During the run-up to the British general election of 1868, an English newspaper looking for “relief from the pressure of home politics” turned “a glance” to the even more rancorous politics across the Atlantic Ocean. The “partisan venom and loathing” in the American South was so acute, the *Western Daily Press* observed, that “ominous” words such as *carpetbagger* had been concocted to malign opponents. “Our own party terms have associations clustered around them,” but at least they are “taken clean from the dictionary, and make no charge of a hopeless moral stain attaching to the characters of the person spoken of.”¹

Although historians now stress how white southerners resisted and ultimately terminated Reconstruction through legal evasion and extralegal violence, some have argued recently that journalists’ linguistic inventions also played a crucial role. During the critical transition from presidential to Radical Reconstruction in the 1867–1868 period, the southern Democratic press launched a concerted and ultimately successful campaign to discredit what it saw as the imposition of “Negro rule” on the South by alien governments. A key strategy of that campaign was the coining of the term *carpetbagger* to denote northerners who were allegedly crossing the Mason-Dixon line to interfere in and profit from southern politics. Although references to suspicious northerners with carpetbags appeared by 1865, the *Montgomery (Al) Daily Mail* editor Joseph Hodgson was allegedly the first, on November 30, 1867, to add the crucial suffix “er” to the word *carpetbag*. This morphological derivation (to use the linguistic term) spread rapidly across the South. Often appearing alongside *scalawag*—another anti-Reconstruction neologism, one referring to the white southerner who voted Republican—and alongside stereotypes of Black Americans as unfit for legislative office, vulnerable to manipulation, and inclined to indolence, the carpetbagger quickly became ubiquitous. Popular entertainers such as the famous minstrel showman Billy Emerson parodied the figure in an 1868 song, mockingly dedicated to the Union general and Radical Republican Benjamin Butler. Carpetbaggers

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even appeared in southern literature and theater, such as Elizabeth Avery Meriwether’s 1877 white-supremacist play *The Ku Klux Klan; or, The Carpetbagger in New Orleans.*

According to recent histories, opponents of Reconstruction deliberately crafted the carpetbagger as a “rhetorical weapon” that worked on multiple levels. It enabled the denigration of southern state conventions (and, subsequently, state legislatures) as packed not with natives or long-standing residents who could properly represent local interests but with interlopers still clutching their luggage—and, worse, a style of luggage supposedly alien to the South. The smallness of the carpetbag betrayed these political prospectors’ disinclination to commit to the South in the long term and become productive citizens. The carpetbag’s size also implied these intruders’ minimal property and lowly class status, affiliating them with transients and vagrants. The carpetbag’s color was significant, too. Typically described or depicted as black (often glazed black), it linked the bearer to the African Americans with whom he was accused of conspiring or consorting.

Although the idea of the contemptible carpetbagger became entrenched in subsequent histories—particularly those of the Dunning school of Reconstruction historiography in the early twentieth century—we now know that it bore little resemblance to social and political realities. Since the 1960s, historians such as Kenneth Stampp, Richard Current, and Randolph Campbell have shown how northern émigrés—whom they inexplicably continued to refer to as “carpetbaggers”—did not constitute a majority in any state conventions or legislatures; did not typically head south to exploit political opportunities for personal enrichment but rather out of patriotic idealism or humanitarianism, or for legitimate economic activities; were not predominantly part of the lower class but were often educated professionals; and were not generally corrupt. These émigrés offered much-needed capital and expertise, and they often stayed on in the South and integrated into southern society. We thus have a more nuanced picture of their backgrounds and motivations.

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Yet whether recovering the social realities obscured by the stereotype or exposing the political intentions that produced it, historians have failed to explain exactly why it was so powerful. The prevalence of the term carpetbagger, along with its subsequent extension to refer to political trespassing in any geographical direction, has perhaps resulted in our overlooking the object that engendered it. By recovering the history of the carpetbag, tracing its adoption, uses, and meanings across a longer period and a broader geographical expanse, we will determine how an apparently innocuous type of luggage became such a suspect or even sinister object—and why northerners as well as southerners might have been so receptive to this epithet. Although a cultural history of the carpetbag cannot by itself explain the demise of Reconstruction, it can supplement interpretations that focus on violent resistance, racism, political maneuvering or failed leadership, or the shift of public concern to other issues such as class conflict.5

In neglecting the antebellum career of the carpetbag, historians have also overstated the rhetorical originality of southern journalists during Reconstruction. This article will show that they did not invent the trope of “the man with the carpetbag” in 1867. That notorious figure—a precursor to the confidence man—had appeared in news reports, fiction, plays, and cartoons since the 1830s and became particularly prominent by the 1850s, especially in reports about shady dealers in western banknotes. Southern Democrats were also not the first to invoke the carpetbag in a partisan political context. Republicans had deployed it in the late 1850s against those who crossed into free states or undecided territories as proxies for slaveholding interests, and they used it again in 1865 against the leaders of the Confederacy. As early as 1840 the object had also come to refer to members of either party who traveled to their state or national capital after a successful election to secure a lucrative civil-service appointment as reward for their campaigning efforts. Southern Democrats merely condensed the name of a well-known character type into a single word. Its potency as a weapon against Reconstruction depended on prior mobilizations of the carpetbag trope.6

Historians have also tended to view Reconstruction within a national framework and have thus assumed that the carpetbagger was a specifically American type. Yet the figure had British roots. Although the Western Daily Press had denounced “the carpetbagger” as an offensive neologism, the English paper would have been familiar with the tendency to impugn someone based on their adoption of this hand luggage. Indeed, British verbal, visual, and theatrical satire of “the man with the carpetbag” predated its American incarnations. This article will explore how American political uses of the carpetbag drew on the meanings established by these British authors and artists and will suggest that this familiarity with the transatlantic discourse and imagery of carpetbags further explains the widespread acceptance of anticarpetbagger rhetoric in the South in the late 1860s and in the North by the mid-1870s.7


5 For interpretations that focus on other factors in Reconstruction’s demise, see Richardson, Death of Reconstruction; William Gillette, Retreat from Reconstruction, 1869–1879 (Baton Rouge, 1979); and Andrew L. Slap, The Doom of Reconstruction: The Liberal Republicans in the Civil War Era (New York, 2006).

6 Like Ted Tunnell and Adam Thomas, K. Stephen Prince argues that “Northern Republicans . . . allowed themselves to be convinced by an extended and remarkably successful campaign of Democratic slander and misinformation.” See Prince, “Legitimacy and Interventionism,” 544.

In examining the strange career of the term *carpetbagger*, this article offers a framework for uncovering the hidden meanings and usages of the many highly charged words that have arisen at critical moments in U.S. history. American political conflicts have long been mediated by influential and often-pejorative neologisms: from the nineteenth century—with its *pork barrels*, *lame ducks*, and *stump speeches*; its *gerrymandering*, *muckraking*, and *mudslinging*; its *Copperheads*, *Graybacks*, *Redeemers*, and *robber barons*—through the twentieth century (*pinkos*, *fellow travelers*, *silent majorities*, and *Sister Souljah moments*) to the recent past (*alternative facts*, *death panels*, and *Bernie bros*). Instead of taking these terms for granted, we must clarify what made them so powerful. What subtextual connotations did they convey, and what prior assumptions, dispositions, or sentiments did they mobilize? Who was their intended audience, and why did the word speak to them? How did these terms enter common parlance, and how did they shape political outcomes? Furthermore, how did their meanings evolve during—and after—those political struggles? What layers of signification did they accrue or shed as they migrated from one context to another? Complex histories lie compressed within words such as *carpetbagger.*

Whereas etymologists would seek the originator or earliest instance of a term, thus granting it an originary unity, this article will excavate the deeper strata of meanings that underlie it. It will do so by taking a materialist approach to political language. Showing how the meanings of the term *carpetbagger* were shaped in large part by the material qualities of carpetbags themselves— their size, pliability, decoration, and lockability, but also their production methods and materials, their pricing, and their various disadvantages as a receptacle—it will further challenge the assumption that politicians were (and are) the masters of their own rhetoric, concocting their words and phrases *ex nihilo*. The article will thus demonstrate larger possibilities for integrating the history of material artifacts with the study of discourse. Rather than take up material culture approaches in reaction to cultural histories that focus on texts (and/or images), we should treat the material and the discursive (and/or the iconographic) as mutually inextricable. Through the example of the carpetbag, we can apprehend how inanimate objects have subtended the discursive world, thus subtly influencing how social and political conflicts played out.

