Ellen Ewing Sherman had seen her share of death. At William Tecumseh Sherman’s encampment near Vicksburg, Mississippi, she had toured abandoned entrenchments laden with blood. It was during Ellen’s visit with her husband in the summer of 1863 that their son Willie had fallen sick. He died before Ellen could reach her parents in Lancaster, Ohio. That same fall, Ellen’s mother, Maria Boyle Ewing, entered the final stages of a terminal illness. Her father, Thomas Ewing, had already suffered a series of heart attacks since the beginning of the war.¹

If the deaths of Maria and Willie had shaken Ellen to her core—followed by the loss of another child while Sherman was marching through Georgia—her father’s decline was devastating. He had always been a source of calm in Ellen’s turbulent life. By sheer willpower Ewing had rallied so he could continue his law practice in Washington. He collapsed while presenting a case before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1869. Remarkably, Ewing was not yet counted out. Now, two years later, Ellen sat by her father’s bedside in Lancaster on a deathwatch. Her husband kept his distance, harboring mixed
feelings of gratitude and resentment toward the man who had taken him in when his own father died and to whom he owed so much.²

As Ewing’s life slipped away on October 26, 1871, his reputation had already assumed legendary proportions. He was the impoverished “Salt Boiler” of Virginia’s Kanawha Valley who had gone on to become a U.S. senator and serve in the administrations of Presidents William Henry Harrison and Zachary Taylor. Although Ewing had not known Taylor before his 1848 campaign, he found him to be a lively storyteller and keen observer of human foibles. Taylor had an honored place at Ellen’s wedding in 1850—a fact Sherman underscored when trying to impress military superiors and prospective business associates.³

In his first Senate term (1831–37), Ewing sat next to the prickly Henry Clay of Kentucky and behind the eloquent Daniel Webster of Massachusetts. Ewing often mediated disputes between these rival leaders of the Whig Party, and he became especially close to Webster. Indeed, Webster and Ewing were like impish schoolboys, whispering wry observations about their colleagues in Latin lest anyone might be listening. Whether in committee meetings or in debates on the Senate floor, Ewing gained equal measures of respect and bile as “the Logician of the West.” Webster believed he had never met a more intelligent man, while Treasury Secretary William Meredith, who also served in Taylor’s cabinet, said of Ewing: “His reasoning was like a sledgehammer, and woe betide the antagonist who mistook its weight.” Even a few of his critics acknowledged him as a “statesman” who was “inclined to be what some would term ‘jovial.’”⁴

His Scots-Irish forebears had bequeathed to him a commanding physique. He stood six feet tall, and though he weighed 260 pounds, it was mostly muscle, not fat, that tipped the scales. Old-timers in Lancaster recalled that when Ewing had simultaneously served as prosecuting attorney for Athens and Fairfield Counties, he had led a posse in pursuit of outlaws. Locating the fugitives in a farmhouse, Ewing charged up a flight of stairs and then launched his fists into the largest member of the gang. Amid breaking furniture and bones, he hogtied his quarry. His companions had a rougher time, so Ewing turned his attention to the rest of the gang. Seeing an opportunity, Ewing’s prisoner loosened his binding enough so he could get to his feet, jump out the second-story window, and escape on a horse provided by a relative.⁵

Ewing’s private legal practice proved to be both consequential and, on occasion, peculiar. In 1828, Ewing represented a Lancaster man accused of having had sexual relations with a horse. Ewing won the defamation suit and collected the princely sum of $500. That same year, Ewing received
admittance to practice law before the U.S. Supreme Court. He made quite an impression, and in later years when he entered the Supreme Court the justices interrupted their deliberations to shake his hand. American jurists, when recommending case law to their younger cohorts, urged them to read less Blackstone and more Ewing.

He tendered his most important—and unsolicited—legal advice to President Abraham Lincoln. In November 1861, the U.S.S. San Jacinto intercepted the British ship Trent, which was conveying two agents of the Confederate States of America—James Mason and John Slidell—to Europe. The British government viewed the Union Navy’s action as tantamount to an act of war. Secretary of State Henry Seward, and public opinion in the North generally, favored keeping Mason and Slidell prisoners even if it meant war with Britain. Alarmed, Ewing lectured Lincoln in international law and argued that the United States could not defeat the Confederacy while fighting Britain. (Among friends, Ewing characterized Seward as “a low, vulgar, vain demagogue.”) In need of a legal framework to justify the release of the Confederates, Lincoln accepted Ewing’s rationale but gave him little credit.

