sinipee Herald* did not exist and Sinipee itself was a flash-in-the-pan town north of Galena that challenged the latter community for commercial supremacy in the Upper Mississippi River Valley.² The Smellfungus column further

¹ *North Western Gazette & Galena Advertiser* [Weekly], April 29, 1839: 2. Hereafter, references to this paper are shortened to “*Gazette.*” In the character’s first appearance, his name is spelled “Smelfungus” but in subsequent appearances it is present as “Smellfungus.” For the sake of consistency, I use the more common spelling.
concluded with market news much as might be reported from communities elsewhere. In Fogville, however, counterfeit coins minted during Jackson’s presidency traded at ten percent above par, Irish coins molded from potatoes traded at par, and both muskrat and raccoon skins were considered lawful tender. Just one column over, reporting real news, the Gazette alluded to the actual target of the Smellfungus and Fogville parody: Galena’s Board of Trustees “continue to violate the law and outrage public sentiment in preventing the action of the people on the new charter.”³ The editor of the Gazette was clearly using the exploits of Ichabod Smellfungus to lampoon Galena’s state of affairs.

At first glance, this satirical, local episode neatly parallels the national development of the Second Party System in American politics. Previous to 1839, Galena’s local politics were generally non-partisan. Just the month before Smellfungus first appeared in the Gazette, however, Democrats swept Galena’s town election and left local Whigs to idly fume. In the weeks that followed, concerns about public credit, immigrants, and non-elective positions gave rise to conspiracy theories and Whig accusations of corruption among the new officials. In this context, the creation of Ichabod Smellfungus as a parody of local politics and a means to mock arch-Democrat Andrew Jackson can easily be read as a means of invigorating the Whig party base. By the end of 1840, similar energy in the famous Log Cabin and Hard Cider Campaign would elevate William Henry Harrison into the White House as a Whig.⁴

Upon closer inspection, this episode paints a nuanced picture of local and national politics in an era in which party appeared ubiquitous. Over the course of a year between April

³ Gazette, April 25, 1839: 2.
1839 and February 1840, Ichabod Smellfungus continued appearing in the *Gazette*, first in a series of faux news excerpts from the *Setting Sun* and later as serialized chapters of the fictional character’s biography. While occasional material would continue to mock the Galena board, Ichabod Smellfungus’s story took on a life of its own—the *Gazette* published eleven chapters of the man’s biography without ever reaching the title character’s birth. Simultaneously, Galena’s local affairs reached a crisis state as the lingering effects of the Panic of 1837 made the community’s financial condition increasingly unstable. Yet, rather than evolving to include the 1840 local elections or that year’s presidential contest, Smellfungus disappeared from the pages of the *Gazette* just as party feeling nationally reached a watershed moment. While party politics and economic crisis combined to elect a Whig president in 1840, the same factors instead saw Galena’s public figures retreat to non-partisanship, some going so far as to make clear distinctions about the necessity of party to national affairs and its misapplication to local government. As Galenians tackled these issues in their local affairs, unwavering loyalty to party created dysfunction and paranoia in town government. Unlike at the national level where, in 1840, such loyalties resulted in a change of party control, partisan politics at the local level of Galena sparked a retreat to non-partisanship. The saga of Ichabod Smellfungus is thus reveling about both the extent and the limits of party politics during the Age of Jackson.

**Ichabod Smellfungus in Fact and Fiction**

As a city of the early nineteenth century, Galena was comparatively unique. The community, situated on a tributary of the Mississippi in the northwestern tip of Illinois, originated as an entrepôt for the lead mining region of present-day southwestern Wisconsin and adjacent portions of Iowa and Illinois. Galena’s first Anglo-American residents arrived in the early 1820s in what was then the far reaches of Illinois and the Michigan Territory. Galena itself
took its name from the principal ore mined throughout the region, lead sulfide or galena. Located about seven miles from the Mississippi River at the head of navigation on the ill-named Fever River, Galena was situated close to the earliest lead mines while still allowing for regular contact with St. Louis by water. Although the location was convenient for miners, it was hardly conducive to building a city. The Fever River was prone to seasonal flooding and the town site was best characterized by steep hills rising from the river. By the mid-1830s, one observer best described it as “a frontier town built indifferently of frame and log houses thrown confusedly together on the side of a hill.”