If historians have gravitated toward what we might call positive artifacts—those that individuals value and therefore collect, preserve, and display as expressions of status and identity or as repositories of memory—this article will emphasize the role of a negative artifact. Or, more accurately, it will trace how an object once valued as the height of bourgeois fashion, practicality, and economy acquired what the philosopher Gottlob Frege called “negative coloring and shading.” Such pejorative associations, according to Frege, are “not objective” or inherent in words but “must be evoked in the mind of both speakers and listeners.” How, in other words, did Americans come to view the carpetbag as a bad object?

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8 For an exemplary history of American neologisms, see Stephanie A. Smith, *Household Words: Bloomers, Sucker, Bombshell, Scab, Nigger, Cyber* (Minneapolis, 2006). Stephanie A. Smith’s discussion of the emergence in the early 1850s of the word *bloomer* to define both a garment and a type of woman, and the redefinition of that word in the 1890s, is especially important. See ibid., 1–34.


“A shift in meaning or a change of usage,” cautions the literary historian Stephanie Smith, “is difficult to chart with assurance,” yet this essay will suggest that the answer to the question will revolve around the carpetbag’s association with mobility. Small and light enough to be carried while on foot or in streetcars and railroad carriages, but elastic enough to accommodate many items, it became the luggage of choice for the proliferating journeys—such as daily errands, work commutes, or tourist excursions—made possible by the transportation revolution. Its cheapness and decorative variety spurred its adoption across class, gender, race, and region. The carpetbag functioned compellingly in pejorative discourse because it resonated with concerns that both northerners and southerners, Republicans and Democrats, Americans and Britons harbored regarding this expanded mobility. For the southern elite, geographic movement—not just of migrants to their region but also of their own lower-class and Black populations—appeared as a threat to their control of labor and capital. And while northern elites celebrated the movement of people, goods, and ideas as crucial to the nation’s economic and spatial expansion and deplored the South’s underdeveloped roads and railroads as signs of its economic and moral backwardness, they also grew increasingly uneasy about forms of mobility that did not conform to orderly capitalist circulation. They viewed the peregrinations of confidence men, bank note runners, political adventurers, traveling voters, and vagrants as unpredictable and nonproductive. Indeed, the carpetbagger gained potency through its coincidence with the rebranding of vagrants as “tramps” in the 1870s.11

“The greatest discovery of the age,” announced Chamber’s Journal of Popular Literature in 1854, is neither the steam engine, nor gaslight, nor the telegraph, but rather the humble carpetbag (see figure 1). Although intended humorously and not substantiated in the remainder of the article, the claim reminds us that even apparently simple containers were the product of, and could function as, complex technologies. On the surface, the carpetbag—introduced by the Parisian company Bazar du Voyage in 1826—was simply an overnight case (or sac de nuit) consisting of carpet, a material that dates to ancient Persia. Yet it was also the outcome of industrial advances. With the introduction of handloom technology in the 1790s (and power looms by the 1830s), and the new fashion for concealing faded wooden floorboards, carpet manufacturing boomed on both sides of the Atlantic. The carpetbag was a solution to the problem of factory offcuts. Carpetbag manufacturers visited carpet salesrooms and bought up large quantities of these remainders (and old samples) at discounted prices. They then cut and folded them into bags, adding leather or stiff-rope handles, an inner lining (sometimes using offcuts of cotton from clothing factories), and a brass fastener. The introduction of a frame made of cast iron—a material by then associated with technological modernity—gave the bag some structure, while a flat, cardboard base allowed it to stand upright by itself. Further innovations included a machine, patented in 1852, for bending the frame more precisely.12

11 Smith, Household Words, xxv. On northerners’ critiques of southerners’ transportation networks, see John D. Cox, Traveling South: Travel Narratives and the Construction of American Identity (Athens, Ga., 2005), 141–64.
The carpetbag’s transmutation into a dark symbol of unscrupulousness is striking, given its initial celebration in Britain and the United States as ideal luggage for the railway age. Indeed, the upsurge in mobility in both countries during the mid-nineteenth century should be attributed not just to technological developments such as the steam engine and the iron-and-glass train station but also to innovations in luggage design. A much-touted feature of the carpetbag—besides its obvious durability—was its portability. Whereas trunks necessitated porters or footmen, carpetbags could be easily carried (and indeed packed) by travelers themselves, thus helping render recreational travel accessible to the broader middle class. Carpetbags, along with hatboxes and other small items, were also allowed to accompany travelers in the carriage. As with the “carry-ons” of today, this allowance liberated passengers from delays. Those traveling with trunks and portmanteaus had to wait anxiously on railroad platforms and coach stations for porters and luggage vans, declared the Glasgow Citizen in an 1846 article that was reprinted in at least three American magazines. But those carrying just a carpetbag could board immediately and grab

Carpet-Bag Frames, &C,” Scientific American, Nov. 27, 1852, p. 84; Report of the Commissioner of Patents for the Year 1852. Part II. Arts and Manufactures (Washington, 1853), 47.
“the best seat,” and when the train arrived at its destination, “they [could be] off with the jaunty swagger of unencumbered bachelorhood.” Portability also meant freedom from the demands and insults of porters—a figure of bourgeois fear—and from damage inflicted on luggage that was often thrown “upon the ground, as if they belonged to nobody.”

As a carry-on, the carpetbag allowed the traveler to save money too, by evading the extra charges that railroad, stage, and omnibus lines—like airlines today—sometimes imposed on luggage. Noting that “on all the railways on the [European] continent, luggage is charged for almost by the ounce,” Charles Dickens recommended traveling with “as little luggage as possible. A carpet-bag...is enough for any man.” A carpetbag carrier was regarded, according to an anonymous American author, as a “frugal, independent, economic sort of character.” Like other examples of Victorian recycling, this assemblage of fabric offcuts appealed to a bourgeois ethic of thrift and modesty. Abraham Lincoln’s disinterest in land speculation or other financial schemes was, according to early biographers, embodied not only in his plain clothes and simple tastes but also in the carpetbag he carried around Illinois in the 1850s. For already distinguished statesmen such as Senator Henry Clay, the bag’s modesty could render them more relatable. In *The Illustrious Guest*, painted in 1847 by his fellow Whig James Henry Beard, Clay has arrived in a tavern, perhaps in his home state of Kentucky. His carpetbag, left in the corner, marks him as an unostentatious man who carries his own baggage—a compelling image as he was then bidding to become his party’s nominee for president.

Whereas Clay and Lincoln were traveling within the nation, the carpetbag could evoke a more expansive kind of independence. In Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851), Ishmael packs his “old carpet-bag” with a “shirt or two” and sets out, via New Bedford, for “Cape Horn and the Pacific.” (Two decades later, Jules Verne’s Phileas Fogg and Passepartout would circumnavigate the entire world with just a carpetbag). If “baggage” was coming to mean the things that encumber individuals, weighing them down literally and intellectually, then the carpetbag was the exception. It implied a freedom from everyday burdens, or—in the new idiom of the 1870s—a willingness to “travel light.” In a letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1851, Melville adopted the metaphor to praise those who, like his correspondent, lack mental preconceptions and thus “are in the happy condition of judicious, unincumbered travelers in Europe; they cross the frontiers into Eternity with nothing but a carpet-bag—that is to say, the Ego.” Hand luggage could thus convey independence not just from porters but also from intellectual constraints.


The carpetbag’s portability stemmed, of course, from the fact that it was designed for smaller, recreational trips rather than for major journeys of relocation. As such, it needed only to be large enough to contain such essential items as a change of shirt, nightclothes, a spare pair of shoes, and perhaps a novel or guidebook to read en route. (With the improvement of hotels by midcentury, bringing one’s own bed linen, towels, and blankets was no longer necessary.) Thus, whereas the immigrant’s steamer trunk signified a traumatic separation and an uncertain future, the carpetbag had only pleasant, bourgeois connotations. “No painful ideas of stormy seas, or dreadful accidents on far off railway lines are suggested by it,” added the Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette, in a reprint of an article from the Glasgow Citizen, but just “a short and pleasurable excursion.” The carpetbag’s bearer, wrote the English playwright Edward L. Blanchard in 1847, was likely to be “a stout, ruddy-faced, good-humoured individual” of the kind who is “always treating himself to short railway excursions, and bustling about the station in the busiest and pleasantest manner imaginable.”

While small in size, carpetbags were surprisingly capacious—especially those constructed with triangular pieces (or “gores”) on each side, rather than with just two rectangular pieces. Because of carpet’s flexibility, much could be compressed into it. “There is a popular tradition,” continued Blanchard, “that a carpet bag will hold anything: we believe it.”

It is the very encyclopaedia of light articles, possessing, like a London Omnibus, the algebraic property of containing within itself unknown quantity. It has a perfect aldermanic capacity for stuffing; its limits are as indefinable as the Oregon territory. Nature herself could not manifest a greater antipathy to a vacuum. Into this expansive receptacle cram everything you want to take, from a top-coat to a tooth-brush, and you have always a portable wardrobe at your disposal.