At home in Lancaster, Ewing solicited clients by engaging in athletic competitions. In one such exhibition, Ewing demonstrated his physical prowess by hurling an ax over the Fairfield County Courthouse. This same attorney that played roughneck for the locals took a complex case involving land claims in St. Louis. Ewing realized that understanding Spanish might prove useful in interpreting earlier land titles, so he locked himself in his study for six weeks and became fluent. For his fee, Ewing obtained a large portion of downtown St. Louis.

When Ewing set a goal for himself he became an unstoppable force of nature. If he became interested in real estate speculation, then his objective was to be among those who developed St. Louis and Leavenworth, Kansas. If in need of a better burning fuel for boiling brine at his salt wells, then Ewing would become the father of coal mining in southeastern Ohio. If Ewing required more efficient transportation networks for his salt and coal, then he would construct canals and railroads to link Lancaster to New York City, Pittsburgh, Wheeling, and the Kanawha Valley.

Most importantly, if in need of political protection, then Ewing would cultivate friends and family. He formed law partnerships with such men as Illinois senator Orville Hickman Browning, a confidant of Lincoln, and Henry Stanbery, a Lancaster relative who later served as attorney general for President Andrew Johnson. These political and familial alliances were no small matter. Daniel Webster introduced Ewing to the Boston businessmen who provided a good portion of the capital to build his canals and railroads.
Cousin James Gillespie Blaine, the Republican Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and the party’s 1884 presidential candidate, joined the Ewing family in the mining of Ohio coal.10

Ewing kept the wine cellar and humidor well stocked when travelers from the Upper South came through Lancaster on Zane’s Trace—which linked to the National Road all the way to Washington. Henry Clay and Andrew Johnson knew they could always find good cheer at the Ewing mansion on Main Hill. When he served as secretary of the Interior, Ewing rented the Blair House, which had space enough for entertaining. With his legal practice in the 1840s having netted nearly $1,000 a month, Ewing was well able to spend money to make more money.11

As with business, law, and politics, so it was with love: nothing could deter Ewing. In this case, the prize was Maria Boyle, the attractive and bright niece of Philemon Beecher, a prominent Lancaster attorney and member of Congress. Although Maria was Irish Catholic and Thomas of Irish Presbyterian descent, the sentiment among the Blaines, Boyles, Ewings, and Gillespies could be summarized thus: they were the exiles of Donegal and Londonderry seeking religious and economic freedom. For Thomas Ewing this meant his religion was the U.S. Constitution. For Maria Boyle, while the path to God went through Rome one still had to coexist peacefully in Protestant Ohio. Consequently, they reared their six children in the Catholic faith, with frequent visits to their Blaine kin so that they would be socially at ease with the Protestant majority.12

Thomas and Maria Ewing raised their two daughters and four sons in the contrasting worlds of Lancaster and Washington. The eldest child, Philemon (b. 1820), was likely the only thirteen-year-old in America who could say he had dined in the White House and camped in the foothills of Appalachia. Although Phil Ewing spent his legal career in Ohio and acquired no national reputation, he knew his way around the corridors of power in Washington. He was also a rare confidant of his mercurial brother-in-law, William Sherman. Phil’s intimate knowledge of Washington politics helped save Sherman’s military career more than once during the Civil War.13

The Ewings’ daughters, Ellen (b. 1824) and Maria Theresa (b. 1837), received the most intensive religious instruction of the children. Maria went to the Sisters of Visitation in Washington, while Ellen attended Catholic boarding schools in Somerset, Ohio, and Georgetown. It was at the Georgetown (Washington) convent of the Sisters of Visitation that Ellen became friends with several members of the Mudd family—one of Maryland’s prominent Catholic families. (The Mudd and Ewing families had a connection that preceded Ellen’s enrollment at the Georgetown convent. Sister Catherine
Mudd of Maryland was among the founding faculty affiliated with St. Mary’s Academy in Somerset.)

From her mother, Ellen developed a religious devotion that might have led her to take vows but for her love of the red-headed Sherman boy. From her father, Ellen inherited keen skills of observation. It was doubtful that any adulterer or drunkard in Lancaster, St. Louis, or Washington escaped Ellen’s notice. Like her father, Ellen kept track of enemies and allies. To her husband’s dismay, Ellen envied Maria Theresa, who had been able to remain physically close to their parents.

As the second eldest son, Hugh Ewing (b. 1826) had his father’s girth, as well as his love of literature and thirst for adventure. What he lacked, especially in his younger years, was focus. Hugh was also more of an idealist than his father. Of the boys, Hugh appeared most comfortable hunting and playing war in the dense woods of southeastern Ohio. He certainly knew his way around taverns and billiards tables but remained a stranger to advanced mathematics. For those reasons, Hugh proved to be one of the most popular cadets to ever flunk out of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. He was also a welcome companion to have in the goldfields of California. Few would have predicted that Hugh was destined to become a fine general in the Union Army, serving honorably at South Mountain, Antietam, Vicksburg, and Missionary Ridge.

