George Washington Bickley stated the purposes of the Knights of the Golden Circle were to promote secession and guarantee Southern rights. He avowed the order was capable of repelling an invasion.
Ohio and the Knights of the Golden Circle: 
The Evolution of a Civil War Myth* 

by Frank L. Klement 

Cincinnatii and Ohio contributed considerably to the development of the legend that the Knights of the Golden Circle sowed the dragon’s teeth of treason in the upper Midwest during the Civil War years. It was a Cincinnati resident, George W. L. Bickley, who charted the Golden Circle on paper during the late 1850’s and later pretended it was an actuality. A Cincinnati printing firm published the exposé pamphlet in mid-1861. Ohio Republicans arranged the first pre-election “revelations,” using the K.G.C. bogeyman to affect voters and stigmatize Democrats. Ohio newspapers, especially the Cincinnati Gazette, the Cleveland Leader, and the Ohio State Journal (Columbus), led the efforts to make the Knights of the Golden Circle a household term. They contended that Knights hid in Democratic closets, that Clement L. Vallandigham headed the subversive society and that Ohio had more than a fair share of the organization’s initiates and “castles.”

George Washington Lamb Bickley, the ex-Virginian who devised the K.G.C. and charted his dreams on paper, was a true historical character. Little is known of his pre-Cincinnati days except that he was apparently born in Louisa County, Virginia, and lived for a time in Tazewell County. When he came to Cincinnati in 1851 he brought with him a manuscript entitled “History of the Settlement and Indian Wars of Tazewell County.” He sought a publisher and a new career. He gained prompt attention and apparent success. Claiming to hold a medical certificate from the University of London—this was a bare-faced lie—he secured an appointment as lecturer at the Eclectic Medical Institute and his history of Tazewell County’s settlement and Indian Wars was published. He married a widow, tapped her resources for his diverse schemes, and thereby achieved a semblance of respectability.

In the years which followed everything Bickley touched turned to dross. He joined a Know-Nothing lodge shortly before it was torn asunder by internal dissension. He tried to organize a Cincinnati branch of the Continental Union, but the effort fizzled. He founded a new literary magazine, the West American Review, but it lasted less than six months. Next he tried to establish “a conservative newspaper” as an antidote to Horace Greeley’s New York Tribune, but the project died aborning. While living on his wife’s farm in Scioto County he briefly edited the Ohio Pennant (Portsmouth) and tried his hand, quite
unsuccessfully, at land speculation. He tried to transfer his wife's property to his own name, but a brother-in-law intervened in the nick of time and his wife gave him the gate.\(^7\)

Returning to Cincinnati and using his glib tongue and braggadocio to advantage, Bickley caught on with a company organized to promote inventions, handle patent cases, and publish a weekly called the *Scientific Artisan*.\(^8\) He lasted less than two months as editor. A fellow-worker later characterized him as

\[ \text{an ignorant pretender, as restless and scheming as he was shallow, very vain of his person, exceedingly fond of military display, constantly engaged either in devices to borrow money and crazy schemes of speculation, or in debaucheries less creditable even than his swindling.}\(^9\) \]

After his dismissal as editor of the *Scientific Artisan*, Bickley developed two other schemes. One dealt with the organization of a drill team, equipped with a variety of uniforms, to travel all over the world to put on exhibitions and master intricate maneuvers.\(^10\) The second, which included the creation of the K.G.C., dealt with a vague scheme to carve out an empire for himself and his order somewhere in Mexico. This second fantasy rescued Bickley from oblivion and gave him a niche in history.

Bickley's filibustering fantasy was born of the expansionist spirit of the 1850's which prompted Narcisco Lopez's excursions into Cuba and William Walker's filibustering in Nicaragua. Bickley envisioned the Golden Circle as an agency to "go forth and plant new colonies, build up new markets, and expand the area of Anglo-Americanism," perhaps colonizing and finally annexing "northern Mexico to the Domain of the United States as in the case of Texas"—\(^11\) his pockets might be filled with membership fees in the process.

Since Bickley regarded Mexico as "a papal fief," his scheme could strike a blow against Catholicism and popery as well as superimposing the "superior Anglo-American civilization" upon the "inferior" Latin Americans. "We are," Bickley stated, "only the tools in God's hands to regenerate Spanish-America."\(^12\)

Bickley not only prescribed the ritual, oaths, and passwords, but also provided for one, five, and ten dollar membership fees, depending upon the degree sought. He devised a "great seal" with the words "UNION" and "POWER" in large letters, assumed the headship of the order, and appropriated the title of "General," signing documents as "President General of the American Legion, K.G.C."\(^13\) Bickley, evidently, hoped to accumulate a fortune while becoming "the grey-eyed man of Destiny."\(^14\)