Most problematically for Galena’s development was the practice of the federal government to reserve potential mineral deposits from public sale and instead lease such lands under the authority of the War Department. After the formal removal of many of the area’s native inhabitants following the Black Hawk War of 1832, the national government unquestioningly held title to the region, creating tension between western miners and those in the East who sought to exploit the public lands as a national resource. Heightening these tensions was the presence of a U.S. army officer tasked with supervising the leasing of mineral lands and otherwise precluding civilian government. Not until 1836 would residents of the mining district force the withdrawal of the federal agent and only in 1847 would the land surrounding Galena be available for private ownership. A special act of Congress permitted the sale of Galena’s town lots in 1829 but even that concession was not put into effect until 1837. As such, only in the mid- to late-1830s would residents of Galena begin to participate in the sort of local government other nineteenth century Americans took for granted. Galena elected its first board of five trustees in 1835, but only after the Illinois General Assembly exempted town officers from the

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state requirement that they also be landowners. Until the opening of land sales in 1837, the
town’s early boards focused on fire prevention measures and efforts to improve the streets and
wharf. Despite the town’s ability to issue property taxes and assessments, the trustees borrowed
money to maintain an ambitious program of improvement resulting, by early 1839, in a debt of
$15,000 and complaints that the corporation was not transparent enough regarding its finances. 6

Up to this point, despite annual elections, Galena’s Board of Trustees was decidedly
nonpartisan. Yet in the weeks preceding the upcoming election, the town’s two partisan papers
accused the other party of turning the town election into a factional contest. 7 Hezekiah H. Gear,
a twice elected trustee and Whig, was particularly agitated by the election’s transition into a
political popularity contest and refused to run for reelection. 8 In the end, however, a Democratic
ticket headed by board veteran Daniel Wann won the election and the Whigs, as embodied by the
Gazette editorials, erupted with accusations of fraud and impropriety. The Gazette estimated
there were about 400 eligible voters in town yet noted almost 500 ballots were cast and implied
that the Democrats allowed individuals who did not meet state and town residency requirements
to vote. 9 The following week, the Gazette more specifically circulated a rumor that the town’s
Irish street laborers had been told that the “Corporation paper” with which they had been paid
would be “as good as gold and silver” if the Democratic ticket was elected. 10 Whig fears of a
Democratic conspiracy were given even more fuel when the new board convened for their first
meeting on April 3, 1839. While exchanging most of the town’s officers for loyal Democrats,
the attorney to the corporation, John Stark, suggested the propriety of replacing even the lowly

6 Pospisek, 131-177.
10 “Before the election...,” Gazette, April 11, 1839: 2.
s sexton (a Whig). The new board also transferred the corporation’s printing, heretofore done by the *Gazette*, to the *Galena Democrat*, although the *Gazette* avoided looking petty by continuing to publish the board’s proceedings, at least temporarily.

Underlying much of the concern over Galena’s local administration during this period was a significant increase in population and a corresponding desire for more effective municipal governance. By 1837, Galena was home to as many as 1,500 people and the town’s charter was revised to increase the number of trustees from five to seven. In the five years following 1837, the town claimed to double in population and officials estimated Galena was home to 3,000 residents by early 1843. In this context, the 1838 trustees sought a city charter with expanded powers from the state legislature. The state senator to whom the corporation sent a draft charter noted that the request was made without public input and, consequently, defended the prerogative of the legislature to offer amendments. When the new partisan board took office in 1839, it took issue with two particular clauses added by the General Assembly: the first restricting the right to vote in city elections to citizens of the United States and the second requiring the corporation to submit the new charter to a public referendum. From the Democratic perspective, the requirement to be a U.S. citizen ran counter to the Illinois Constitution, which gave the franchise to all white, male “inhabitants” over the age of twenty-one. John Stark would go on to offer just such a reasoned explanation to the Board of Trustees,

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18 Constitution of the State of Illinois (1818), Art. 2, Sec. 27.
subsequently published in the *Gazette*, upon inspecting the charter as passed by the legislature.\(^{19}\)

To Whigs, such concerns presumptuously defied the will of the legislature and added credence to their suspicions that the recent election had been stolen with the assistance of non-resident, immigrant votes.

