POLITICS, CHESS, HATS:
THE MICROHISTORY OF DISUNION
IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA

BY
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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the genesis of disunion at the Confederacy’s unlikely epicenter, Charleston South Carolina. Viewed from street level, through the words and actions of more than three hundred ordinary men—those who joined the radical Vigilant Rifles in 1860, and others who did not—the break-up of the Union appears unanticipated, largely undesired, yet wholly unavoidable. Southerners did not blunder into Civil War, I argue; they marched steadily, unwittingly, self-destructively into it because, at the end, fear, honor, and self-interest had invested them too heavily in the performance of that foolish act for them to choose any other course. Surprisingly, too, those who shouted loudest for secession in Charleston were not those most deeply implicated in slavery’s defense. They were small fry—young, single, unpropertied men mostly—clerks and accountants, volunteer firemen, chess club members, looking to stand tall with their fellows and get a leg up in the world. Too late they learned that bold promises, saber rattling, and street theater could not easily be disavowed. The consequence was disaster.
For Kathleen,

*All I want in this Creation*....
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In my memory, Maggie and Lina are outside the window as I write, flashing across the prairie in pursuit of a swallow. They have been zooming and zigzagging from first light, every day since spring came. They’re lightning fast, even for border collies, but the birds stay just out of reach. No matter: my dogs love the challenge, and are happiest flat out on the chase. To catch their quarry would be anticlimactic, even distressing, I think. The game would be over, and with it the delight and thrill of play.

Magnolia and Carolina are gone to rest now, yet I play on after their example, doggedly, delightedly overwhelmed by joy and wonder. My chase has brought me here for a breather before the next good, wild run. My whole being pants thanks. This study has been a labor of love, and I am glad to tip my hat to those who make possible the jubilant race that is my life and work, and share its bewildering twists and turns. Ultimately, I have been no more successful than my dogs in catching what I have pursued, but perhaps I see it clearer now than at the start of my run. I’ll take understanding over knowledge any day. Tomorrow I will be back out there, tearing after something else I may never quite bring to ground. That is the private happiness I find in history.

Thanks, then, to all who aided my research and gave me time and space to wonder over what I found. That list begins with the staff of the South Caroliniana Library, especially Henry Fulmer and Allen Stokes. I remember, too, the wonderful librarians at the South Carolina Historical Society, the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the Charleston Museum, the University of Illinois, and Iowa State University who opened doors, untangled knots and kept me turning pages. In Charleston, Marie Ferrara, Ethel Trenholm Seabrook

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Nepveaux and the Rev. Jennie Taber Clarkson Olbrych helped me understand their illustrious ancestors and the special place they called home.

Most valuable was the aid and comfort my labors received across four years by way of a Research Fellowship at the Institute for Southern Studies at the University of South Carolina. Then, I had hardly heard of the Vigilant Rifles, but the scholars I broke lances with—Barbara Bellows, David Carlton, Joyce Chaplin, Peter Coclanis, Lacy Ford, Dan Littlefield, Stephanie McCurry, the late George Terry and others—played a crucial role in putting my work on its present path. I hope they will enjoy—and raise a hundred boisterous dissents to—what I’ve argued here. To Walter Edgar, former director of the Institute, my thanks for his hospitality and support.

Others rendered assistance in various and often unlikely forms. At a meeting of southern labor scholars, back in a different century, Eric Hobsbawm encouraged me to take hats seriously as an historical subject. His kindness on that occasion did more good than he could have known. Likewise, I thought little about questions of sport or play until John Dewar asked me to teach a graduate seminar on the subject at the University of Saskatchewan in 1990. To John, Pat Dewar, and Tan Chin-Aik, I am grateful for broadening my horizons. In divergent—and not always gentle—ways, the injunctions of Charles Joyner, Bryan Palmer, Marcus Rediker, and Leslie Rowland challenged me as I wrote. Their resourcefulness, intelligence, and careful scholarship set a high standard I have marked if seldom met.