While trying to formalize his fantasy, he later claimed to have established a chapter in Cincinnati and another in Scioto County.\(^15\) Bickley tried to maintain his solvency by begging for funds and favors from his wife who was staying with a daughter in Memphis. But he had fleeced his wife too often. She turned her back upon his blandishment and his pleas for funds and forgiveness, and
he returned empty-handed to Cincinnati.\textsuperscript{16} Fearful of being recognized by Cincinnati creditors who were hounding him, Bickley secured false whiskers and registered at the Spencer House as “General Baez.” Several alert creditors saw through the disguise and demanded immediate and full satisfaction. Cornered, he promised to pay what he owed the next morning. Not wishing to end his Cincinnati sojourn in jail, he hurriedly re-packed his carpetbag and left town on the midnight train,\textsuperscript{17} taking his packet of K.G.C. materials and a shabby reputation with him.

Bickley visited several eastern cities before making Washington his headquarters. He received some publicity for himself, his colonizing scheme, and the Golden Circle in Washington, New York, and Baltimore newspapers. And he handed out some copies of a sixty-three page booklet entitled \textit{Rules, Regulations, and Principles of the Knights of the Golden Circle}, which promised that the organization “would fight the battles of the South on Mexican soil.”\textsuperscript{18}

Bickley drifted southward in March, 1860, seeking publicity and promoting his filibustering scheme. He planted an “open letter” in the Richmond \textit{Whig}, presided over an ill-attended national convention in Raleigh, North Carolina, and ordered members of the “military department” of the Golden Circle to rally in Texas in mid-September.\textsuperscript{19} The planned rendezvous evaporated into nothing, failing because of a lack of followers, funds, and organization.

The self-styled general belatedly realized that Southerners were more interested in sectionalism and the presidential contest of 1860 than in a vague colonizing scheme. Using his pen as a wand, he tried to transform the K.G.C. into a military order capable of repelling invasion, promoting secession, and guaranteeing Southern rights. Leaving his dashed dreams in Texas, he directed his steps toward Montgomery, provisional capital of the Confederate States of America, claiming to have had much to do “with the working of secession of Western Texas.”\textsuperscript{20} Then he headed for Knoxville, Tennessee. He took with him the great seal of the K.G.C., a collection of clippings, a deflated pocketbook, and his broken dream-of-empire. Knoxville became the new headquarters of the Golden Circle.

While Bickley sought to re-establish himself in Tennessee, rumors about the K.G.C. circulated in Washington. It was reported that a secret Southern-based subversive society might take over the city and prevent Lincoln’s inauguration. A House committee discredited the rumors,\textsuperscript{21} but Washingtonians put more faith in their fears than a congressional report.

In May and June, 1861, rumors of Golden Circle activity shifted to Kentucky and adjacent states. George D. Prentice, influential editor of the Louisville \textit{Journal}, charged that a subversive society was trying to plunge Kentucky into a civil war, to promote secession and destroy the state’s “neutrality.”\textsuperscript{22} A Kentucky Unionist, campaigning for a congressional seat against a state’s righter, charged that his opponent had received the endorsement of “General Bickley” and the K.G.C. “General Bickley has been at work for some weeks,”
The Hiatt exposé of the K.G.C. stated "the Knights of the Golden Circle were secessionists proper and their history is the history of secession."
an anonymous letter-writer stated, "...drilling his men and secretly scattering circulars." 23

Bickley now turned up in Louisville and made an effort to capitalize upon this publicity to revive a defunct organization. He wrote an "Open letter" claiming a membership of 8,000 Knights and expressed a wish to see the Confederate flag flying over the state capitol. 24 He issued a circular entitled "Volunteers Wanted," 25 and moved his headquarters back to Knoxville offering to sell five and ten dollar memberships. 26

Two Kentucky Unionists sent notes to Bickley seeking information and expressing a desire to establish chapters of the Golden Circle in their neighborhoods — this as the first step in amassing information for an exposé. Dr. Anthony A. Urban's exposé filled three columns of the Louisville Journal. 27 Joseph W. Pomfrey, a resident of Covington, wrote a longer exposé and published it as a forty-seven page booklet entitled A True Disclosure and Exposition of the Knights of the Golden Circle, Including the Secret Signs, Grips, and Charges, of the Third Degree as Practiced by the Order. 28

The popularity of Pomfrey's pamphlet prompted James M. Hiatt, an Indianapolis newsman to compose his own exposé, entitled An Authentic Exposition of the K.G.C., Knights of the Golden Circle, or, A History of Secession from 1834 to 1861. The Hiatt pamphlet added a new dimension to the Golden Circle story by blaming the order for the growth of secession, the annexation of Texas, the Mexican War, and the efforts to impose a proslavery constitution upon Kansas. "The Knights of the Golden Circle," Hiatt averred, "were secessionists proper and their history is the history of secession." 29