For Galena’s Whigs, the most galling act came near the end of the new board’s first meeting when the trustees referred the new city charter to attorney Stark, “to dispose of as he may deem most expedient.”\(^{20}\) The *Gazette* was particularly troubled by the appearance of a revised resolution in the *Galena Democrat*, instead requesting Stark “to report upon the nature of the provisions of said charter and to give his opinion upon the duties thereby imposed upon the Trustees.” The change in wording appeared first to be a revision of the official record and second to be yet another usurpation of the public’s will by the partisan board: “This is the PEOPLE’S business and not John Stark’s” a *Gazette* editorial insisted.\(^{21}\) Adding insult to injury, the trustees allowed the charter to pend with Stark for weeks, further forestalling a verdict of the people.\(^{22}\)

Over the course of that April, the Whig *Gazette* increasingly turned its rage from the supposedly partisan Board of Trustees to the manipulative Stark. The corporation attorney was a well-educated lawyer from Massachusetts who had only arrived in Galena in 1836. More problematic, as recalled by Whig Elihu Washburne, was that Stark’s “literary pursuits and political discussions...interfered with his professional success.” Stark, as it turned out, also edited the *Galena Democrat*. The printing, the sexton, and the refusal to act on the new charter were, in the eyes of Galena’s Whigs, all instances of Stark wielding too much influence with the

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\(^{19}\) “Corporation Proceedings,” *Gazette*, May 9, 1839: 4.


\(^{22}\) “We understand that on Monday...,” *Gazette*, April 11, 1839: 2; “It will be remembered...,” *Gazette*, April 18, 1839: 2; “The Board of Trustees still continue...,” *Gazette*, April 25, 1839: 2.
Board of Trustees. While the board’s opponents would eventually mount a legal challenge, the infrequency of circuit court sessions kept the charter issue pending for the next two years.23

As the wait gave Galena’s Whigs little to do but complain, the Gazette opted for another tack: satire. Political humor had a long history in English speaking North America, although it was most likely to appear in times of crisis when it might defuse tensions or isolate and ostracize its targets.24 Ichabod Smellfungus would not even be the only satire of the town’s notable Democrats to grace the pages of the Gazette; following the sexton incident, the paper published “On a Lawyer Who Turned Grave Digger,” a poem in which a failed lawyer named Shark received insults from Death incarnate.25 The name “Smellfungus” itself originated with Laurence Sterne’s A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy by Mr. Yorick first published 1768. Sterne’s work parodied Tobias Smollett’s Travels Through France and Italy (1766) by creating the character Smelfungus, a proxy for Smollett, as vain traveller who found fault with virtually everything away from his native Britain.26 Over time, the name Smelfungus (or Smellfungus) became synonymous with the overly critical and prone to complaint.27 Fogville’s Smellfungus, however, appeared to be more of rhetorical device designed to juxtapose his generally derisible qualities with the praise heaped upon the character. Regardless, the Gazette author expressed familiarity with Sterne (as the author of Tristam Shandy) by naming him amongst luminaries like James Boswell, John Gibson Lockhart, Sir Walter Scott, Thucydides,

23 History of Jo Daviess County, 473-4, 497. Unfortunately, copies of the relevant issues of the Galena Democrat have not survived to the present day.
and Homer when discussing particular styles with which to adopt in composing the Fogville lawyer’s biography.  

Three weeks following the partisan Board of Trustees election, the *Gazette* offered its first article from the fictitious *Setting Sun*. Thus, on the same day the paper reported Stark was given yet another week to report back on the charter, the paper introduced Ichabod Smellfungus as an obvious mockery of Stark. Smellfungus’s legal training enabled him to “dive into all kinds of filth without leaving any scent” upon him. Temperate Whig readers were expected to look down on the character as he “took a glass of something that very much resembled ---- water.” Like President Jackson, Smellfungus’s Latin was questionable and, like Martin Van Buren, he offered no qualms about maintaining his party at all costs. Despite his learned pretenses, Smellfungus’s legal opinion was deemed valuable by the trustees simply because “it cost them two hundred dollars.” If nothing else, the first *Setting Sun* piece gave the *Gazette*’s editor the cathartic opportunity to publically lob barbs at both Andrew Jackson and John Stark. In the weeks that followed Smellfungus’s first appearance, the charter controversy continued and the *Gazette* increasingly turned towards the fictional lawyer to fill columns. 