Others criticized portions of this work or offered thoughtful words of encouragement. Thanks to Patrick Doyle, Marc Egnal, John Inscoe, Bill Link, John Mayfield, David Moltke-Hansen, Kees van Minnen, Amanda Mushal, Jim Oakes, Jane and the late William Pease, Bill Scarborough, Andy Slap, Frank Towers, Eric Walther, Tim Wolters, and especially the late...
Bertram Wyatt-Brown. I am grateful for opportunities to discuss aspects of my research at conferences organized by Don Doyle, Lesley Gordon, John Neff, Ted Ownby, the fellows of the St. George Tucker Society, and the late Bill Cecil-Fronsman. In the Netherlands, the staff of Middelburg’s Roosevelt Studies Centre have earned a special place in my heart for their kindness and support. Warm and generous colleagues in the Antipodes also deserve special mention: Tom Dunning, Shane White, the late Greg Dening, Donna Merwick, Ian Tyrrell, and above all, Cassandra Pybus. To all the clan of the Australia-New Zealand American Studies Association who took in an Asian-based Canadian working on what must have seemed odd and scrambled topics ten years back, thanks mates. Next round’s my shout.

I wrote much of Politics, Chess, Hats in Kaohsiung, the city I love best. It is impossible to overstate how my Taiwanese neighbors, friends, and students helped bring this work to life. Across a dozen years, they maintained a lively interest in my study of that other southern seaport in that other inscrutable hemisphere, and taught me daily what xi fu means. Cindy, Sandy, and Oliver Hsu gave me affection, hope, and perspective; I am proud to be their uncle. Nemo growled and stole my pens and waited patiently for me to claim a corner of his pillow, long after most good poodles have gone to sleep. I have never met an historian of greater determination or character than that little grey dog.

That is saying much for Nemo, considering the friends who have fed me, argued with me, and cheered my plodding progress. Among these I number Lewis Bateman, Georganne Burton, the late Malcolm Call, Peter Kolchin, Mark Smith, Troy Smith, and the late Elizabeth Fox-Genovese. Peter Way has been soul brother number one to me for a quarter century now; we’re still out there on the cutting edge of nowhere, thank goodness.
I have been blessed with brilliant teachers. At the University of Western Ontario, Craig Simpson introduced me to the contradictions of southern history, and has stood as mentor and model ever after. At the Johns Hopkins University, Ron Walters and the late John Higham helped me hone my craft. Blunt Bob Hogan urged me to study object-relations theory, the elegant Erving Goffman, and the connections between individuals and organizations. Janet and John More, my sister and brother-in-law, stand among my best teachers, too, always ready with a lesson in perspective. Thanks aren’t nearly enough for how they’ve nurtured this project and its author over the years.

William W. Freehling taught me to read and write. Patiently, generously, relentlessly, he red-penned the flabby prose, shallow research, and crabbed theory I brought him. It would have been easy to foist on me his love of writing, his passion for the sources, his respect for common sense and intellectual rigor. Instead, he insisted that I find my own path, write my own book, become my own historian. How thankful I am for the faith, toughness, and compassion that gift cost.

At the University of Illinois, I received the wise counsel of Jim Barrett, Craig Koslofsky, Max Edelson, Bruce Levine, John Lynn, and Vernon Burton. I am grateful for their advice and criticism, and the very long rope they gave me.

I never actually studied with Eugene D. Genovese, but he was by my side from beginning to end--scoffing at my “Trotskyist tricks” and encouraging the progress of my “history of the world,” as he called it. Always he was the truest of friends, giving freely of his hospitality, his brilliance, and his wicked wit. More than any other scholar, I learned from Gene, not least the truth of Gramsci’s dictum, “Pessimism of the spirit, optimism of the will!” Thanks, comrade.