The three exposes had a wide circulation in Ohio and made Bickley's name well known. The fact that Bickley had once lived in Cincinnati gave Republican editors a chance to smear their political opponents with K.G.C. tar. The editor of the Bucyrus Journal for example, contended that Golden Circle members were numerous in Democratic communities and that "at least three lodges" flourished in his county, "teaching nothing but the rankest treason." 30

War psychosis, plus the popularity of supposition about the Knights, tempted Marion County Republicans to concoct "revelations" intended to discredit the Democrats and affect the election returns. Thomas H. Hodder, editor of the (Marion) Democratic Mirror, alienated many by his carping editorials against President Lincoln, the Republicans, and the war. Indignant "patriots" invariably of the Republican persuasion, retaliated with curses and threats of bodily harm. They threatened to burn down his shop, tar and feather him, and hang him. Democratic friends, believing Hodder the victim of political bigotry, organized a mutual protection society; it had no written constitution, no officers or offices, and no ritual. Its members, however, did agree upon a "signal of distress" when a member of the organization or the offices of the Democratic Mirror were threatened by a mob. Naturally all members of the mutual protection society were Democrats. 31

As tension mounted and election day approached, some Republicans, including
the son of the editor of the Marion Republican, forged documents which transformed this mutual protection society into a lodge of the Golden Circle. The bogus "second oath" read:

And I further promise and swear in the presence of Almighty God, and the members of the Golden Circle, that I will not sleep until Abraham Lincoln, now President, shall be removed out of the Presidential chair, and I will wade in blood up to my knees, as soon as Jefferson Davis sees proper to march with his army to take the city of Washington and the White House, to do the same.\(^\text{32}\)

These Republicans offered other "evidence" which they claimed they had seized in a raid upon a K.G.C. "castle": an affidavit of a spy belonging to the Golden Circle, several letters, a list of Democrats belonging to the organization, and the "confessions" of a young Democrat whom they had plied with whiskey.

Although the strange "second oath" should have been enough to stamp the whole thing a humbug, a partisan federal marshal arrested editor Hodder, Dr. John M. Christian, leader of the Marion County Democracy, and Frederick Court, the country bumpkin who had been plied with liquor. The exposé, based on the forged documents and some suppositions, made headlines in Ohio Republican newspapers on the eve of the October 8, 1861 elections. The headlines in the Ohio State Journal (Columbus), official organ of the Republican party in the state, read: "Important Arrest! A 'Castle' of the Knights of the G.C. Assaulted the U.S. Marshal! The Records Seized! A 'Commander' Taken!"\(^\text{33}\)

Meanwhile the authorities carted Hodder, Christian, and Court off to prison despite their pleas of innocence and their contentions that they had been framed. The Republican editor of the Bucyrus Journal claimed that Golden Circle lodges existed in Crawford County and he asked for a grand jury investigation.\(^\text{34}\) Several Republican editors offered the supposition that Samuel Medary, editor of The Crisis (Columbus) and chief Democratic critic of the war, headed the Golden Circle in the state and that other Democratic editors also belonged to the society.\(^\text{35}\)

Democrats, of course, denied these allegations, contending that they were the inventions of dishonest men to affect the election returns. The "show" in Marion County, the editor of the Ohio Statesman asserted, had been "staged" by a politically-minded marshal to discredit the Democracy. Furthermore, the editor added, the bogus "second oath" had come off the same presses as the Marion Republican.\(^\text{36}\)

Time proved the Democrats right. The district court, convening in Cleveland, acquitted Hodder and Christian and demonstrated that a federal marshal and the son of the owner-editor of the Marion Republican had "managed the show," providing the bogus oath and other forged documents. Furthermore, there was no evidence to link Hodder's mutual protection society to the Knights of the
Golden Circle charges which had been made by Republicans in Richland County also evaporated. Republicans as well as Democrats appeared before the grand jury, the former to repeat the K.G.C. rumors they had circulated before the election and the latter to deny that they belonged to any secret society. In the end the grand jury concluded that no substantial evidence had been presented, that honorable men had been maligned, and that the pre-election rumors were canards.

Democrats gloried in this turn of events. Use of the K.G.C. bogeyman, one editor contended, was an "electioneering trick" and Republicans stood naked and exposed. Another used the term "a very silly game" and accused Republicans of outright dishonesty. Medary, who had been maligned the most, made the point that Republicans were guilty of "disgraceful deviltry"; Republicans stood accused, he wrote, of devising "a diabolical electioneering scheme" and of creating "a roorback of huge dimensions." "We believe," he added, "that this secret organization...has no existence in reality, and it was furthermore our honest conviction that the whole affair was concocted by a few dishonest politicians to influence well-meaning men to vote against the Democratic party nominees."42

Ohioans had a brief respite from Golden Circle stories during the early months of 1862. The approach of the April elections, however, served as an excuse to raise the K.G.C issue again and most of the rumors seemed to originate in Cincinnati. The visit of an impostor to the Queen City gave Republican editors the opportunity to put the Golden Circle back into headlines. The impostor, claiming his name was Dr. R. Brownlow Smith and that he was the
Samuel Medary of the Crisis was one of the Ohio editors Republicans attempted to discredit by accusing them of being members of the K.G.C.