Once on board the train with such a well-stocked carpetbag, added an American journalist, the traveler can pluck the various “comfort[s]” needed to enjoy the journey. Imagined as a voluminous receptacle capable of containing the world—a conceit later rendered fantastical in Mary Poppins—the carpetbag echoed the new “miscellaneous” magazines of the period. Indeed, the popular satirical journal that published Mark Twain’s first story was called Carpet-Bag and displayed one on its masthead (see figure 2).17

Another asset of the carpetbag was its low cost. Although higher prices were charged by boutiques such as Bazar du Voyage, which opened a branch on Wall Street in New York City in 1836, one could purchase a carpetbag for as little as one dollar from a saddler.


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or from a railroad station. The bag’s affordability and ready availability were products of and catalysts for the transportation revolution that transformed Britain and the United States during the antebellum period. The carpetbag came to symbolize the new mobility of the middle classes and the democratization of tourism, appearing in numerous paintings of the interior of railroad carriages or stations. The most well-known of these was the British painter William Powell Frith’s *The Railway Station* (1862), which was graced with a “prominent position” at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia, where it attracted “a dense crowd” of visitors “already familiar” with it from the widely circulated engravings (see figure 3). Frith’s painting of London’s Paddington Station presented the variety of groups that the railway has set in motion. The wealthy traveling to their country homes, embarking on a honeymoon, or seeing their boys off to boarding school jostle up against the “humbler classes” departing for fishing and other excursions. This socioeconomic diversity is reflected not just in the clothing but also in the confusion of luggage types: from trunks being loaded onto the train to baskets, hatboxes, satchels, and, most visibly, the carpetbag that the porter is picking up in the foreground. It is potentially a scene of social chaos, yet Frith ultimately reassures the viewer that order can be maintained—not only by the detectives, who are arresting the criminal disguised as a gentleman, but also through the imminent separation of this crowd into carriages (one of them bears the words First Class, and the *Illustrated London News* identified the train as “mixed down,” consisting of three classes) and through the stability of the composition, in particular the pyramidal group centered in the foreground, presided over by the respectable figure of Frith himself. The viewer is also presumed to be a bourgeois male; in the left foreground, we perceive a shadow cast from outside the frame, alongside an umbrella, a walking stick, and another carpetbag.¹⁸

The material from which carpetbags were fashioned itself offered reassurance against the railroad’s associations with painful separations and overwhelming crowds. Its woven textile evoked the domestic, suggesting that travelers could carry reminders of the family home. Inside the train, carpetbags could double as pillows, while “railway rugs” (rugs that could be rolled up and carried as bags) were spread across the legs for warmth, especially in the days before heated carriages. Echoing the general parlor-like decoration of first-class carriages, such tokens of domesticity may have additionally alleviated lingering anxieties about train accidents. The carpetbag thus constituted a small yet crucial tie to home—a kind of “transitional object” enabling one to venture out into the world. Made of the same material as one’s floor covering—a relationship Umberto Eco calls homomateriality—it exerted a physical, indexical link to the domestic sphere.19

How, then, did a type of luggage celebrated as the most convenient, modest, affordable, and homely lend itself to negative caricature? If it had been merely a northern fashion, Democrats’ weaponization of the carpetbag would not be surprising. Yet evidence shows that southerners, too, had imported the item from Europe. An 1854 business directory listed fifteen establishments across the South that sold carpetbags. Prominent carpetbag owners included the proslavery ideologue Edmund Ruffin, who alluded to it in his 1857 diary. And a list of unclaimed luggage held in Atlanta’s Southern Express railway

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office in 1862 included more carpetbags than trunks. Why, then, did this particular container become so tainted and stigmatized in Anglo-American culture?  

One set of answers concerns the carpetbag’s aforementioned expandability and capaciousness, which rendered it vulnerable to satire. In 1852 the impersonator W. S. Woodin based an entire show on this theme and performed it over five hundred times to packed London houses and then to audiences around Britain, establishing his reputation as “one of the greatest humorists . . . of the day.” He began his one-man act by introducing and unlocking his false-bottom carpetbag, and then proceeded to “draw forth a variety of characters and incidents” from its “mysterious recesses.” This elasticity of the carpetbag was fodder for political cartoonists, too. In a Punch cartoon of 1848, the Whig prime minister Lord John Russell and Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Charles Wood struggle to make up the budget shortfall by cramming legislation for an augmented income tax, along with additional proposed taxes on various commodities and sources of revenue, into an overstretched carpetbag (see figure 4). American cartoonists also seized on the motif. An 1860 cartoon in Vanity Fair placed a Black child in Lincoln’s much-reported carpetbag to represent the slavery issue that Horace Greeley warned him not to “drop” during the campaign—a balancing feat that would challenge the skills of even the famous tightrope walker Charles Blondin (see figure 5). Strangely filled or grotesquely distended carpetbags became a common motif in Reconstruction-era political cartoons. For holding out against the Compromise of 1877, the Louisiana governor (and Maine native) Stephen Packard was depicted in Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper holding two outsized carpetbags, yet reluctant to board the train back to the North (see figure 6).

For travelers, a container that could be stocked with all kinds of items raised practical problems, too. Recovering a particular item from an overfilled carpetbag could prove difficult. Other containers of the Victorian period, from secretary desks and writing desks to reliquaries, tended to have inner compartments to organize the contents into epistemological or mnemonic relationships. Without such internal dividers, the carpetbag threatened to throw one’s possessions into disarray. As recounted in numerous fictional and nonfiction accounts, a carpetbag was also vulnerable to loss or theft, a devastating blow if it contained all one’s essentials. “We lost in that carpet bag an invaluable quantity of comfort,” wrote the English novelist and travel writer Frederick Marryat, “for it contained all the little necessaries required for it. . . . It would appear that everything had been crammed into this unfortunate receptacle.” The Pittsburgh genre painter David Gilmour Blythe addressed this fear in The Post Office (circa 1859–1863), which depicts a street urchin stealing a red carpetbag from a man who, immersed in his newspaper, had unwisely placed it on the ground. The scene dramatizes the particular threat to property and propriety posed by democratic public spaces such as post offices, which attracted a heterogeneous throng in

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Figure 4. In this 1848 cartoon, the Whig prime minister Lord John Russell and Chancellor of the Exchequer Sir Charles Wood struggle to make up the budget shortfall by cramming tax legislation into an overstretched carpetbag. “Lord John and the Chancellor of the Exchequer Packing Their Carpet Bag,” Punch, 14 (Jan.–June 1848), 80, reprinted in John Leech, Early Pencillings from Punch (Chiefly Political) (London, 1864), 144.

the days before home delivery. With identity increasingly tied to, and reinforced by, material possessions, the protection of one’s container became paramount. The painting thus identifies the carpetbag with a naïve or careless individual, an unsuspecting victim.22

22 On nineteenth-century containers and their inner compartments, see Camille Showalter and Janice Driesbach, Wooton Patent Desks: A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place (Bloomington, 1983); Deborah Lutz,
Figure 5. This 1860 cartoon by *Vanity Fair’s* chief cartoonist H. L. Stephens has placed a Black child in Abraham Lincoln’s much-reported carpetbag to represent the slavery issue that Horace Greeley (shown on the right, calling out “don’t drop the carpet bag”) warned him not to abandon during the presidential campaign. The cartoon also alludes to the French acrobat Charles Blondin’s crossing of Niagara Falls on a tightrope. *H. L. Stephens (cartoonist) and George Wevill (engraver), “Shaky. Daring Transit on the Perilous Rail, . . . Mr. Abraham Blondin De Lave Lincoln,” Vanity Fair, June 9, 1860, p. 377. Courtesy Special Collections, Musselman Library, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, Pa.*