Tom Ewing (b. 1829) looked like a leaner version of his father. He possessed a first-rate intellect and made the most of his education at Brown. In contrast to Hugh, Tom had ambitions to be just as prominent as his father in business, law, and politics. Having served as his father’s personal secretary when he led the Interior Department, Tom knew all of Washington’s back channels of influence. Like his father, Tom was politically pragmatic and thoroughly logical. Unlike either Thomas or Hugh, Tom was reserved, as if always on guard against potential threats. He was the only Ewing son who rejected his mother’s Catholicism and became Presbyterian—much to his sister Ellen’s sorrow.

Tom moved to Kansas in the 1850s, hoping to achieve fame and fortune. While he did not acquire fortune, Tom became chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court and won fame of a kind during the Civil War. General Thomas Ewing Jr. fought William Quantrill’s Confederate guerrillas and, after the 1863 Lawrence Massacre, issued General Order Number 11, which, at bayonet point, removed from their homes ten thousand Missouri residents suspected of aiding the insurgency. In 1864, Tom Ewing saved St. Louis from capture, decisively defeating a Confederate force several times larger than his own at Pilot Knob, Missouri.
When Dr. Samuel Mudd of Maryland stood accused of aiding John Wilkes Booth in his flight from Washington after the assassination of Lincoln, Tom Ewing served as his aggressive legal counsel. He also assisted Henry Stanbery in the defense of President Johnson at his Senate impeachment trial. Of the brothers, Tom Ewing had the dirtiest war and the most controversial legal and political career. Though Sherman’s relations with Hugh and Charles Ewing during and after the war were sometimes tense, he always showed Tom the greatest deference.

Charles Ewing (b. 1835) was the youngest, shortest, and only golden-haired son of Thomas and Maria. As a teenager, Ellen practiced her mothering skills on Charley in an effort to make him an obedient child. She failed. Charley was a scamp with quick mental and physical reflexes—useful attributes to have, since he had a talent for finding trouble. His studies at the University of Virginia immersed him in Greek philosophy and the pastimes of the southern gentry. Fifteen years junior to Sherman, he idolized his brother-in-law. As a captain in the Thirteenth U.S. Infantry, Charley was wounded at Vicksburg while leading a desperate charge against Confederate positions. He fought at Missionary Ridge and marched through Georgia and the Carolinas, ending the Civil War with the rank of general and the distinction of being the most sought-after bachelor in Washington.

Thanks to Hugh, Tom, and Charley, as well as to the great renown achieved by his son-in-law Sherman, Thomas Ewing became known at the end of war as “the Father of Generals.” It was rare for one family to produce so many capable military commanders, placing the Ewings in the exceptional company of Ohio’s “Fighting McCooks” and the Virginian Jacksons. What made the Ewing brothers particularly remarkable was the size and pro-southern culture of the community from which they sprang, as well as their privileged background.

Lancaster at the outbreak of the Civil War was a county seat of 4,303, as well as a transportation hub that encompassed a winding route between Virginia’s Kanawha Valley and Columbus, the capital of Ohio. From this small community sprang five Union generals and two of the first soldiers to receive the Medal of Honor. Lancaster and Fairfield County men filled the ranks of the Sixty-First Ohio Volunteer Infantry and served in at least eleven other Ohio regiments. They fought in nearly every major battle in the eastern and western theaters, including Antietam, Atlanta, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and Vicksburg. 16

Despite impressive service to the Union, much of Lancaster, Fairfield County, southern Ohio, and, indeed, its western neighbors preferred either neutrality in the war or an outright Confederate victory. Ulysses Grant
recalled that in his southern Ohio hometown most residents despised Lincoln. Moreover, Grant continued, “There were churches in that part of Ohio where treason was preached regularly, and where, to secure membership, hostility to the government, to the war, and to the liberation of the slaves, was far more essential than a belief in the authenticity or credibility of the Bible.”

Grant’s characterization of southern Ohio rang true. On the eve of the Civil War, roughly a quarter of the residents of the Old Northwest were either southern born or the children of southerners. The founders of Ohio—notably, Thomas Worthington, Nathaniel Massie, and Simon Kenton—were Virginians. This was not surprising, since there was a fifteen-county area in southern Ohio known as the Virginia Military District—land set aside for Revolutionary War veterans from the Old Dominion. Indeed, Ohio’s original capital, Chillicothe, was in the Virginia Military District. Ohio’s first settlers tended to be ardent states’ rights Democrats, as was true of their southern kin. Populist on economic matters, such people often assumed that businessmen were dishonest as a matter of course. Tellingly, when they felt cheated in a commercial transaction, they claimed they had been “Yankeed.”

