10-10 The Presidential Election of 1836

The election of 1836 is notable for two reasons. First, the Whig Party, formed in the wake of Andrew Jackson’s destruction of the Second Bank of the United States, engaged in its first national campaign. Against Martin Van Buren, Jackson’s hand-picked successor, the Whigs ran four candidates with strong regional affiliations, apparently in an attempt to garner enough electoral votes to deny Van Buren an electoral majority, and thus to force the contest into the House of Representatives. That strategy failed. The second notable thing about the 1836 election was the candidacy of Richard Mentor Johnson of Kentucky for the vice presidency under Van Buren. Johnson, a Kentuckian who has served with William Henry Harrison during the War of 1812, cultivated a reputation as the man who had killed the Shawnee chief Tecumseh. More than offsetting this presumed advantage, however, was the fact that Johnson had a long-term relationship with his mulatto slave Julia Chinn, and had fathered two daughters with her. Johnson made no secret of the relationship; indeed, he treated Chinn as his common-law wife (because the law prohibited an interracial marriage) and openly recognized Adeline and Imogene as his daughters. As might be expected, opponents made much of Johnson’s personal life. And although Van Buren won the presidency outright on election day, Johnson failed to gain the necessary electoral majority. Thus the Senate had to select the vice president in accordance with the terms stipulated in the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution.

In “Political Race Course,” the 1836 campaign was portrayed as a horse race, with the four leading candidates’ faces adorning the four animals. They are, from left to right, William Henry Harrison, Van Buren, Daniel Webster, and Hugh Lawson White. “An Affecting Scene in Kentucky” was a racist attack on Johnson. A distraught Johnson is seated, flanked by a black man and an abolitionist. His daughters try to comfort him; one is carrying a portrait of their mother, Julia Chinn, who had died of cholera three years earlier.


TEXT OF DIALOGUE FROM “POLITICAL RACE COURSE”

First Rider: “Old Tip” has been in training but a short time, yet his wind and bottom are staunch as his backers are honest. I say “Old Hickory” that Kinderhook Nag of yours has been over trained!!!

Second Rider: By the Eternal!!! I’ll never back a Northern Horse again. They have neither wind nor bottom, and so cursed slippery withal that it’s hard to keep your seat on them. The People too are all throwing their caps for “Old Tip” and “White Surrey,” while this cursed “cold blooded” animal is disgracing his groom and training. I say Old Boy if you’ll stop a minute I’ll jump off & beat you myself.

Third Rider: The game is up! “Old Tip” is winning the prize notwithstanding the training of Old Hickory. I always told him when he was backing that “Cold blooded Kinderhooker;” he would find him wanting bottom in the hour of trial, & any thing but a race horse. Thank God he’s beaten! So we may as well hold up.

Fourth Rider: Well I want to know! I guess I’ll jist tote along & kinder look out in case Old Tip he mout git a tumble. As for that tarnation “Kinderhooker,” by ging he’s used up & he wont only be distanced, but I kinder think he’ll throw his rider into that ‘are dirty pool near the Central Post!

TEXT OF DIALOGUE FROM “AN AFFECTING SCENE IN KENTUCKY”

Richard M. Johnson (seated): When I read the scurrilous attacks in the Newspapers on the Mother of my Children, pardon me, my friends if I give way to feelings!!! My dear Girls, bring me your mother’s picture, that I may show it to my friends here.

First Daughter: Here it is Pa, but don’t take on so.
Second Daughter: Poor dear Pa, how much he is affected.
Man standing behind daughters: Pickle! Pop!! And Ginger!!! Can the slayer of Tecumseh be thus overcome like a summer cloud! Fire and furies. Oh!
Abolitionist: Be comforted Richard; all of us abolitionists will support thee.
Black Man: Colonel, I pledge you de honor of a Gentleman dat all de Gentlemen of Colour will support you.
Postmaster (far left): Your Excellency, I am sure all of us Postmasters and deputies will stick to you; if you promise to keep us in office.
Questions

1. What was the illustrator of "Political Race Course" suggesting by depicting the candidates as horses rather than the riders?

2. The rider of "Old Tippecanoe" tells Jackson, "That Kinderhook Nag of yours has been over trained!" What was this supposed to suggest to the voters in 1836? What was significant about the appearances of the Whig riders?