Initially, Smellfungus’s appearances in the *Gazette* served to offer fairly standard critiques of Democrats and Democratic policies. Juxtaposing the Whig investment in reform and social order, Smellfungus’s drinking was again on display in his second appearance on the *Gazette*’s pages. The lawyer was expected to give a lecture on temperance, a fact emphasized in the *Setting Sun* to show he was not an alcoholic. Smellfungus “drinks but seldom,” the paper

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29 *Gazette*, April 29, 1839: 2
reported, “except at the expense of others—and now and then on Corporation occasions.” A week later, the Gazette combined the implications of intemperance with ridicule of the abuses of appointed offices. Smellfungus, noticing that the trustees often absented themselves from business to fill their pipes and water tumblers, recommended the employment of one Peter Gobble to attend to these matters on their behalf. Gobble was employed for one hundred dollars (in corporate indebtedness) for which he would also dust the council room and aid the board in drafting resolutions. Concerns over rotation in office met insinuations that the Democratic party was dependent upon immigrant voters when the Gazette used Smellfungus to recommend the replacement of Fogville’s grave digger. The board accepted the nomination of Patrick O’Gopher, a man noted for his friendship with the corporate counsel and his service to the party “as one of the gentlemen who had distinguished himself last fall in amusing the opposition with his shelalah and brick-bats.” The author quickly dispensed with any potential confusion over O’Gopher’s Irish birth by quoting from his address to the board in dialect, ultimately thanking the officials for his appointment as “sextant.”

More pertinent to the specific affairs of Galena, the Smellfungus pieces also served to satirize the work of Stark and the town board. Just as Stark did editorial work for the Galena Democrat, Smellfungus too joined the Setting Sun. Mocking the pretenses of the Democrat, the Setting Sun announced its expansion to printing on larger wolf skins, rather than the smaller raccoon skin it had previously depended upon. Following efforts in Galena to obtain a writ of mandamus against the board to force action on the new charter, Fogville’s trustees received just such an order. The brilliant Smellfungus, however, quickly labeled the order a forgery as it lacked several important “whereases” and “aforesaids.” Should the mandamus turnout to be

31 Gazette, June 8, 1839: 2.  
32 Gazette, June 15, 1839: 2.  
33 ibid.
authentic, he assured the trustees that they could pack a jury to render the writ moot. In addition to the politically motivated replacement of the town sexton in both Galena and Fogville, the Gazette directed particular attention to the financial affairs of both towns. Galena continued to dive further into debt, growing from $15,000 in January 1839 to an estimated $30,000 in April 1839 with notes circulating at a discount of seventy-five percent. In Fogville, the trustees were quick to pay everyone and for everything in corporate indebtedness. When reporting on the Fogville treasury, the illustrious Smellfungus found only “a few damaged coon-skins and a still smaller number of Corporation Notes.” The lawyer blamed previous boards for issuing over $30,000 in corporate notes and claimed that a cabal in town was holding those notes for nothing less than a ten percent premium, thus causing a monetary crisis. Because the notes were issued by other trustees under the original town charter, Smellfungus argued that the current board could not be held liable for those debts and it was those previous trustees who should pay. Having dispensed with concerns over old debts, Smellfungus turned to the corporation’s current expenses. The lawyer again came to rescue by recommending, “that the Corporation proceed immediately to issue as many Notes, in their own name, as will answer their purposes and enable them to carry out their plans. And should it be deemed necessary to give any pledge for their ultimate redemption, it may safely be done with the implied understanding that this pledge may be redeemed itself by promises in case the Corporation should have nothing more valuable or convenient to give.

To such logic, Peter Gobble, the corporation water bearer, concluded “Nick Biddle was a fool in comparison to Mr. Smellfungus.” Soon after, the Setting Sun announced the corporation of Fogville would be passing an ordinance to fix the value of skins in circulation, “enabling their friends to pay their debts at easier rates.”