After studying the evidence Enquirer editor, James J. Faran, concluded that Bickley had tried but failed to establish a K.G.C. lodge in Cincinnati.
son-in-law of the well-known William G. "Parson" Brownlow, not only contended that he belonged to the K.G.C. but insisted that he had initiated both James J. Faran and Washington McLean, co-editors of the Cincinnati Enquirer, into the secret society.

Faran and McLean ridiculed these allegations, asserting that the Cincinnati Gazette and the Cincinnati Commercial had been humbugged. Faran pointed out that the self-styled Dr. R. Brownlow Smith had been exposed as a "Fraud" in Dayton before coming to Cincinnati to ply his trade. The Dayton Journal, also a Republican sheet, had revealed that "Smith" had been arrested for drunkenness and vagrancy in that city and chased out of town.

The Cincinnati Gazette, however, refused to retreat. Even if "Dr. Smith" were a "fraud", it said, the Golden Circle still existed, spewing treason. Reports of Golden Circle activity drifted into Ohio from Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. Kentuckians still claimed that a subversive society was active in their state. Many Ohioans, their denials notwithstanding, belonged to the K.G.C. "The order not only exists in Cincinnati," the Gazette asserted, "but its members are getting impudent."

Calvin S. Starbuck, Republican editor of the Cincinnati Times, jumped into the fray. He claimed to have documents in his possession which conclusively proved that a lodge of the Golden Circle had been instituted in Cincinnati. He published selections from the documents two days before the spring election. Then he repeated the Gazette's assertions that the K.G.C. was active in Cincinnati, undermining the war effort and soliciting members at Democratic party rallies.

The Enquirer tried to discredit Starbuck's charges. After examining Starbuck's "documents," Faran concluded that the evidence only showed that Bickley had tried to establish a lodge of the Golden Circle in Cincinnati before the war, but that the effort had failed. "The whole thing shows that the K.G.C. took no root here," Faran concluded, "and that the attempt to make the public believe that such a lodge existed in the city is one of the most vicious and detestable impositions that the war has produced."

As the October, 1862, elections approached Republican editors again raised the Golden Circle bugaboo. Whitelaw Reid of the Cincinnati Gazette and Edwin Cowles of the Cleveland Leader made the first charges, both contending that the knights were active in Ohio and that prominent Democrats flirted with treason. The editor of the Dayton Journal, trying to sidetrack Clement L. Vallandigham's bid for reelection to Congress, also raised the Golden Circle issue; Vallandigham, he wrote, was a defender of secession, a friend of Jeff Davis, and a Janus-faced Judas. Obviously, he must also belong to the Golden Circle since he was trying to align Ohio with rebeldom. "He has been a smart trickster," the Journal concluded, "but he has not been able to conceal his sympathies with treason."

Three events of 1863 served as an excuse for Ohio Republicans to revive
The arrest of Clement L. Vallandigham gave Republicans an opportunity to resurrect rumors of the Golden Circle.
Golden Circle rumors. These were: (1) the arrest and trial of Clement L. Vallandigham, (2) the raid of Confederate General John H. Morgan into Indiana and Ohio, and (3) the arrest of Bickley after he entered the Union lines and deviated from a prescribed route.

Ohio Republicans generally endorsed the arrest of Vallandigham and his trial by military commission. Those who accused him of Golden Circle membership saw no need for further justification of the arrest. The editor of the Dayton Journal, always bitterly partisan, claimed that Vallandigham had fired three shots out of his upstairs window just before his arrest as "a distress signal" to his Golden Circle colleagues. The story circulated throughout the upper Midwest, helping to link Vallandigham to the K.G.C. in the public mind. The Journal also suggested that Golden Circle members had not attempted to prevent the arrest only because it was executed so expeditiously and they did not attempt to rescue Vallandigham from his "felon's cell" because General Ambrose E. Burnside increased the size of the guard.

Democratic editors, on the other hand, dismissed rumors which linked Vallandigham to the Golden Circle or reports that the secret order underwrote draft resistance or talk that Knights might try to assassinate President Lincoln and seize control of the government as invidious political propaganda. It was a means, they contended, to malign their leaders, stigmatize the party, and influence voters. The Cincinnati Enquirer, for example, contended that the Republican "lies" were cut from whole cloth. Not a single member of the Golden Circle, it insisted, could be found in Ohio; "No such lodge and no such person belonging to them has ever been found simply because they do not exist."