Although many southern transplants had migrated to the Old Northwest because of their inability to compete economically against slave labor, they harbored more hatred for African Americans than for white planters. To them, blacks were the carriers of crime, disease, and moral debasement. In 1802, when Thomas Worthington helped draft the Ohio Constitution, he opposed granting citizenship to blacks. Ohio’s Virginian-bred leaders prohibited blacks from testifying in court, barred their children from public schools, denied them the vote, and required African Americans to post a $500 bond that had to be signed by two white men if they wished to remain in the Buckeye State. After Lincoln called for volunteers to put down the southern rebellion in April 1861, Ohio Democrats in the legislature sponsored a bill to ban interracial marriage. Their intention was to place Republicans on the record as supporting interracial sex and to divert attention from South Carolina’s attack on Fort Sumter.

Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois were hotbeds of antiwar and antiblack sentiment, leading Republicans and some prowar Democrats to refer to their foes as “Copperheads”—after the poisonous snakes that were abundant in the Ohio River Valley. Ohio produced a number of important opponents of the war and the emancipation of the slaves. Columbus was home to Samuel Medary, who had been the editor of the state’s Democratic newspaper, the Ohio Statesman, and a proslavery territorial governor of Kansas. Medary was not one to mince words. When Whigs in 1845 tried to repeal Ohio’s antiblack
laws, Medary’s *Statesman* asked: “Are you ready to be on a level with the niggers in the political rights for which your fathers contended? Are you ready to share with them your hearths and your homes?”

Medary’s racial attitudes did not soften with the passage of time. During the Civil War, Medary, who by then was editing the *Columbus Crisis*, castigated “the half-witted usurper” Lincoln and his emancipation policy. Medary approvingly quoted a Chillicothe antiwar activist who argued that “every white man in the North, who does not want to be swapped off for a free nigger, should vote the Democratic ticket.”

In the congressional district adjacent to and north of Fairfield County, Samuel “Sunset” Cox mocked Unionists and rallied House Democrats against Lincoln. Meanwhile, U.S. representative George Pendleton of Cincinnati joined George McClellan on the Democrats’ presidential peace ticket in 1864. Pendleton charged Republicans with having gone to war under false pretenses. While deceitfully claiming that the North was fighting to preserve the Union, Lincoln, so Pendleton alleged, was leading “an armed crusade for the abolition of slavery.” Both Pendleton and Cox warned that freed slaves would invade Ohio—which already had the largest black population in the Old Northwest—if the South lost the war.

Most notorious among all the Copperheads was Congressman Clement Vallandigham of Dayton. Vallandigham opposed emancipation and pay raises for Union troops. He expressed his criticism of military recruiting so intemperately that he had the singular distinction of being deported from Union territory. From exile in Canada, Vallandigham ran for governor of Ohio in 1863. His campaign song, which mocked the abolitionists’ “Battle Cry of Freedom,” spoke volumes:

```
We will hurry to the polls boys
From the East and from the West,
Shouting Vallandigham and Freedom,
And we’ll teach the oppression’s crew,
With the niggers and the rest,
To shout Vallandigham and Freedom!
```

Vallandigham racked up impressive tallies in Fairfield County and the neighboring Virginia Military District but decisively lost the Connecticut Yankee–dominated Western Reserve near Lake Erie.

In Lancaster, antiwar Democrat Edson Olds ended up jailed in 1862 for his efforts to disrupt military conscription. From a prison cell in New York City, Olds won a special election as Lancaster’s representative to the Ohio
House of Representatives. Lancaster’s antiwar Democratic newspaper, the *Eagle*, praised Olds and luridly editorialized against emancipation and the enlistment of blacks into the Union Army: “The Negro is a barbarian. His method of making war is by the destruction and massacre of women and children, as well as men, by the perpetuation of atrocities that makes humanity shudder.”

Well acquainted with the state’s noxious political divisions, Thomas Ewing positioned himself on the slavery issue between the extremes of the abolitionist Western Reserve and the stridently antiblack Virginia Military District. The senior Ewing and son Tom desired to preserve the Union without abolishing slavery, hoping it could be contained in the South. This made them wary supporters of Lincoln and enthusiastic backers of Andrew Johnson. Hugh, on the other hand, became an abolitionist. Even Ellen, who had never previously had a political disagreement with her father, embraced abolition as both a military necessity and an act of vengeance against the South—the latter sentiment being one that Sherman did not share.