The carpetbag’s propensity to become swollen and lumpy when too full, unlike more rigid kinds of luggage that retained a basic shape, conjured various anthropomorphic connotations. An obvious physical homologue was an overweight man. The sheet music...
Figure 6. Grotesquely distended carpetbags became a common motif in Reconstruction-era political cartoons, such as this one in which the Louisiana governor (and Maine native) Stephen Packard, reluctant to return to the North after the Compromise of 1877, totes two outsized carpetbags. Depicted as the train conductor, President Rutherford B. Hayes shouts: “All aboard, Mr. Packard! We want to take all you Carpetbaggers in one trip!” “The New Policy Train,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, April 21, 1877, p. 128. Courtesy Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

for a polka inspired by Woodin’s act featured on its front cover a carpetbag bearing the face of a portly man with bulging cheeks (see figure 7). A short story titled “The Horrid Carpet-Bag,” published in London in 1853, likened the eponymous object to Woodin’s “celebrated” carpetbag “in its apparent capability of holding an immensity,” and described it as “resembl[ing] an over-gorged civic functionary.” In the contemporaneous American sketch “The Hungry Carpet-Bag,” a train passenger, outraged at being charged for placing his bag on an adjacent seat in the dining car, opened its “wide mouth” and fed it all the nearby food: “nuts, raisins, apples, cakes, pies.” While often imagined as a bloated male body, the carpetbag might also have evoked a more specific part of the body. The psychologist Wilhelm Stekel’s 1911 claim that “luggage often turns out to be an unmis-
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A takable symbol of the dreamer’s own genitals—a claim cited by his teacher Sigmund Freud in a revised edition of *The Interpretation of Dreams*—seems particularly applicable to the sack-like carpetbag. Those stories in which a male narrator or character loses his carpetbag thus manifest an undertone of psychosexual anxiety. In each of these cases, the humor derives from the conflation of objects and humans: an ontological breach of the conventional boundary between the animate and the inanimate or between personhood and objecthood. Southerners would exploit this strategy during Reconstruction, reducing subject and object to the single word *carpetbagger*.23

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23 “The Carpet Bag & Sketchbook Polka, Composed and Dedicated to his Friend W. S. Woodin Esq. by Camille Colmar” (London: R. Addison, [1865–1866]), JIDI 10049, Spellman Collection of Victorian Music Covers (University of Reading Library, Reading, Eng.). Mrs. Edward Thomas [Jane Penhorn Thomas], “The Horrid Carpet-
A second set of problems stemmed from the carpetbag’s gender associations. Although by the early twentieth century it was identified as a woman’s accessory, in the mid-to-late nineteenth century it had been carried by both sexes—a fluidity unusual among Victorian containers, which were rigidly differentiated by gender. The carpetbag’s unisexuality, compounded by its often-bright colors and ornate decorative patterns, rendered it suspect to some. So did its smallness; even as the *Glasgow Citizen* celebrated the carpetbag’s time-saving benefits in 1846, it admitted that “in contemplating a gentleman with a carpet-bag, we are struck to a certain extent with an idea of disproportion.” The implication, perhaps, was that the bearer was physically incapable of carrying larger and heavier containers such as trunks or valises, and, thus, was less manly. An 1848 watercolor by the American genre painter Richard Caton Woodville hints at such fears of emasculation by portraying a man burdened not only with a carpetbag and umbrella but also with a young child whose demands seem to overwhelm him (see figure 8). An equally hapless and overburdened man with an ornate carpetbag appears in “Our Arrival after a Rough Passage,” a satirical 1860s visiting card by the popular English illustrator Thomas Onwhyn depicting a couple whose bright clothes and luggage contrast with their seasick faces.

At the end of the Civil War, insinuations about the carpetbag’s gender ambiguity were mobilized to impugn the masculinity of southerners. When Richmond, Virginia, finally fell Jefferson Davis, his cabinet, and members of the Confederate Congress fled, allegedly with nothing but their carpetbags. According to Edward Pollard, the Virginia Democratic journalist who was a major architect of the myth of the Lost Cause in the months after the war, those deserters’ carpetbags emblematized their cowardice. “The shop-windows [of Richmond],” he recalled four years later, “were filled with caricatures of it—one of the most popular [of those caricatures], and [one] which might be considered to have originated the tradition of the *carpet-bag*, represent[ed] a fat and terrified [Confederate] Congressman, with his slight baggage in hand, pursued by a gun-boat, the apparition of a magnified insect mounted on spindle legs”—an image that combined the carpetbag’s associations with obesity and effeminacy. The innuendos were compounded, in Davis’s case, by his alleged disguise as a woman. It was bad enough, commented a Republican newspaper in Philadelphia, that Davis fled with “carpet-bag in hand.” But “Davis captured, dressed in his wife’s clothes, fugitive, at night, without even an escort is somewhat lower than Davis merely with his carpet-bag. Some rebellions, though atrocious, . . . have died with decency and honor. This fizzes out like a grand burlesque. Can anything more unmanly be conceived?” During Reconstruction such gendered aspersions were merely redirected by southerners against a certain type of northerner. Whereas “steady, sturdy, and industrious” New Englanders who intend to make their home in the South come with a...
“solid leather trunk,” declared the *New Orleans Commercial Bulletin* in 1868, no “carpet-bagger” has ever been seen performing “manual labor” in a cotton field.25

The ambiguity of the carpetbag also extended to its class status. If, as Adam Thomas and Richard Current have argued, the Reconstruction-era carpetbagger was implicitly “penniless” or from the lower class—their bag signifying vagrancy and lack of fixed property—this, too, was an association that emerged during the antebellum period. Even as etiquette manuals continued to advise bourgeois gentlemen and ladies in both Britain

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and the United States on how to pack and use a carpetbag, the upper classes evidently
did not monopolize it. Edward Thomson dramatized its susceptibility to (mis)appropri-
tion in his 1853 satire *Adventures of a Carpet Bag*. Recounting its own story, as in other
“novels of circulation” or “it-narratives,” the object begins life as a luxury Brussels carpet,
imported to London and purchased by a wealthy man of fashion. Financial ruin causes it
to be auctioned off and turned into carpetbags, one of which is purchased by an elderly
gentleman from middle-class Islington, only to fall into the hands of a pickpocket, who
sells it to a shop near a railroad station. Further mishaps ensue—it falls off a hansom cab
into the street near Holborn, where it is recovered by a young clerk, only to be stolen by
“two ragged ruffians” outside a coach office and left empty in the street, then picked up by
a beggar, and even used as a pillow by two “poor little gypsy girls”—until it finds its way
back to the gentleman from Islington. Such stories reveal how that quintessential sym-
bol of travel, the carpetbag, itself traveled across class boundaries. So, too, was Thomson’s
book potentially mobile; one approving reviewer recommended packing it in one’s car-
petbag to “fill the tedium” of a railroad journey.26

The British artist Abraham Solomon confirmed the carpetbag’s descent from fashion-
able to “common” in his 1854 painting *Second Class: The Parting*. The work depicts a non-
affluent, apparently widowed mother bidding sad farewell to her son, who—as intimated
by the billposters in the background and the ships viewable through the window—has
enlisted as a sailor and is possibly bound for Australia, his life’s belongings crammed into
a carpetbag (see figure 9). The carpetbag’s suggestion of straitened circumstances is sub-
stantiated by the painting’s motto—borrowed from William Shakespeare’s *Timon of Ath-
ens*—“Thus part we rich in sorrow, parting poor.” Solomon intended and exhibited this
painting as a pendant with *First Class: The Meeting*, which contrastingly depicts a frivo-
losous romantic encounter between a gentleman and a lady in a luxurious railway carriage.
This implicit critique of class inequality was diminished, however, when he unveiled a re-
vised version of *First Class* with the gentleman redressed in naval uniform. Named *The
Departure* and *The Return*, the two paintings presented a sentimental narrative about the
poor boy coming good and returning as a respectable officer.27

Thus, while associated with bourgeois tourists’ voluntary and temporary mobility, the
carpetbag could also evoke the involuntary and protracted mobility of those compelled
by economic circumstances. Single men owning little more than the contents of their car-
petbag were, in the minds of propertied northerners and southerners of the antebellum
period, akin to vagrants and vagabonds. As the geographer Tim Creswell has shown, fear
of the wandering poor dates to the late medieval era, and efforts to regulate their mobility
through almshouses, prisons, and vagrancy laws were central to the founding of the mod-
ern state in the sixteenth century. According to Kristin O’Brassill-Kulfan, this fear sharply
increased in the United States in the 1840s, as industrialization, capitalist expansion, and

26 Tunnell, “Creating ‘the Propaganda of History,’” 816, 820. Thomas, “Writing Redemption,” 16; Current,
_Those Terrible Carpetbaggers_. Leslie, _House Book_, 352. Another etiquette book that advises about carpetbags is
Florence Hartley, _The Ladies’ Book of Etiquette, and Manual of Politeness: A Complete Hand Book for the Use of
the Lady in Polite Society_ (Boston, 1860), 34–35. Edward Thomson, _The Adventures of a Carpet Bag: Respectfully
Journal_, May 21, 1853, p. 331.