The indignant editor added, "This miserable lie about K.G.C. lodges has been made the basis of Democratic persecution. It was started by scoundrels for that purpose."

General Morgan's horse-stealing raid into Indiana and Ohio served as an excuse to revive old Golden Circle rumors and devise some new ones. After Brig. Gen. Henry B. Carrington, commander of the District of Indiana, failed to intercept Morgan's men at the Ohio border, he devised Golden Circle stories to cover up his "drunkenness and inefficiency." Carrington and his friends contended that K.G.C. had aided the Confederate raider and that Morgan's raid was intended to coincide with an uprising of the K.G.C. - a myth which gained respectability in the postwar years.

Ohio Republicans got into the act. "It is stated by those who know," wrote Edwin Cowles of the Cleveland Leader, "that the secret of Morgan's success in avoiding the forces sent to pursue him in Indiana and Ohio lies in the fact that the K.G.C.'s and Copperheads of every degree have voluntarily acted as his guides since he crossed into the free states." Isaac Jackson Allen, editor of the Ohio State Journal, told an even better story - Vallandigham's friends had furnished Morgan's men with horses, ammunition, and moral support.

Bickley's sudden reappearance in the upper Midwest, after a three-year stay
in the South, also gave Republican editors in Ohio a chance to compose new
K.G.C. headlines. Some aspects of Bickley's stay in the South are clouded in
obscurity. After making headlines in Kentucky and supposedly establishing
headquarters of the K.G.C. in Knoxville, Bickley had trouble finding a new
career. While in Richmond in September, 1861, he had sought a colonelcy in
the Confederate army, offering to raise a regiment of mounted Kentuckians. He
Five months later, from his old haunts in Virginia, he wrote to Governor John
Letcher, that he was raising a battalion of light dragoons and requested supplies
either from his state or the Confederate government. In November, 1862 he
was in Bristol, Tennessee. There he penned a statement compounded of self-
deceit, bravado, and buncombe: "I have built up practical secession and
inaugurated the greatest war of modern times." 

Early in 1863, Bickley received orders to report to General Braxton Bragg's
army as a "surgeon" for "assignment to duty." He served or claimed to serve in
Bragg's army for several months, because on June 10, 1863 he signed a voucher
for pay from "January 28 to June 9" as "surgeon, 29th N.C. Rgt." Deserting,
he went to the Shelbyville sector of Tennessee to live with a backwoods belle
who had borne him a child. He was still the legal husband of the widow whom
he had married in Cincinnati in the early 1850's. In a letter dated June 22,
1863 he stated that he was "in the society of his family and

While Bickley was "in the society of his family," the Union lines moved south-
ward and he found himself near the headquarters of Brig. Gen. Richard V.
Johnson in Tullahoma. On July 6, Bickley and his "wife" and child presented
themselves to Johnson's headquarters, asking for a pass in his own name and
giving Mr. Eli Kinney of Cincinnati as a reference. Kinney, it will be remem-
bered, was the brother of Bickley's legal wife. Some of the officers at Johnson's
headquarters recalled that the name "Bickley" had been associated with the
K.G.C., so they asked him if he were the head of the society. He denied having
any association with the society, adding that his "Uncle George" had been its
founder. Bickley told another lie when he said that he had known General
William S. Rosecrans during the prewar years.

General Johnson reported his suspicions to his superior (General Rosecrans)
and they contacted Eli Kinney, whom Bickley had given as a reference. In the
end General Johnson gave Bickley a pass, instructed him to report to General
Ambrose E. Burnside in Cincinnati, and assigned a detective to follow and
arrest him if he deviated from the prescribed route.

In keeping with his character, Bickley veered from his prescribed route,
going to Albany, Indiana, rather than to Cincinnati. The detective assigned to
trailing him thereupon arrested him and confiscated his trunk. Bickley was
taken to the military prison in Louisville, while authorities conducted an in-
vestigation and inventoried the contents of his trunk, which proved Bickley
a liar, a bigamist, and a pretender extraordinary.

The contents of Bickley's trunk must have proved most disappointing to
Republicans said the success of General Morgan's raids into Ohio and Indiana were because of the aid given him by the K.G.C. Some even said that Vallandigham's friends had furnished Morgan's men with horses and ammunition.
Democratic presidential nominee, George B. McClellan, was accused of being a member of the K.G.C. and of having done his best to bring about Union defeats.
Republicans hoping for another grand exposé. There was not a single letter from a Confederate official or a Northern Democrat in the stack of miscellaneous material. There was no evidence to show that a castle or chapter of the K.G.C. had been established anywhere, North or South. There was no evidence that Bickley had conversed or corresponded with any Democratic leader in Ohio.