In addition to the racial antagonisms that poisoned attitudes toward emancipation and preservation of the Union, there were angry Democratic charges that the struggle against the South was a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight. Antiwar Democrats in the North contended that conscription fell heavily upon working-class men. Few poor males, especially Irish Catholic immigrants, could afford to hire a substitute for $300 to serve in their place. Rising businessmen such as John D. Rockefeller of Cleveland and Andrew Carnegie of Pittsburgh avoided military service. Financier Thomas Mellon of Pittsburgh urged his sons to stay out of the war. In New York, attorney Grover Cleveland and businessman Theodore Roosevelt Sr. hired substitutes.

Overall, only 2 percent of Union soldiers came from the ranks of professionals and businessmen. Factory workers and craftsmen accounted for 40 percent of the Union’s 2.1 million troops, a proportion that was several times larger than their share of the North’s population. When working-class males in the North went off to war, whether as volunteers or as conscripts, they often left behind wives, mothers, sisters, and children with little means of financial support. Consequently, class tensions on the northern home front were never far beneath the surface during the Civil War.

Paradoxically, even as Lincoln dispatched Union troops to New York City in 1863 to put down an anti-conscription riot that took at least 105 lives, his son Robert was sitting out the war at Harvard. Robert Lincoln claimed that he wanted to serve but that his frantic mother objected. After his graduation near the end of the war, Robert Lincoln went into the military. Lincoln, however, received an assignment to Washington, away from combat. Given how
many prominent young men were able to evade military service, the Ewing brothers proved exceptional, leading by example and acting from a strong sense of civic obligation—even at the risk of their lives.\textsuperscript{27}

Then again, given that the Ewing brothers had spent part of their formative years at the doorstop of Appalachia and were of Scots-Irish descent, they may have been close in culture and heritage to the southern warriors against whom they fought. The bulk of the troops who marched through Georgia and the Carolinas with Charley Ewing, after all, were not gentlemen Yankee clerks from the East. They were often enough uncouth western farm boys, with the highest proportion of Sherman’s command coming from Ohio.

During the war Thomas Ewing had a strained relationship with Radical Republicans and the Lincoln administration, viewing the president as the best of a sorry lot of politicians. Senator John Sherman of Ohio, who kept politically, but not emotionally, close to his brother’s relations, was harsher, regarding Lincoln as a disaster. Senator Sherman even tried to persuade the Republican Party not to renominate Lincoln. Thomas Ewing and John Sherman, as well as Phil, Hugh, and Tom, battled Secretary of War Edwin Stanton when he seemingly (and repeatedly) questioned General Sherman’s sanity and loyalty to the Union. They also tried to temper the Radical Republican senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio and his Committee on the Conduct of the War. With Tennessee senator and committee member Andrew Johnson on board, the Ewings fought Wade, who, as Ulysses Grant complained, appeared interested in promoting Union officers more for their abolitionist beliefs than for their competency.\textsuperscript{28}

With the end of the Civil War, the divisions that had beset the nation, Ohio, and Lancaster did not quickly recede. Thomas Ewing, Tom Ewing, and Henry Stanbery were vocal critics of the Radical Reconstruction of the South that Senator Wade proposed. They also continued their feud with Stanton, whose dismissal by Johnson triggered the president’s impeachment. It was with this history in mind that the \textit{New York Times}, in publishing its obituary of Thomas Ewing, took a position close to his Radical Republican enemies. “Mr. Ewing,” the \textit{New York Times} concluded, “was a man of the old generation in politics, a stately figure, honorable, high-toned, without fear and above reproach, but unfitted for these times of change and progress by a conservatism which clings to the past, and refuses to see any good in the future.”\textsuperscript{29}

Just before the end of his life Thomas Ewing received communion in the Catholic Church. There was no little irony to his gesture. Ewing had paid a political price for being married to a Catholic and for raising his children in the church. Angry nativists had prevented him from securing the vice presidential slot on the Whig ticket in 1848. In his stead, the Whigs’ anti-Catholic
faction chose Millard Fillmore, who ascended to the presidency following Taylor’s death. (Fillmore later ran for president as the candidate of the nativist American Republican Party.) Even though Ewing had not converted until on his deathbed, his family had become revered and reviled as one of the most prominent Catholic families in the Old Northwest.30