34 Gazette, July 6, 1839: 2.
36 “It will be seen...,” Gazette, July 20, 1839: 1.
37 Gazette, July 20, 1839: 2.
One constant throughout the Gazette’s coverage of Fogville was the centrality of Ichabod Smellfungus. The worst practices of partisan government were not simply the results of policy decisions opposed by Whigs, but rather it was the shadowy and foolish influence of Smellfungus that opened Fogville up to criticism. The Gazette presented Smellfungus as a derisible character: he was unashamed about grasping for fame and his actions supported partisan rather than public gains. In short, he embodied everything Whigs despised in men like Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, yet he was beloved by people of Fogville. In the Gazette’s parody, therefore, the Setting Sun’s coverage openly confessed to showcasing and promoting the greatness of this man to the point of absurdity. The weekly Gazette ran five excerpts of Smellfungus’s exploits between April and July, 1839 before devoting space to eleven chapters of the serialized “Life of Ichabod Smellfungus, Esq.” The Gazette ran chapters of the biography through February 1840 but, in what became a running joke, never actually reached the birth of the title character. Instead, skewering the campaign biography trope, the chapters used florid language and Smellfungus’s ancestors to elevate the man by virtually avoiding discussing his deeds. Embellishing the merits of General Smellfungus, the author traced the “Smellfungi” ancestry from ancient Rome, through the knights of William the Conqueror, to a member of Parliament who fled Cromwell’s England for Massachusetts. Having already discussed the circumstances of the contemporary Smellfungus’s descent, the author then turned to the noble Nincompoop line. The colonial era Nincompoops were masters of the chase and thus the joining of these two families by marriage resulted in the virtually perfect character traits of young Ichabod. The final five chapters of the series devolved into a dramatic telling of the events preceding the title

38 For news pieces, see Gazette: April 25, 1839: 2; June 8, 1839: 2; June 15, 1839: 2; July 6, 1839: 1; and July 20, 1839: 1. For biography, see “Life of Ichabod Smellfungus, Esq.” Gazette: July 20, 1839: 2; Oct. 12, 1839: 2; Nov. 30, 1839: 2; Dec 14, 1839: 2; Jan. 3, 1840: 1; Jan. 24, 1840: 4; Feb. 5, 1840: 2; Feb. 21, 1840: 4; and Feb. 28, 1840: 2. The publication of chapters three and six are missing from the existent copies of the Gazette’s weekly edition.
character’s birth, each ending with something of a defense for not having yet reached Ichabod’s entrance to the world. As was common with the partisan activities of the 1830s, Smellfungus’s story was not written in such a way to convince the opposition of their mistakes but rather to make Whigs feel superior.

While news of Ichabod Smellfungus continued to dazzle the rubes of Fogville and Sinipee into 1840, Galena’s internal affairs continued much as before. The Gazette raised questions about the trustees’ spending and the 1839 board appeared not to issue a formal financial statement for the year. Questions might also have been raised about Smellfungus’s utility to the Whig cause as his last appearance occurred on February 28, 1840 and Whigs gained but two seats on the town board when Galena held its local election the following April. Despite this, and the disappearance of Ichabod Smellfungus from the Gazette, the trustees’ reckless spending continued into 1841 by which point Galena was over $61,000 in debt. As the 1841 town election approached, significantly several months after the 1840 election of William Henry Harrison, even the Whig Gazette lamented the state of town affairs and claimed to “have no wish to see party lines drawn at the next election.” By this point, the paper’s criticism shifted from partisan attacks to genuine concern for Galena’s financial situation. At the resolution of the 1841 election, veteran trustees of both parties made up the new board and quickly resolved to bring the long delayed city charter before the people for a vote.

The new town board was especially short lived as voters accepted the new charter in late April 1841 and elected a new mayor and city council the following May. Charles S. Hempstead,