Federal authorities, therefore, squeezed as much propaganda value as they could out of his arrest. They decided against giving Bickley a trial, lest such proceedings discredit the Golden Circle rumors which had circulated in Ohio—and prove merely that Bickley was an "utterly untrustworthy individual." Army officials kept Bickley in solitary confinement in the military prison in Louisville for a month, denying him visitors or counsel. He composed a four-page "Statement of Facts" as a petition and vindication. He insisted that the prewar organization which he had founded had honorable goals, of which every "red-blooded American" and expansionist could be justly proud. "As to the Bogus political organization of the Northwestern States," he wrote, "I am as ignorant as a man in China—I have not been north since such a thing was known there and have had nothing to do with it in any way, either directly or indirectly."

Early in August, federal authorities transferred Bickley to the state prison in Columbus, "there to be kept in close custody until further orders." While the one-time head of the Golden Circle languished in a prison cell, the political campaigns of October and November, 1863 emotionalized Ohioans. Clement L. Vallandigham, in exile in Canada, sought the governorship in a heated contest with John Brough, Union party nominee. Golden Circle rumors flew thick and fast, with the editors of the Cincinnati Gazette, the Cincinnati Commercial, the Cleveland Leader, and the Ohio State Journal raising the K.G.C. issue most often. All tried to develop the notion that Vallandigham's election would plunge Ohio into a civil war and that K.G.C. promoted deep and desperate schemes. "The secret, and sworn and armed bands of the K.G.C." Cowles of the Cleveland Leader wrote, "may present a living breastwork of defense to any itinerant traitor that may venture within our border." One of the better stories involved a K.G.C. plot to win the October 13 election. Golden Circle members, it was reported, intended to take over the polls, import 50,000 members from Kentucky and Illinois, and win the election for Vallandigham.

The scare tactics helped defeat Vallandigham, keep the Republicans in power in the state legislature, and perhaps prompt a post election K.G.C. story. The story revolved around Samuel Cathcart, a rather prominent Cincinnati Democrat, and a state school commissioner. Cathcart was charged with belonging to the K.G.C. and being involved in a plot to release Confederate prisoners being held in Camp Chase, on the outskirts of Columbus. "Their plan," reported Cowles of the Cleveland Leader, "was to attack Camp Chase, release the prisoners (3500 in number), march on Columbus, attack the arsenal, help
themselves to arms,... pitch into the penitentiary, release John Morgan and his Confederates, and thus organize a rebellion in the heart of our state.” The rebellion, started in Ohio, would lead to the establishment of a “Northwest Confederacy.”73

In mid-December, while Ohioans still talked of the latest K.G.C. conspiracy, Bickley made a bid for sympathy and freedom by writing to President Lincoln. He told his tale of woe in well-chosen words:

*I am now in a cell seven by three and a half feet, which contains besides myself, a bed, a stool, and water and urinal buckets.... In this living tomb, days, weeks, and long months pass, and I know nothing of what is taking place in my country. I hear no word of my business or family. I hear the sound of no human voice save the whisperings of the convicts, fellons [sic], and murderers who surround me. I am not allowed to write to my family or friends, to converse with any one save as an officer may speak to me. In a word, sir, I am buried alive.*74

The K.G.C. received considerably less newspaper publicity in 1864 than they had during the previous three years. Two new supposedly subversive societies, made the headlines. Brig. Gen. Henry B. Carrington, still stationed in Indianapolis, wrote an exposé which implicated the Sons of Liberty in a plot to overthrow the government and establish a “Northwest Confederacy.”75 A discredited colonel stationed in St. Louis and seeking to reestablish a tarnished reputation, wrote an exposé dealing with the Order of American Knights and also dealt with a “Northwestern Conspiracy.”76 Each expositor claimed that the K.G.C. had evolved into the organization he had exposed. Both exposés were intended to taint the Democratic party with treason and affect the election returns of 1864.

Golden Circle rumors, nevertheless, continued to surface here and there. Usually they were linked to Clement L. Vallandigham, who had returned to Ohio, or George B. McClellan, Democratic presidential nominee. “It is rumored,” Edgar Conkling of the Cincinnati Times wrote, “that McClellan is known to be a member of the... Knights of the Golden Circle, and that after due deliberation by the order, they decided that Mac should fight for the South on free soil.” McClellan did his best to bring about Union defeats, Conkling insisted, by meeting secretly with General Robert E. Lee and receiving “rebel letters” during the battle of Antietam.77 Republicans circulated a scurrilous tract entitled General McClellan’s Record: His Sympathy with the South.... It emphasized the general’s link to the K.G.C. and compared him to Judas Iscariot and Benedict Arnold.78