Much of the state government of Ohio closed for business on the day of Ewing’s funeral. In Washington, most federal offices were shuttered, with the Department of Interior draped in black. His pallbearers included Senator Sherman and Henry Stanbery, as well as Ohio governor Rutherford B. Hayes. Before the Civil War Ewing had praised Hayes’s legal mind and predicted that he would make his mark on national politics. During the war, Hayes had commanded the Twenty-Third Ohio while Hugh Ewing led the Thirtieth Ohio—both part of the Kanawha Division, which saw action in western Virginia, South Mountain, and Antietam. Hayes felt a debt of honor to both father and son.31

Ewing’s funeral Mass was said at St. Mary’s in Lancaster, an imposing structure at the top of Main Hill that he had helped construct in 1864 as a monument to his wife. Cincinnati archbishop John Baptist Purcell delivered the eulogy, after which the funeral procession went to St. Mary’s Cemetery at the city’s outskirts.32

As the years passed, Thomas Ewing and his brood of generals faded from local and national memory. If recalled at all, Thomas Ewing received a passing mention as the father-in-law of General Sherman, although a few biographers noted that he had been politically powerful and protective of his daughter Ellen. For their part in history, Hugh, Tom, and Charley Ewing became nearly invisible, obscured by the shadow of their famous brother-in-law. Given this state of affairs, it is time to tell a tale of westward expansion, disunion, war, and high-stakes politics as seen by a close-knit family that shaped an era as much as the era shaped them.

On the central political issue of the Civil War and Reconstruction, the status of blacks in America, the Ewings charted a moderate course. They were repelled, in varying degrees, by the virulent racism of many northern Democrats and the black and white poverty they saw firsthand in the South. At the same time, the Ewings’ extended family had little patience with Radical Republicans. In both the political and military arenas, the Ewings grappled with slavery and emancipation. Whether liberating slaves in the March through Georgia or advancing the political career of Andrew Johnson, the Ewings were at the center of the national debate on race relations.

The Ewings’ skepticism of equal rights for blacks, and their limited goal of fighting a war to preserve the Union, embodied the views of the majority of Border State prowar Democrats and Republicans in 1861. Mounting
casualties and escalating war, however, polarized the northern electorate and changed the political objective from fighting to preserve the Union with slavery to fighting for abolition. Thomas Ewing, Tom Ewing, and William Sherman reluctantly came to accept the abolition of slavery but did not believe that blacks merited political and social equality on a par with whites. Tom Ewing had commanded black volunteers and treated them more decently than was the case with many other Union officers. His African American troops in turn gave him good marks. But in the end, Tom Ewing and his family did not change their stance on civil rights and were consequently placed, along with Sherman and Johnson, on a collision course with the Radical Republican Congress.

Once passions over the war subsided in the North, the Radical Republicans lost ground and the court of public opinion swung sharply against them. In place of a spirit of vengeance there arose sympathy and admiration for the Confederate soldiers. The narrative of the Civil War that came into prominence twenty years after Sherman's March hailed the brave Yankees and the gallant southerners of “The Lost Cause” who had fought nobly at Gettysburg. In this emerging narrative, the Ewing family fell into disrepute or disappeared outright.33

Contrary to the romanticized view of the Civil War that many white northerners and southerners embraced after Robert E. Lee’s surrender to Grant, the conflict had its share of ignoble events. Indeed, it can be fairly argued that the North won precisely because certain commanders were willing to fight more viciously than their southern foes—whose own hands bore the blood of massacred black Union troops and unarmed civilians.

Sherman became a reviled figure in Dixie because his troops did something far worse than kill their foes in battle—they destroyed southern property and psychologically emasculated Confederate soldiers who were unable to return home from Virginia to defend their families. Neither Sherman nor Charley Ewing ever regretted these tactics. They believed that South Carolina had started the war and Ohio was going to finish it—no matter the economic cost and mental anguish inflicted on the South.

Tom Ewing felt no differently. The anti-insurgency tactics he used in Missouri, and his battle of annihilation with Confederate forces, had, like Sherman’s March, contributed to Union victory. If crushing the Missouri insurgency in the aftermath of the 1863 Lawrence Massacre required the removal of ten thousand civilians who had provided aid to the guerrillas, then Tom Ewing would remove them. Faced with a Confederate force several times larger than his own at Pilot Knob, Missouri, in 1864, a foe that tortured and executed Union prisoners, Ewing gave no quarter.
Unfortunately for the reputations of the Ewings and Sherman, after the Union armies disbanded and the martial ardor of the Yankees cooled, the North seemed to become ashamed of its win-at-any-cost warriors. While southerners deified Lee and erased Confederate president Jefferson Davis from their “Lost Cause” narrative, northerners placed Lincoln, rather than Sherman, or even Grant, at the heart of the Union narrative. Significantly, the North’s idealized Lincoln would not be the president who approved Sherman’s March and Tom Ewing’s General Order Number 11; he would be the gentle Lincoln who desired reconciliation with the South.