40 “The Ball Rolling!!,” Gazette, April 10, 1840: 4.
44 “Town Trustees,” Gazette, April 9, 1841: 4; “Notice for the acceptance or rejection of the charter of the city of Galena,” Gazette, April 9, 1841: 2.
the new mayor, won election over Whig Hezekiah Gear (who apparently ended his protest against such popularity contests) and Democrat Daniel Wann, both former Galena trustees.\footnote{“City of Galena,” \textit{Gazette}, April 30, 1841: 3; “City Election,” \textit{Gazette}, May 28, 1841: 3.} Hempstead was quick to excise the spirit of party politics, remarking “however salutary a proper party spirit may be in affairs of higher government, to extend it to municipal matters...has proved to be most injurious.”\footnote{“Organization of the City Government,” \textit{Gazette}, June 4, 1841: 4.} The inaugural city council’s attention quickly turned to the financial situation that the city inherited from the town, now expected to be almost $80,000 of debt. Although the council also found over $10,000 in unpaid taxes and assessments, it struggled with a solution to meeting its own expected expenses while paying the debts of the old corporation.\footnote{“Proceedings of City Council,” \textit{Gazette}, July 10, 1841: 4.} The council ultimately elected to fund the town’s debt with new instruments of the city and, in practice, Galena issued promissory notes to those presenting evidence of old corporate indebtedness.\footnote{“An Ordinance for the funding and payment of the Debt of the Corporation of the Town of Galena,” \textit{Gazette}, July 10, 1841: 4; “Proceedings of the City Council, \textit{Gazette}, Dec. 11, 1841: 2; “Proceedings of the City Council,” \textit{Gazette}, Jan. 22, 1842: 4.} Evidence of the old indebtedness would continue to trickle in for years, however, and the city’s financial situation largely overshadowed future efforts to improve Galena’s streets, maintain the city wharf, and improve the health of its residents. Partisan politics would again creep into municipal affairs by the end of the decade but the tone of those later debates would not sink again to the levels of Ichabod Smellfungus.

\textbf{Lessons of Smellfungi}

The strange case of Ichabod Smellfungus is representative of the dysfunction that ruled over Galena while partisans took control of local government. While Democrats maintained control of the town board, they attempted to continue Galena’s earlier program of improvement but did so by driving the town further and further into debt. Whigs, on the other hand, refused to
believe that the board was controlled by anything but a cabal whose only goals were to do favors for friends and maintain power for themselves. The Gazette stopped running its Setting Sun pieces as the 1840 Galena election approached and, by no coincidence, as the national campaign to elect Whig William Henry Harrison president began taking up more of the paper’s columns. This incident is thus isolated but telling about how nineteenth century Americans approached and practiced politics.

In recent years, scholars have debated the centrality of politics during this period. Following the observations of Alexis de Tocqueville, the consensus among historians has largely been that Americans, during the 1830s especially, were a particularly political people. In 2000, Altschuler and Blumin’s Rude Republic called that assumption into question. Rude Republic notes that divisions of race, sex, aspirations to gentility, provincialism, and general interest contributed to a widespread lack of sustained political involvement for many Americans. Galena’s experience and the case of Ichabod Smellfungus split the difference between these two perspectives on political involvement. Undoubtedly, there is some truth to Altschuler and Blumin’s assertions as Galena was home to at least 1,500 people by 1839 yet only 500 people cast ballots in that year’s partisan election. Yet the passion with which both parties approached local politics in 1839, an off year for national elections, displays more than just a passing interest if only for the one-third of the town who cast ballots. With few exceptions, however, the history of the second party system tends to focus on the macro level of the nation, brushing aside the

49 See, for example: William E. Gienapp, “‘Politics Seem to Enter into Everything’: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860,” in Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860 ed. Stephen E. Maizlish and John J. Kushma (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982); Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
micro level of local politics without much explanation. Galena’s microhistory thus offers a more nuanced perspective on this debate: partisanship could and did reach local politics but did so without entrenching party politics in local affairs.

Furthermore, this debate about partisanship offers little explanation as to how devoted, opposing partisans could co-exist, and perhaps even cooperate, in their communities. Among Rude Republic’s arguments is that a growing body of Americans sought middle class respectability in the nineteenth century and participation in partisan politics ran counter to their efforts to develop the trappings of gentility. Galena’s status as a developing community with a vocal booster ethos and active partisan politics at the local level raises issues with both this assertion and the party-is-central arguments advanced by other authors. On one hand, many of Galena’s politicians were upwardly mobile businessmen who, one must assume, also sought genteel respectability. Of the Galena politicians previously named, Daniel Wann was a merchant, Hezikiah Gear was a prosperous miner, and Charles Hempstead, like John Stark, was a practicing attorney. While Stark would leave, these three would live out most, if not all, of their days in Galena and actively participate in the city’s improvement during that time. Wann had been one of the commissioners appointed to facilitate the transfer of Galena’s town lots to private ownership and had served as the president of the Galena branch of the State Bank of Illinois. Gear supported the establishment of Galena’s Episcopal church while also donating land for both the town’s public school and a school for free blacks. Hempstead had been a trustee of the Galena Library Association and the first president of the Galena Temperance

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51 Rude Republic goes so far as to itemize town meetings and local elections among portions of American life untouched by party politics. Altschuler and Blumin, 6. For exceptions to the national focus, see: Ryan, Civic Wars; Michael F. Holt, The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

52 See also Susan Gray, The Yankee West: Community Life on the Michigan Frontier (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 139-168.