After Republicans defeated McClellan’s bid for the presidency and reelected Lincoln, Golden Circle rumors seemed to disappear. They were revived, however, at the time of Lincoln’s assassination. Some believed that the
assassination was a Southern plot, carried out by the K.G.C.\textsuperscript{79}

Bickley, who started it all by putting his filibustering fantasy on paper, remained a federal prisoner until October 14, 1865. He gained his freedom after signing an amnesty oath and promising not to prosecute the government for the summary treatment accorded him.\textsuperscript{80} He drifted back into obscurity, dying in Baltimore on August 10, 1867. The Cincinnati Gazette, which had done so much to popularize the Golden Circle, gave him a two-sentence obituary: "G.W.T. [sic] Bickley died in Baltimore on Saturday. Bickley flourished in Cincinnati fourteen or fifteen years ago."\textsuperscript{81}

Although Bickley passed the way of all mortals, the Golden Circle rumors had nine lives and evolved into accepted history. Whitelaw Reid, whose Cincinnati Gazette had kept the K.G.C. in the headlines during the war years, incorporated the rumors as history into his Ohio in the War.\textsuperscript{82} Other writers of Civil War history followed suit.\textsuperscript{83} Two extremely popular historical novels, William Blake's The Copperheads and Constance Robertson's The Golden Circle, made the Knights of the Golden Circle a household term.\textsuperscript{84}

Despite all the space given to the Golden Circle rumors and exposés during the Civil War, no unimpeachable evidence exists to show that a single "castle" of the Knights existed in Ohio. Republicans devised the Golden Circle to discredit Democrats, win elections, and stimulate the party faithful to organize Union Leagues. Time and circumstance transformed these Republican wartime maneuvers into legends that have lived for more than a hundred years.

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(1) Hereafter referred to as "K.G.C."

(2) Bickley's prewar career is treated in scholarly fashion in Ollinger Crenshaw, "The Knights of the Golden Circle: the Career of George Bickley" American Historical Review, XLVII (October, 1941), 23-50.

(3) Bickley claimed to be a graduate of the class of 1842 and to have studied under the famous Dr. John Elliotson. University of London officials failed to find Bickley's name in the school records. Furthermore, the U. of London records show that Dr. Elliotson resigned from the faculty in 1838.

(4) Bickley's pamphlet, published in 1852, was included in its entirety in William C.

(5) Mrs. William Dodson was the daughter of Aaron Kinney and the sister of Eli Kinney, later a successful Cincinnati banker.

(6) Imbued with the spirit of expansionism and Manifest Destiny, George Lippard of Philadelphia organized the Continental Union in the late 1840's. The Cincinnati *Weekly Nonpareil*, June 17, 1852, credits Bickley with inaugurating a lodge named "Brotherhood of Union, Wayne Circle No. 192, Continent of America, No. 37, State of Ohio."


(9) Quoted in Cincinnati *Daily Gazette*, August 6, 1863. Ollinger Crenshaw, who researched the record extensively, also questioned Bickley's veracity. In footnote number 17 (page 17) of his article in the *American Historical Review*, Crenshaw stated "that the assertions made by Bickley must be corroborated by other sources before they can be accepted as fact."


(12) Bickley, K.G.C. (degree booklet, n.p.d.), 2. Bickley Papers. Bickley's anti-Catholicism was evident in his Know-Nothing membership, and in his attempt to organize the Wayne Circle of the Continental Union from which he excluded "all worshippers of the Pope."

(13) The great seal with the date 1858 in the stamp, are in the Bickley papers.


(17) Ibid.

(18) The booklet, printed by Benjamin Urner, 248 Canal St. New York, had a listed publication date of September 12, 1859. The New York *Tribune*, January 7, 1860, reported on Bickley's scheme, concerned with "some port in Mexico."


(22) Louisville *Daily Journal*, May 22, 1861.

(23) Letter (anonymous) to "Editors of the Louisville Journal," June 6, 1861, published in *ibid.* June 8, 1861.

(25) The circular, dated June 29, 1861, was later published in the Louisville Daily Journal, July 18, 1861.


(27) Ibid., July 18, 1861.

(28) The booklet was "printed for the author" in Cincinnati, and claimed to be an expose written by "A Knight" who was the "Captain-General of Kenton County." Later events proved Pomfrey a draft dodger, forger, and liar. Five packets which deal with Pomfrey's claims against the government are in the Records of the Adjutant General's Office (Record Group #94), National Archives.

(29) Hiatt, A True Disclosure... (Indianapolis, 1861), 77. Hiatt's name did not appear as author; it was simply credited to "A Member of the Order."


(31) History of Marion County, Ohio (Chicago, 1883), 448-449.

(32) Published in the Ohio State Journal (Columbus), October 8, 1861.