As the battlefield experiences of Hugh, Charley, Sherman, and especially Tom Ewing illustrated, three Civil Wars were being fought. The first and most familiar war was the one of Union and Confederate armies clashing in conventional combat at Antietam and Gettysburg. The desperate battles became the spine of “The Lost Cause,” glorious contests fought between two equally admirable forces.

The second and less familiar war—a war largely unknown to Americans today—was the struggle against guerrilla insurgents and the targeting of civilians. This war took the lives of fifty thousand civilians. Tom Ewing’s Civil War, in terms of the brutality directed against combatant and noncombatant, equaled what Sherman inflicted on the South in 1864 and 1865. To understand the Civil War in all its dimensions requires studying the Ewing brothers’ response to guerrillas and the insurgents’ civilian support network in Missouri, western Virginia, Georgia, and the Carolinas.34

Finally, the third Civil War was one that the Ewings and Lincoln appreciated all too well. This front was the political contest fought by antiwar northern Democrats against the Unionists. There was a direct relationship between the electoral prospects of Republicans and prowar Democrats in the North and the military progress of Union forces. Repulsing Lee at Antietam in 1862 made the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation possible, even though, as Thomas Ewing warned Lincoln, it gave ammunition to racist Copperhead Democrats in the Old Northwest. Sherman’s capture of Atlanta and Tom Ewing’s defense of St. Louis in 1864 secured Lincoln’s reelection. There could never be a separation of military policy and electoral politics—a fact of life well understood by the Ewings.

Rediscovering the Ewings provides a window on the importance of family networks in nineteenth-century American politics. This family helped advance Andrew Johnson to the White House (and saved him from impeachment), paved the way for Sherman to become one of America’s greatest soldiers, and kept the Union out of war with Britain. Thomas Ewing combined his business and political interests and practiced constitutional law at the
highest level. The power he wielded, while laying the foundation for his sons’ military careers during the Civil War, also served the larger purpose of preserving the Union and economically developing the West.

Finally, the Ewings represented one of the most socially and politically prominent “blended” families in Civil War-era America. Although the ancestors of the Ewing, Boyle, Blaine, and Gillespie families had fought each other in Ireland’s sectarian wars, they became Americans at ease in Catholic and Presbyterian pews. While Scots-Irish and Irish Catholics conducted bloody feuds in Belfast, Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, the Ewings’ relations came to each other’s aid. If there had been any doubt as to whether an American could be loyal to the Roman Church and the Constitution—and this was the doubt nineteenth-century nativists raised—the military and political records of the Ewings gave proof of their patriotism. In the religious culture wars of the nineteenth century, there were important figures such as the Ewings who reserved their ammunition for real battlefields.

* * *

Chapter 1 will chart Thomas Ewing’s path from impoverished Appalachian salt boiler to formidable Washington political player. The political context of Ewing’s battles with Presidents Andrew Jackson and John Tyler, as well as his business ventures prior to 1850, receive particular attention. Further, the cultural context of Ohio and western politics and society in the early nineteenth century will be analyzed.

Chapter 2 focuses on Thomas Ewing’s marriage, children, kinship ties, and Catholic religious practice. The introduction of William Sherman into the Ewing household, failed efforts to bring the belligerent John Sherman under control, and John Sherman’s later redemption are part of this story. We will discuss the adventures of three of the Ewing brothers: Hugh, Tom, and Charley. While Hugh Ewing flunked out of West Point and headed to the California goldfields, Tom Ewing served as his father’s assistant in the Interior Department and witnessed his father’s (losing) opposition to the Compromise of 1850. Thomas Ewing opposed the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and watched with disgust when armed Missourians crossed into territorial Kansas to vote for its admission to the Union as a slave state. Tom and Hugh Ewing went to Kansas to practice law, speculate in real estate, and politically battle the proslavery forces.

In chapter 3, we will survey Thomas Ewing’s role in the 1860 presidential election and his subsequent participation, along with Tom, in the 1861 Washington Peace Convention. By a quirk of fate, Hugh, Charley, and William Sherman, along with U. S. Grant, found themselves in the middle of
what was then the bloodiest moment of the Civil War as fighting broke out in St. Louis between secessionists and Unionists. Hugh Ewing returned to Ohio to join the invasion of western Virginia in the summer of 1861. The Ewing family intervened with President Lincoln to protect Sherman from charges that he was insane, while Thomas Ewing and John Sherman presided over the establishment of the Union Party in Ohio, bringing together moderate Republicans and prowar Democrats. The senior Ewing also took it upon himself to save Lincoln from war with Great Britain.