53 Altschuler and Blumin, 8-9.
Society. Although it can only be assumed these men sought gentility for themselves, clearly they affixed similar aspirations onto Galena itself. Simultaneously, politics were not below them and, more likely, could have been seen as another means to establish their status as genteel members of a respectable community.

Also worthy of note is the fact that, despite the hyper-partisanship of the period 1839-1841, Galenians generally appeared to recognize the truth behind Hempstead’s distinction between party politics at the national and local levels. As an example, shortly before Smellfungus’s disappearance from the Gazette in 1840, Galenians of all politics gathered in support of what, in hindsight, might best be described as a fool’s errand. As the Wisconsin Territory began agitating for statehood, long simmering claims about the validity of the existing Illinois/Wisconsin border reached Galena’s public discourse. In short, the people of Wisconsin and northern Illinois looked back to boundaries drawn in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 and noted that the territory north of a line drawn east and west from the southern tip of Lake Michigan rightfully belonged to the Old Northwest’s fifth state. The so-called “disputed territory” had been incorporated within Illinois when it entered the union in 1818 and various interest groups in both Illinois and Wisconsin saw potential benefits to shifting the jurisdiction of that area to the new state. For residents of Galena and its environs, becoming part of Wisconsin would unite most of the lead district under one government, ideally putting their growing city in the running to become the state capital. For Wisconsin, annexing this portion of Illinois would give it the populations of both Galena and Chicago, thereby unquestioningly enabling the territory to meet Congress’s population threshold for statehood. As Galenians gathered to

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54 *History of Jo Daviess County*, 248, 251, 331, 362; 475-8, 504, 637-8, 654.
discuss these issues, opposing partisans made common cause. In announcing the first of a series of public meetings, numerous Galenians including Democrats J. Morrison (member of the 1839 Board of Trustees) and William H. Hooper (member of both the 1840 and the short-lived 1841 town boards) joined with Whigs H. H. Houghton (editor of the Gazette) and R. W. Brush (an 1841 trustee) calling for a “full expression of public opinion.” Although only a handful of current or former Galena trustees signed their names to this first call, the more than one hundred men whose names appeared represent an extensive cross-section of Galenians, partisan and non-partisan. When residents gathered for the meeting, Charles Hempstead received the call to chair while Whig O.S. Johnson served as secretary. When a correspondence committee was created at a succeeding meeting, perhaps most shockingly, even the divisive John Stark could be called upon to assist in the task. In the end, nothing came of these efforts and Galena remains a part of Illinois. However, as the conversation dragged on for months, the lesson was that partisan Galenians were still capable of productively working with their political foes. Politics might have been a constant presence for some, but there were limits, as Hempstead noted, to their applicability.

Galena’s experience with the Second Party System and the story of Ichabod Smellfungus therefore offer a valuable corollary to the political history of the Age of Jackson. By changing the scale at which we view the mid-nineteenth century’s political theatre, both the length to which party politics could reach and limits thereof become clearer. Although the Era of the Common Man undoubted left many people out of the political process, the vigor with which those who did participate pursued their goals was hardly insignificant. The fact that

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58 History of Jo Daviess County, 481-2.
Smellfungus, a parody that not infrequently bordered on libel, could run for so long in the *Gazette* indicates that people other than the paper’s editor were interested, if not invigorated, by the satire. Yet, such partisanship had consequences. Democrats who likely had Galena’s best interests at heart were challenged by Whigs who believed otherwise. The economic conditions of the era essentially guaranteed the failure of any Galena government but the town’s increasing debt supported Whig accusations of malfeasant. Thus the retreat to non-partisan local government in 1841 was not simply a return to the disgust with faction that had earlier motivated presidents like George Washington or John Quincy Adams. Rather, Galenians saw such partisanship as a hindrance to the improvement of their community and set politics aside when the need arose. As Alexis de Tocqueville noted, Americans were a conspicuously democratic and political people yet the partisanship of the 1830s and 1840s was by no means the only mode in which those Americans operated.