(33) Ibid.; Buckeye State (New Lisbon), Oct. 17, 1861; Cleveland Leader, October 7, 1861.

(34) Bucyrus Weekly Journal, September 27, October 11, 1861.

(35) Cleveland Leader, October 7, 1861; Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, October 19, 1861; Ohio Statesman (Columbus), October 8, 12, 1861. Francis P. Weisenburger, Columbus during the Civil War (Columbus, 1963). 22. reviews K.G.C. accusations made against Matthias Martin, editor of the Ohio Statesman in 1861.

(36) Ohio Statesman, October 15, 1861.

(37) Ibid., October 16-19, 1861; Crisis, October 24, 1861; Cleveland Leader, October 18, 1861. The Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, October 19, 1861, featured an article entitled "Exposure of a Villainous Political Trick."

(38) Grand jury report, published in the Ohio Statesman, December 22, 1861. The report ended with the statement: "...we are forced to the conclusion that the Knights of the Golden Circle exist in this county in imagination alone."

(39) Ohio Statesman, December 22, 1861; Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, October 30, 31, 1861, June 12, 1862.

(40) Mansfield Shield and Union, November 14, 1861.

(41) Detroit Free Press, November 19, 1861.

(42) Crisis, November 7, 28, 1861.

(43) Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, March 2, April 3, 1862.

(44) Cincinnati Daily Gazette, April 2, 4, 1862.

(45) Cincinnati Daily Times, April 3, 5, 1862.

(46) Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, April 6, 8, 1862.

(47) Dayton Daily Journal, September 12, 1862.


(50) Cincinnati Daily Gazette, May 27, 1863.

(51) Ohio State Journal, February 9, 1863.

(52) Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, June 17, 1863; Cleveland Leader, June 17, 1863.

(53) Milo S. Hascall, "Report" (MSS), dated September 25, 1865, Archives Division, Indiana State Library.

(54) Indianapolis Daily Journal, July 15, 22, 25, 1863; Henry B. Carrington, "The Morgan Raid through Indiana, 1863" (typewritten manuscript of 21 pages), Henry B. Carrington Papers, Archives Division, Indiana State Library.


(56) Cleveland Leader, July 30, 1863.

(57) Ohio State Journal, July 30, 1863. 25
(58) Bickley to “Hon. Secretary of War, Confederate States,” September 3, 1861, Bickley Papers.
(59) Bickley to Letcher, February 3, 1862, Adjutant General’s Records, National Archives.
(60) Bickley, “Statement,” dated December 14, 1862 in Bristol, Tenn., in Bickley Papers.
(61) Voucher, signed June 10, 1863, Adjutant General’s Records.
(62) Bickley to J. A. Blakemore, June 22, 1863, mentioned in a letter, Blakemore to Bickley, June 27, 1863, Shelbyville, Bickley Papers.
(66) “List of items found in Bickley’s trunk,” undated, ibid.
(71) Cleveland Leader, September 17, 1863.
(72) Ohio State Journal, August 27, 1863; Cincinnati Daily Enquirer, August 26, 1863. The Commercial’s headline read: “Copperhead Villainy! Sound the Alarm!”
(73) Cleveland Leader, November 2, 1863. The so-called “Cathcart Conspiracy” proved to be a figment of Republican imagination. It became an essential part of the plot in a highly readable and popular historical novel. See Constance Robertson, The Golden Circle (New York, 1951).
(74) Bickley to “His Excellency, Abraham Lincoln,” December 18, 1863, Bickley Papers.
(76) “Conspiracy to establish a Northwestern Confederacy,” undated, John B. Sanderson Papers, Ohio Historical Society. Sanderson’s expose of the Order of American Knights was discredited by Frank L. Klement, “Phineas C. Wright, the Order of American Knights, and the Sanderson Exposé,” Civil War History, XVIII (March, 1972), 5-23.
(77) Cincinnati Daily Times, October 20, 1864.
(78) McClellan’s Record . . . (Cincinnati, 1864), passim. Evidence indicates that the pamphlet was Conkling’s handiwork and that it came off the same presses as the Cincinnati Times.
(80) Stephen V. Benet (assistant Secretary of War) to Charles Bickley, March 15, 1888, Bickley Papers.
(81) Cincinnati Daily Gazette, August 16, 1867.
(82) Whitelaw Reid, Ohio in the War (2 vols., Columbus, 1868), passim.
492-493; II, 18-19, 556-558.

(84) William Blake [William J. Bleck]  
*The Copperheads* (New York, 1941) and  
Constance Robertson, *The Golden Circle,*  
(New York, 1941) both dealt with the K.G.C.  
and the "Northwestern Confederacy."  
Phyllis A. Whitney, *The Quicksilver Pool*  
(Greenwich, Conn., 1955) also dealt with  
the Golden Circle in a Civil War setting.