27 Abraham Solomon, _Second Class—The Parting_, 1854, painting, NGA 81.8 (National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra). Abraham Solomon, _First Class—The Meeting_, 1855, painting (Yale University Center for British Art,
_Timon of Athens_ (1623; New York, 2020), 59.
an unprecedented financial depression multiplied the number of vagrants and magnified their perceived threat to social order and property. Overwhelming an archaic poor-law system, their mobility stimulated northern states to pass new laws to control their movements. Proslavery ideologues warned, meanwhile, about the vagrancy that would result from emancipation, especially given the supposed racial tendency of African Americans to abscond. In *Sociology for the South* (1854) George Fitzhugh reminded his readers that the abolition of serfdom in early modern England had the unintended effect of unleashing great bands of beggars and bandits on the land.28

Even middle-class mobility was becoming a cause for concern. Although more likely to celebrate a supposed spirit of restlessness and freedom of movement, northern magazines increasingly warned of the dangers of an itinerant, rootless existence. Advising every young American to make an abiding home, the Cincinnati-based *Ladies Repository* warned in 1863 that, “without such a hold upon the earth, he is a vagabond . . . a homeless wanderer over the face of the earth.” Even the nomadic Bedouin makes sure to pack “his home . . . upon his camels,” and the “Tartar hordes” transplanted whole villages. “But the American is ready, at five minutes notice, to emigrate anywhere, and all the home he

asks is a moderate sized carpet-bag.” Rootlessness was increasingly seen as a problem endemic to the North, which had greater socioeconomic pressures to relocate and, by 1860, more than twice as many railroad miles as the South. In 1857 the *London Times* posited a contrast between southern sedateness and the “perpetual rushing to and fro, by train and steamer, throughout the north and west.” Whereas southerners traveled less frequently, “more comfortably, and in less of a scramble,” one in three northerners seemed to be “going somewhere with a carpet-bag.” Yet, northerners such as Frederick Law Olmsted drew attention to pernicious forms of mobility in the South, too: the westward drift of slave-owning planters who repeatedly exhaust their soil, or the “vagabond . . . habits of life” that slavery was “encouraging” among poor whites.29

A key source of the fear of itinerants was their apparent unknowability—their liminal status as strangers within a community. Strangers arriving in towns in earlier decades, according to the historian Karen Halttunen, were identified and reported by ship captains and boardinghouse owners. But with the transportation, market, and urban revolutions of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, strangers became “not the exception but the rule.” The democratization of fashion and etiquette, moreover, made their class position indeterminable. A man with a carpetbag, given the availability of cheap versions of that luggage, was the very incarnation of this new type of socially ambiguous outsider. Indeed, in a society organized around the impersonal nexus of money, all individuals seemed strangers to one another, carrying their secrets around with them as if in carpetbags.30

Antebellum fiction and theater exacerbated these fears by suggesting how strangers could employ the carpetbag not just to pass as respectable gentlemen but also to commit criminal acts of fraud or embezzlement. With its lingering semblance of gentility, its ubiquity, and its lockability, the carpetbag was tailor-made for carrying illicit or stolen goods. In Gilbert Abbott A’Beckett’s *The Man with the Carpet Bag*—a one-act farce performed in London in 1835 and 1836, reprinted in New York in 1870, and revived on Broadway in 1871—the unscrupulous lawyer Mr. Grab attempts to gain another individual’s estate by having his unfortunate clerk, Grimes, conceal the deeds not in his brief-bag, which would arouse suspicion, but in his carpetbag, as that “looks more as if it belonged to a gentleman.” Meanwhile, news reports are circulating about a thief who checks into inns with a carpetbag filled with “cabbage leaves, or other rubbish” and then refills it with bed linen and other valuables. When Grab and Grimes arrive at a country inn, Grimes is suspected of being that thief and can prove otherwise only by revealing the contents of his carpetbag and thus disclosing his master’s fraud. The carpetbag’s aura of respectability, it appears, could quickly dissolve.31


Not confined to A’Beckett’s play, the anonymous thief who tricks innkeepers with his prefilled carpetbag was a familiar figure on both sides of the Atlantic, circulating as a kind of urban legend—in effect, a forerunner of the confidence man, a term not coined until 1849. “No individual,” asserted the American magazine Sargent’s New Monthly of Literature, Fashion, and the Fine Arts in 1843, “has given rise to so much curiosity and surmise as the ‘man with the carpet-bag.’ He has figured extensively in our police reports, and been made the subject of a farce. Every body has heard of him.” The magazine drew (without attribution) on the British Chronicles of Crime to recount how the original swindler had first appeared a few years earlier in London’s finest inns, where he exploited the carpetbag’s air of “innocence” to gain admittance. By 1866, his exploits were mock celebrated in a song performed to “great applause” in a British music hall and reported in a Boston magazine. “Personating the man with the carpet-bag, the singer boasted of his rogueries,” such as “how he had made his trousers out of his landlady’s sheets.”

As the figure’s notoriety grew, innkeepers came to view any carpetbag as an object of suspicion, a sign of the bearer’s potential criminality. Law-abiding and “respectable” individuals complained about being repeatedly denied accommodation in inns and public houses because of the bag they were carrying—an embarrassing predicament conveyed by Dickens’s illustrator Hablot Knight Browne, also known as “Phiz” (see figure 10). The carpetbag’s stigma could inflict even worse consequences. In “The Horrid Carpet-Bag,” by Mrs. Edward Thomas [Jane Penhorn Thomas], the young man who embarks in the middle of the night to elope with his lover is thwarted by a police sergeant who deems his overstuffed carpetbag sufficiently suspicious to warrant arrest. When the young man insists he is a gentleman, the sergeant retorts, “You a gentleman, and carrying a carpet-bag which would try a ticket-porter [a licensed porter] or a dray-horse!” Dickens himself reinforced its association with criminality in 1850 by relating a tale in which a Scotland Yard detective trails a Jewish criminal from London “to Cheltenham, to Birmingham, to Liverpool, to the Atlantic Ocean,” and ultimately to the Tombs prison in New York. He did so merely by following sightings of his carpetbag, which was distinctively adorned with a green parrot.

In the antebellum United States, the carpetbag became identified with a particular species of confidence man: those who dealt in the varieties of paper money that coexisted during that era of monetary permissiveness. “Wildcat” banks—unsound institutions often purposefully located in remote parts—apparently hired men to put their notes into wide circulation, for which the carpetbag was the surreptitious container of choice. Those who tried to redeem large quantities of notes for specie at their bank-of-origin, which could cause a run on that bank, were also known to bring those notes in a “suspicious-looking carpetbag.” This association gave rise to the naming of such individuals after their bag of choice. Reports about “carpet bag men” became frequent in the Midwest in


Figure 10. As reports circulated about a thief who used a carpetbag to steal from country inns, innkeepers came to suspect anyone carrying a carpetbag. In this image, by Charles Dickens’s illustrator K. Hablot Browne, the female innkeeper’s expression turns from a “smile . . . to a frown” at the sight of the travelers’ carpetbag, and she declares, “No sir; we have no room.” Phiz [K. Hablot Browne], The Man with the Carpet Bag, 1841, engraving, from Camden Pelham [pseud.], The Chronicles of Crime; or, The New Newgate Calendar, A Series of Memoirs and Anecdotes of Notorious Characters Who Have Outraged the Laws of Great Britain from the Earliest Period to 1841 (2 vols., London, 1841), II, opposite 312.

The aftermath of the panic of 1857, when gold rose in value. Rural banks, according to an Ohio newspaper in 1861, “keep a sharp lookout for these carpetbag men, as they are called.” Locals were prepared, “in aggravated instances, to assist in treating the carpetbag man to a free ride on a rail to the outskirts of the town.” Another, more colorful name for this suspect group was the “carpetbag gentry”—a term that played upon the socially
ambiguous status of this luggage. Bank note runners who were sent from Cincinnati into rural Kentucky to cash in notes during the panic, explained a popular New York monthly in 1859, “acquired the name of the ‘carpetbag gentry,’ and . . . were not unfrequently treated to a touch of lynch law. Eventually any stranger hailing from Cincinnati, whose baggage consisted of a carpet sack, became an object of suspicion in these towns.” By the Civil War, then, northerners were well versed in the carpetbag’s dubious connotations.34

The carpetbag’s growing moral ambiguity by midcentury becomes more apparent when we compare two works by Richard Caton Woodville that depict another species of confidence man: the cardsharp. In the first, The Card Players, painted in 1846, a man with a carpetbag appears to be the innocent victim of a fraud (see figure 11). Familiar and homely, his red-and-gray-striped carpetbag contrasts with those objects that evoke deception: crooked signs on the door and walls, the oblique angle of the clock pendulum, the card hidden under the younger man’s left thigh, the spoon in the glass, or the dirty floorboards and spittoon. Placed behind the older man’s chair, the carpetbag suggests that he is in transit—a notice on the door announces a stage line between Washington and Baltimore—and seems to be a gentleman, perhaps a southern one. In contrast, the younger man can be identified by his lack of luggage as the kind of local professional cardsharp who snares passing travelers, and the third man, despite his pretense of neutrality, as his shill. This scene of entrapment may be read as a critique of the dangers of gambling (which reformers were then seeking to prohibit or regulate) or of financial speculation—or else a vindication of speculation via what the historian Ann Fabian calls the “negative analogue” of gambling.35