As the events of 1862 unfold in chapter 4, we will explore Hugh Ewing’s embrace of abolition even as his father warned Lincoln that a policy of emancipation would play into the hands of the Copperheads and throw the Old Northwest to the antiwar Democrats. In the aftermath of the bloody battle of Shiloh, the Ewings once again fought to save Sherman’s reputation. While Charley Ewing languished as a prison guard at Alton, Illinois, Hugh Ewing and the Kanawha Division played critical roles in the Union Army’s victories against Lee at South Mountain and Antietam. Meanwhile, Tom Ewing resigned as chief justice of the Kansas Supreme Court to assume command of a Kansas regiment. He distinguished himself in Missouri and Arkansas. Subsequently promoted to brigadier general, Tom Ewing battled a vicious guerrilla insurgency along the Kansas-Missouri border.

In chapter 5, Hugh Ewing, Charley Ewing, and William Sherman held a family reunion in Mississippi. General Grant’s Vicksburg campaign of 1862–63—followed by the desperate battle of Missionary Ridge in Tennessee—brought notoriety and pain to the Ewing brothers. Both were in the thick of combat, with Charley Ewing wounded and Hugh Ewing all too accurately calling his troops “the Forlorn Hope.”

Shortly after the guns at Vicksburg fell silent, Confederate guerrilla William Quantrill’s troops executed 175 men and boys in Lawrence, Kansas. General Tom Ewing issued General Order Number 11. Ewing’s military response to the guerrilla insurgency would not be matched in scale until the federal government relocated tens of thousands of Japanese immigrants and their children during World War II.

In Ohio, the Copperheads nominated the exiled Clement Vallandigham for governor as pro- and antiwar partisans escalated their feud. Losing Ohio to the Copperheads in 1863 would have made Lincoln’s reelection in 1864 all the harder and would have hampered war mobilization given that the Buckeye State provided the third-largest number of troops to the Union cause.

Chapter 6 emphasizes the interplay between presidential politics and the brutal military clashes of 1864. Sherman, Charley Ewing, and an army of one hundred thousand advanced toward Atlanta while Grant racked up
enormous casualties in the eastern theater against Lee. After antiwar Democrats in the North captured control of their party and nominated former Union general George McClellan and Ohio congressman George Pendleton for president and vice president, respectively, Lincoln’s sense of desperation grew. Moderate Republicans chose Tennessee Democrat Andrew Johnson, a Unionist and ally of the Ewing family, as Lincoln’s running mate to appeal to prowar voters outside the Republican Party.

Sherman’s capture of Atlanta in September 1864 improved Lincoln’s political position. Aware of that fact, Confederate general Sterling Price launched an invasion of Missouri with the intention of capturing St. Louis and shifting northern political momentum away from Lincoln. Only Tom Ewing’s troops stood in the way of a much greater Confederate force.

After the battle of Pilot Knob, Charley Ewing and sixty thousand Union troops launched what was then the most audacious campaign in American military history. As a member of Sherman’s staff responsible for overseeing the behavior of troops, providing supplies, and acting as troubleshooter at large, Charley Ewing took a crucial backstage role in the march through Georgia in 1864. Hugh Ewing, exhausted from three years of close combat, remained behind in Kentucky to deal with a guerrilla insurgency. Tom Ewing, promoted to the rank of major general for his decisive victory at Pilot Knob, Missouri, turned down Sherman’s invitation to join him in Georgia, choosing to resign his commission and take up a law practice in Washington. Only Charley Ewing would be present at the creation of the legend of General William T. Sherman.

In chapter 7, Sherman’s troops marched through the Carolinas and greatly contributed to the ending of the military conflict. While the shooting stopped in April 1865, a political war between Radical Republicans and moderate Republicans and War Democrats commenced. Sherman found himself in trouble with War Secretary Edwin Stanton and Senator Ben Wade, thanks in part to the generous surrender terms he had given Confederate general Joe Johnston in North Carolina. The Ewing family once again rallied to Sherman’s side.

Meanwhile, Tom Ewing became one of the most despised men in the North by defending Dr. Samuel Mudd and a few others prosecuted for complicity in the assassination of Lincoln. With Ewing family member and law partner Henry Stanbery serving as President Johnson’s attorney general, Tom Ewing and his father crossed swords with the Republican radicals. Paradoxically, the post–Civil War era opened with a military trial—that of Dr. Mudd—and closed with the Senate impeachment trial of Johnson—defended by Stanbery and the Ewings.