Although art historians have underexamined the carpetbag in The Card Players, they have discussed the status of the enslaved man or servant to whom the older man has entrusted it. For Elizabeth Johns, Justin Wolff, and others, he—like other Black figures who linger in the corners of genre paintings—calls attention to the legal exclusion of African Americans from gambling or, more generally, their marginalization within the marketplace and society. Yet, while this can be deduced from the spatial positioning of the Black figure, it is more subtly reinforced by his custody of the carpetbag. For Frederick Douglass and other delegates to the National Convention of Colored Freemen in 1848, carrying white men’s carpetbags was the antithesis of those skilled vocations that would allow Black men to become productive and independent citizens. Such menial jobs, they declared, kept them in a state of precarity: “A man is only in a small degree dependent on us when he only needs his boots blacked, or his carpet-bag carried; as a little less pride, and a little more industry on his part, may enable him to dispense with our services entirely.” When


The Black Philadelphia newspaper *Christian Recorder* celebrated the sight of thousands of freedmen wearing army uniforms and bearing muskets in 1864, it contrasted that image with the memory of them subserviently carrying their masters’ carpetbags. Indeed, although northern travelers typically carried their own carpetbag—hence its evocation of self-reliance—antebellum southerners apparently prided themselves on not doing so—an affectation noted by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852). The northerner Miss Ophelia’s intention to carry “a small carpet-bag” and three boxes as she disembarks from the steamboat in New Orleans draws a rebuke from her southern cousin Augustine St. Clare: “My dear Miss Vermont, positively you mustn’t come the Green Mountains over us that way. You must adopt at least a piece of a southern principle, and not walk out under all that load. They’ll take you for a waiting-maid; give them to this fellow.” The carpetbag’s easy portability made it a more conspicuous sign of white authority when not carried.

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This is not to assume, however, that the Black figure in *The Card Players* is necessarily passive and subservient. Art historians have too quickly assumed that he is the embodiment of the “faithful slave” trope, his “neutral expression and obedient posture” (in Wolff’s words) functioning as a “foil” to the other men’s greed. What has been overlooked is that the man is subtly smiling, perhaps at his slave owner’s (or master’s) impending misfortune. He may have his hands clasped in prayer but could conceivably be praying for his master’s downfall. The carpetbag may also indicate a deeper defiance. Enslaved people, such as a Kentuckian named Henry Crawhion, were known to have taken flight bearing a (sometimes-stolen) carpetbag, and reward posters referred to the item in their description of fugitive slaves. Indeed, his master’s engrossment in his card game—and the fact that he is in transit—might be imagined as an opportunity for escape.37

Five years later, Woodville appeared to reprise—and intensify—many of these themes, albeit with the omission of the Black figure, in *Waiting for the Stage* (see figure 12). Critics have noted the heightened sense of duplicity and opacity here: the dark or hidden recesses of the room, the devilish face drawn on the blackboard, the oblique positioning of the players (which prevents us from seeing the face of the nearest one), and above all the *Spy* newspaper, which hints that the dandy with the dark glasses may be feigning blindness. Yet, it is the carpetbag—which has now moved from the wings to center stage—that is, again, pivotal to the painting. It may indicate, as in the earlier painting, that its owner is traveling and thus vulnerable to shysters who prey on out-of-towners—a reading that would reinforce those moralistic critiques of confidence men, gamblers, and (perhaps) speculators. Leaving the keys in the carpetbag’s lock—which, according to one account, was not uncommon among carpetbag owners—would suggest the kind of carelessness that would make him, like the man in Blythe’s *The Post-Office*, an easy target.38

And yet, unlike five years earlier, Woodville now acknowledges the increasingly infamous moral ambiguity of the carpetbag. While remaining a symbol of homeliness, it has become unhomely—that is, uncanny (unheimlich)—in its suggestion of hidden identities and secret intentions contained within. The respectably dressed traveler may be a cardsharp himself, one who roaméd from town to town and thus proved difficult to catch or evade. Just as the bird appears to have flown the birdcage above him, so will he make a quick exit once he has pulled off his deception. On this reading, the lock and key of his carpetbag suggest the fastening away of his true identity. With its bright color and prominent patterning, it is also a decoy for viewers, distracting their own eyes from his sleight of hand. Indeed, all three figures may be on the make, each of them presenting a front—or, to draw on a second meaning of the title, performing on a stage. Ultimately, Woodville


deploys the carpetbag’s doubleness to suggest that his gambling scene—or, by extension, urbanized market society writ large—can never be fully decoded or rendered legible, for all the efforts of physiognomists, detectives, or reformers.39

As sectional tensions intensified in the 1850s, the carpetbag came to signify not just the slipperiness of gamblers, tricksters, and speculators or the subservience (or potential fugitivity) of enslaved people but also the contentiousness of travel between free states and slave states, particularly in an age of mass mobility. While passing from North Carolina through Philadelphia in 1855, the enslaved woman Jane Johnson and her two children escaped from their master with the aid of the abolitionists William Still and Passmore Williamson. Upholding the sentence of imprisonment for Williamson, U.S. District Judge John K. Kane—a Democratic appointee—declared that an individual had the right to retain all his property while passing through a state, and that a slave was as much as part of his “traveling equipment” as “the horse he rides, or his coat, or his carpet-bag.” With its ontological equation of enslaved people with animals, clothing,

39 My differentiation of Waiting for the Stage from The Card Players is indebted to Wolff, Richard Caton Woodville, 68, 147.
and luggage, Kane’s decision provoked outrage in and beyond Philadelphia, energizing abolitionists.40

The carpetbag also became associated with those who crossed into free states or territories as pawns for the “slaveocracy.” During a particularly bitter contest for the governorship of Indiana in 1856, a local Republican newspaper denounced—under the headline “Carpet Bag Gentry”—the recent influx of “single gents” (allegedly railroad employees) from neighboring Kentucky as a fraudulent scheme to boost votes for the proslavery Democratic candidate, Ashbel P. Willard. Concerns about such electoral shenanigans were strong in the North and especially in the Midwest, where railroad corporations exercised power by dispatching their workers to polling stations, and where states wishing to encourage settlement had recently shortened—or in the case of Indiana, abolished—the residency period required to exercise a vote. In the South, by contrast, suspicion of migrants had led to the expansion of residency periods, to as much as two years in some states. Previously advocated by northern Whigs and resisted by Democrats, restrictive residency requirements were now a southern tool—one that would be used (alongside literacy tests and other means) to disenfranchise African Americans in the 1890s.41

This link between carpetbags and election manipulation was cemented during “bleeding Kansas.” Given the terms of “popular sovereignty,” spurious votes threatened to determine whether Kansas would become a slave state or free state. By describing the proslavery Missourians who inundated Kansas after 1854 as bearing carpetbags, free soilers portrayed them as temporary or artificial residents, in contrast to the genuine settlers who came from free states. “The emigration of the ‘carpetbag gentry,’ as they are popularly termed, has nearly closed for the season,” wrote the free-state Herald of Freedom in 1857. “Now comes the bone and sinew, ‘with their wives and little ones,’ not in a condition to return . . . but to settle down for life.” When celebrating the latter, antislavery newspapers did occasionally resuscitate the carpetbag’s earlier, positive associations with manly independence. The free emigrant undertakes his “abolition pilgrimage” to Lawrence, Kansas, declared the Leavenworth Herald, “shoulder[ing] his carpet-bag.” Yet, when they characterized the paramilitary gangs sent to Kansas to advance proslavery interests as “carpet-bag adventurers,” they were playing on the bag’s new association with lower-class, transient, and potentially dangerous elements.42

Rather than inventing the carpetbag epithet, then, Democrats merely purloined it from their political adversaries. They first did so not during Reconstruction but in the aftermath of Lincoln’s election in 1860. To discredit the incoming administration, Democratic


42 “They Come! They Come!!,” Lawrence (ks) Herald of Freedom, May 23, 1857, p. 1. See also “Immigration to Kansas,” Leavenworth Weekly Herald, May 10, 1856, p. 149, Andrew Stark, ed., Kansas Annual Register for the Year 1864 (Leavenworth, 1864), 153. For the “abolition pilgrimage” quotation, see Richard Cordley, A History of Lawrence, Kansas: From the First Settlement to the Close of the Rebellion (Lawrence, 1895), 144. William Phillips, Conquest of Kansas, by Missouri and her Allies: A History of the Troubles in Kansas, from the Passage of the Organic Act until the Close of July 1856 (Boston, 1856), 265.
newspapers painted a picture of hordes of disreputable men—some Black—traveling to Washington with carpetbags to secure some sinecure. Southern newspapers, complained the Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette, “attempt to depreciate the appearance and character of the great throngs of northern men by saying that they had a lean and hungry look, and were deficient in clothing, as they all carried carpet bags. One correspondent quotes a railway baggage master as saying that there was not more than one trunk for a hundred passengers.” Democratic newspapers in the North also ran with the image. “Carpet bag in hand,” James Gordon Bennett’s New York Herald reported in 1861, those shameless political opportunists “pour into the several departments in shoals, and naively inquire of this or that clerk what sort of a place he has.”

Critiques of brazen office seekers were not new; the patronage, or “spoils,” system had been controversial ever since Andrew Jackson systematized the practice. Nor was the image of them descending on their state’s or nation’s capital with carpetbags; the New York Herald had used it to denounce the swarm of Whigs that infested Albany when William Seward was elected governor more than twenty years earlier. And the novelist Nancy Polk Lasselle dedicated an entire chapter of her 1859 exposé of Washington, D.C., life to that “class” of individual who arrives the day before an inauguration, “carpet-bag in hand,” and lingers in hope of “receiving reward for service rendered during the Presidential canvass.”

Yet the Democratic excoriation of office seekers in 1861 exceeded earlier censures in its harshness. The Confederate spy Rose O’Neal Greenhow, writing in London in 1863 after her release from prison and clearly appealing to British sympathizers already familiar with the disreputability of the carpetbag, likened the influx of those office seekers to a barbarian invasion of the capital.

The city was filled to overflowing with greedy adventurers seeking office. Day after day, and month after month, the resistless tide, with black glazed carpet-bag in hand, came rolling in. I sometimes thought them the lost tribes of Israel, who, sniffing from afar the golden harvest, had pierced the confines of eternity and found their way over. Every thoroughfare—every public building—doorway, and corridor, and steps—were blocked up by these sturdy beggars, who came to demand the spoils of victory; and who, disdaining the accommodation of hotel or lodging-house, ate their meals out of those same black glazed carpet-bags, on the highways or byways, and slept like dogs in a kennel.

Anticipating the rhetoric of anti-Reconstruction, Greenhow here combines the carpetbag’s multiple associations—vagrancy, blackness, embezzlement, and the wandering Jew—into a single, powerful slur.

During the Civil War, Southerners identified the carpetbag with a further threat: the Union army. Days after the fall of Atlanta in September 1864, the Richmond (va) Daily Dispatch denounced the “whole war” as motivated by theft, claiming that even Union


officers who professed to uphold the law had, “in all probability, carpet-bags stuffed with silver spoons stolen from Confederate dwellings.” Carpetbags did accompany Union officers on their campaigns, especially after the baggage restrictions imposed by Quartermaster General Montgomery Meigs on October 18, 1862. Gen. George McClellan’s failure to pursue and destroy Gen. Robert E. Lee’s army after the Battle of Antietam, which McClellan attributed in part to logistical problems of supply and transportation, prompted Meigs to introduce new rules for all Union baggage trains. The trunks and chests that officers had enjoyed in earlier wars were henceforth forbidden; only “a small valise or carpet-bag, and a moderate mess-kit” would be allowed, under penalty of dismissal from service. Meanwhile, privates, who were known to carry carpetbags, were now restricted to knapsacks and haversacks. Thus, despite its indeterminate class status, the carpetbag became a means of distinction during wartime. Indeed, “carpet-bag recruit” had emerged in Britain by the 1860s as “a barrack-room appellation of contempt for the young gentleman recruit who joins his regiment omnibus impedimentis (with all his luggage)—who, in fact, brings his baggage with him, to find it, of course, utterly useless.” The Richmond Daily Dispatch’s allusion to officers with carpetbags thus hinted at both sectional and class resentments. Moreover, Confederate veterans’ subsequent testimony about the “carpetbag officers” who laid waste to their cities and towns during the war represent an effort to disavow the object: many Confederate soldiers themselves carried carpetbags.46

These disparate efforts to align the carpetbag with the northerner finally coalesced by late 1867 into a coordinated strategy. When a caucus of southern Democrats met in November to discuss what negative moniker to confer on the Republicans who were convening in Alabama for the first of the state constitutional conventions, a certain Colonel Reese (most likely Warren Stone Reese) reportedly reminded his colleagues about those earlier carpet-bag-wielding office seekers. The caucus voted to revive the term and the next morning the Montgomery (al) Daily Mail published its infamous neologism, carpetbager, subsequently adding a second “g.” More than just a convenient abbreviation of the longer phrase “a man with carpetbag,” undertaken for the sake of linguistic economy, the suffixation of “carpetbag” consummated the conflation of the human subject and material object, reducing the Republican to a mere appendage of his luggage, while also emphasizing his active engagement in “bagging” something; indeed, within two years the word was being used as a verb. Thanks to the already existing notoriety of this type of luggage, the new term spread virally throughout the South, while also cropping up in the northern Democrat press by 1868. Its meaning also expanded, as it came to refer not just to those who went south to gain political office but also to those who did so for commercial or ultimately any reason. Once associated with all kinds of travel—middle-class men on railroad excursions, bank note runners in the Midwest, office seekers in Washington, D.C.—the carpetbag now became

rooted in a specific demonology, solely targeting northerners who trespassed on southern soil, or at least those who did not respect the ways of southern whites.47

Initially, northern Republicans reacted by seeking to reclaim the carpetbag. Responding to the attack on Republican office seekers in 1861, the Philadelphia North American and United States Gazette had reaffirmed it as a positive symbol of patriotism, enterprise, respectability, and mobility.

So far as regards baggage this is true. The Northern people are accustomed to travel about three times as much as Southerners, and as time is valuable to them they cannot encumber themselves with heavy baggage. . . . We of the North are of a more thrifty and business-like turn. The carpet bag is an institution with us. . . .

[The Republican party contains] thousands of the most respectable merchants and other citizens of the North, men of means far beyond those [of the South] who traveled with so much baggage to bore previous administrations. . . . No one need be ashamed to belong to the carpet bag industry. The carpet bag is the emblem of the business man . . . [who builds] up fortunes and trade, palaces and cities.

During the early years of Radical Reconstruction, Republicans continued this strategy of reappropriating the carpetbag as an emblem of a benign or even heroic mobility, drawing on the initial, positive associations of manly independence. If the carpetbag simply denotes the willingness to cross borders, declared the former Union general and now occupying commander Dan Sickles to a gathering of blue-coat veterans on the sixth anniversary of the Battle of Antietam in September 1868, then so-called carpetbaggers belong with Daniel Boone, William Penn, and the Pilgrim fathers in the pantheon of great Americans. “Our country, North, East, and West,” he reminded them, “has been peopled by an emigration of carpet-baggers” who “carry intelligence and civilization and enterprise wherever they go.” A month later, the abolitionist and now Radical Republican senator Charles Sumner made a similar effort to reclaim the term. Denouncing the Rebels for “wicked[ly]” defaming those who bring to the South “the blood, the capital, and the ideas of the North,” he redeemed the carpetbag as “the symbol of our whole population: [there is] nobody who is not a ‘carpet-bagger’ or at least the descendant of one. Constantly the country opens its arms to welcome ‘carpet-baggers’ from foreign lands.” Others added that the South had had its share of carpetbaggers. The New York Evening Post reminded readers that the term applied to Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, and to some current anticarpetbaggers, and that “this freedom of movement has been a main source of our rapid increase in wealth.” Some northerners directly involved in the struggle for racial equality in the South, such as Albion Tourgée, declared themselves “proud” to be called a carpetbagger.48

Yet by 1872, Republicans who broke with Grant to form a Liberal Republican party under Horace Greeley and Carl Schurz had joined the anticarpetbagger chorus—either as a strategy to attract southern voters or out of the belief that Reconstruction had become


a distraction from more important problems. Four years earlier, Greeley’s *New-York Tribune* had repudiated the neologism, warning that “such language does the Southern people immense harm.” But now he and his allies espoused it, along with its guiding image and underlying assumptions, as a largely accurate characterization of these sojourners in the South, whom they vividly denounced as bloodsucking parasites. Efforts by Grant Republicans to reappropriate and perhaps neutralize the term—such as the cartoonist Thomas Nast’s portrayal of Schurz as a carpetbagger, for having relocated from Wisconsin after the Civil War to get elected as a senator from Missouri—merely reinforced the assumption that only natives or long-term residents of a state should be elected to office. Although Greeley lost the presidential election, his views on carpetbaggers entered the Republican mainstream, reinforced by the influential northern journalists Horace V. Redfield, James S. Pike, and Charles Nordhoff. By the mid-1870s, according to Stephen Prince, most Republicans—even those still supporting Reconstruction—“seem to have accepted the general accuracy of the . . . stereotype.” So did some Black leaders; Hiram Revels, the moderate former senator and now convert to the Democrat cause, complained to President Grant in 1875 about those “unprincipled adventurers” who exploit “the masses of my people.”

While the groundwork for this Republican acquiescence in the vilification of the carpetbagger was laid by several decades of discourse and imagery about carpetbags, it was finally consummated intensified concerns about mobility. A moral panic about “tramps” flared up in the early 1870s, stoked by mass-circulation newspapers and magazines that transformed what had been a verb, meaning to march a long way, into a personal noun and a pejorative. Alarmed by the sight of growing numbers of homeless, jobless men on the streets of American cities—an upsurge triggered not only by the panic of 1873 and ensuing depression but also by the ongoing disruptions wrought by industrialization and urbanization and by the physical and psychological traumas caused by the Civil War—journalists and social reformers categorized them as a new and dangerous breed of vagrant. They stigmatized them as threats to bourgeois property and safety (especially of women and children) and as enemies of middle-class values, such as domesticity and the work ethic. But the demonization of the tramp also centered on his expanded mobility. Riding boxcars on the now-transcontinental railroads, these men traversed the entire country, eluding local or state approaches to vagrancy. According to the dominant “moral geography of mobility,” their movement was deviant insofar as it was apparently nonteleological, nonpurposive, and excessive. The connection between tramps and carpetbags was articulated at the inaugural meeting of the Association for the Advancement of Women in 1873. In a paean to the moral primacy of home and hearth, the prominent women’s suffrage advocate Charlotte Beebe Wilbour warned of the dangers posed by all forms of “nomadism,” such as tramps, bachelors in boardinghouses, and those who carry

all their belongings in a carpetbag. “Not quite without reason,” she added, has the carpetbag “become a synonym for rogue.”

This consolidation of the carpetbag’s negative connotations may also have contributed to its obsolescence as a male accessory. Since the Civil War, remarked the popular humorist Robert Henry Newell in 1871 through one of his characters, southerners have jettisoned their carpetbags. The 1877 edition of John Russell Bartlett’s Dictionary of Americanisms confirmed that, due to their association with northerners, “carpet-bags have fallen into such disrepute that not one can be sold in the South.” Travelers were now going to the “opposite extreme” and selecting “trunks the size of a Newfoundland’s kennel,” much to railway officials’ “disgust.” But the item also fell out of fashion beyond the South. When carpetbagger was finally admitted to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1888, a reviewer dwelled on the “odd” irony that, even as the word crops up everywhere, “the original article from which [it] . . . is derived has almost totally disappeared.” Fashionable men turned instead to leather or fake-leather portmanteaus such as the Gladstone bag and ultimately (by 1900) to the suitcase. Those who retained a carpetbag risked “derision”—or being misidentified as plumbers or immigrants. Even the latter were encouraged to view the carpetbag with shame. The cover illustration of an 1896 book for Italian immigrants contrasted the humble carpetbag in which the new arrival lugs all his belongings with the expensive trunk (and porter) that will soon accompany him on his leisurely travels. These specific, negative meanings induced Mark Twain in 1884 to make a revision to the manuscript of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, replacing mention of Huck’s carpetbag with the more neutral, “baggage.” He reserved the item for use by the “duke” and “king,” those confidence men heading downriver to defraud southerners. One of the first things Huck notices about them is their “big fat ratty-looking carpet-bags.”

If the carpetbag retained any positive associations for northerners in the post-Reconstruction era, it was as a nostalgic object safely relegated to the past. It might appear surprising, given the object’s irredeemability by then, that one of the most popular American images of the late nineteenth century featured a carpetbag: Thomas Hovenden’s 1890 work Breaking Home Ties, which visitors to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago voted their favorite of the thousand paintings exhibited there (see figure 13). Viewing this sentimental depiction of an adolescent boy bidding sad farewell to his family as he heads out into the world, contemporaries did indeed find solace in the homely

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carpetbag that his father is carrying out for him. One reviewer speculated that it contains his mother’s gifts of cakes and “a little book . . . she wants him to read . . . every day.” Its umbilical connection to the home is reinforced by its duplication of the colors in the room’s carpet.52

Yet, although art historians have tended to consider *Breaking Home Ties* as a stand-alone painting and as a depiction of contemporaneous life, Hovenden exhibited it in Chicago as a pendant with *Bringing Home the Bride*, painted in 1893. As in Abraham Solomon’s pendant, a boy goes away and returns a wealthy man. The humble carpetbag will be replaced by a modern suitcase, carried upstairs by a servant in the background. The carpetbag could kindle positive feelings in Hovenden’s viewers precisely because it was a relic of a bygone era. Like the Windsor chairs and the ingrain carpet, which contrast with the modern furnishings in *Bringing Home the Bride*, the carpetbag marks the scene as taking place in the past.53

Meanwhile, in the South, the carpetbag—having served its purpose in terminating Reconstruction—was now proving instrumental in consolidating white supremacy. Despite a northern demand that southerners “erase from [their] vocabulary . . . the odious

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word” as part of “reconciliation” in 1877, anticarpetbagger rhetoric lingered. Revived by southern writers in the late nineteenth century to promote Jim Crow segregation, the figure featured in historical novels such as Opie Read’s *The Carpetbagger* (1899), Joel Chandler Harris’s *Gabriel Tolliver: A Story of Reconstruction* (1902), and Thomas Dixon’s *The Clansman* (1905), all published by northern presses. Some northern villains, such as Jonadab Leech in Thomas Nelson Page’s *Red Rock* (1898), were literally identifiable by their carpetbag. The same material prop made fleeting appearances in subsequent movies that perpetuated the myth of northern villainy—most infamously *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939). In each of these retrospective fictions, the venal carpetbagger designated the Reconstruction era as an abomination now rectified.

The meaning of the term was apparently so self-evident by the early twentieth century, so powerfully established as “common sense,” that historians of the Dunning school used it without explanation.54

Southern Democrats, then, did not themselves transform the carpetbag into a derogatory symbol: nor did they invent the man with the carpetbag. They drew on the object’s deeper meanings, established over three decades by authors, artists, and performers on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line and the Atlantic Ocean. The carpetbag’s cultural meanings—if not its physical design—mutated significantly during those decades. When the carpetbag was first introduced, its affordability, portability, and versatility had conveyed the promise of expanded access to travel for the middle class. But by mid-century, amid growing anxieties about the social implications of mobility, those same material qualities appeared to make it an ideal tool for transgression—whether of gender, class, racial, or moral boundaries. Drawing on these associations, politicians and journalists mobilized the carpetbag in the political sphere as a symbol of border-crossing voters or fleeing Confederate leaders. Thus, the southern Democrats who introduced the carpetbagger neologism were merely codifying and capitalizing on the object’s already established notoriety. That notoriety helps explain the rapid adoption of the term, and its anti-Reconstruction insinuations, by Democrats in the North and the South in the late 1860s, and its eventual embrace by Republicans amid the tramp panic of the mid-1870s.

To foreground the changing meanings of hand luggage and growing anxieties about geographic (and social) mobility is not, of course, to sideline the role that race played in terminating Reconstruction. As we have seen, the carpetbag was itself racialized through references to those that were glazed black or that contained a Black baby; at the same time, nostalgia for “an olden time when the country-side, site of home values and family feeling, bred sturdy boys.” See Sarah Burns, “The Country Boy Goes to the City: Thomas Hovenden’s *Breaking Home Ties* in American Popular Culture,” *American Art Journal*, 20 (Winter 1988), 63.

Democratic rhetoric about carpetbaggers and corruption was precisely intended to distract attention from the issue of racial inequality. Moreover, although implicitly a white, male figure, the carpetbagger could also be Black. From the term’s inception, southern newspapers applied it to the thousands of educated African Americans—including Revels himself—who came south to seek elected offices still denied them in the North. Yet, through the example of the carpetbag, we can see how attitudes about race—which are always already imbricated with other cultural categories—came to be particularly entangled with concerns about the destabilizing and deterritorializing effects of the transportation revolution, and of industrial capitalism more generally. This overdetermination of carpetbaggerphobia made it all the more powerful a force for dismantling Reconstruction.55