I am grateful, finally, to those I love best. Politics, Chess, Hats focuses pretty
relentlessly on double-minded men and the folly of their choices. Yet it would not exist without the hope, love, and courage of four remarkable women. Barbara Johnston Croft was there long before the beginning of this work, asking smart, tough questions, barring us both from the compromises which would have put me on a different, easier path. Carol Lee Yu-fen was my neighbor, teacher, and dear, true friend. This work owes very much to her wisdom, wit, and unfailing support. Kathleen Hilliard came into my life near the end of my march, guiding me quite patiently toward the goal. How thankful I am, each day, to find her and Murphy on the other side of the door. Six years on, it all seems quite imposserous.

Kathleen Florence Robinson did not live to read the story she did so much to shape. As I pushed my pen, she battled cancer, lending determination and strength in her inimitable way. When nurses and visitors were gone, and she was tiring, she would murmur, “Write your book, son,” wink, then close her eyes. So I did--improbably--at last. Here it is, Mum.
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<td>ADAH</td>
<td>Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery, Alabama</td>
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<td>Baker, HU</td>
<td>Baker Library, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts</td>
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<td>CCL</td>
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<td>CCPL</td>
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<td>EU</td>
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<td>GHS</td>
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<td>HTC</td>
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<td>LC</td>
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<tr>
<td>UGA</td>
<td>Hargrett Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia</td>
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<td>VM</td>
<td>Valentine Museum, Richmond, Virginia</td>
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PROLOGUE:

On November 19, 1860, Samuel Yoer Tupper wrote Governor William Henry Gist, offering the services of the Vigilant Rifles for the defense of South Carolina. Defense against what, Captain Tupper’s letter never said exactly. But that was hardly necessary.¹

Across the summer and fall, white southerners had mulled the probable outcome of the presidential election, imagining catastrophe in countless shapes and variations. With the news of Abraham Lincoln’s victory on November 7, decades of dread welled up. “They are downright crazy at the South,” one writer exclaimed, and in South Carolina, “the rankest & most crazy of the disunionists” held the upper hand. “The feeling of indignation and resentment was profound,” Ben Whitner recalled three generations later, “and the Spirit of Secession, as the only alternative for the Southern States, seemed to be in the very air we breathed.”²

For thirty years, South Carolina had wavered on the brink of disunion, striving to secure slavery’s place in an increasingly antislavery Union. “[A]ll that we ask for,” mewled beset masters, “is to be let alone.” Time and again, Carolinians had warned northerners to cease meddling with their “domestic institutions,” urged southerners to make common cause in defense of their rights. That talk had failed, and disastrous “[e]vents long foretold” seemed about to sweep slavery’s regime to its doom. Now the hated party of “Black Republicans” had been lifted to power. They would control Congress. Their candidate would scheme from the White House. Soon the South’s fate would be sealed. First, bondage would be barred from the western


² William L. Hodge to Thomas Corwin, October 30, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC; Benjamin F. Whitner to J. Frank Fooshe, n. d. [1920s?], Whitner Family Papers, SCL.
territories and banished from federal forts and shipyards. The District of Columbia would become free soil. Then the noose would tighten round the slaveholding states as Yankees grew bolder. How long it would take Lincoln’s mob to abolitionize the Supreme Court, none could say, but before that time Republicans would have nurtured a nest of southern traitors to do their bidding. There was the real danger. “[A] stand must be made for African slavery,” fire-eaters declared, “or it is forever lost.”

Temporizing and moderation had conjured the crisis. Even as their power in Washington faded, southern politicians placed their faith in the fantasy of “state rights,” imagining that the Constitution, interpreted by a proslavery Supreme Court, would protect against anything untoward an antislavery Congress might aim their way. But, as Carolina’s master strategist John C. Calhoun admitted just before his death in 1850, state rights’ theory ended in a cul-de-sac. For what happened if southerners themselves grew soft on slavery? Over four decades before Lincoln’s election, northern slaveholders had surrendered their bondmen with hardly a whimper. Now, above the Mason-Dixon Line, slavery existed in Delaware only, and there in name alone. Along Dixie’s margins, from Maryland to Missouri, the institution was hemorrhaging badly in terms of numbers and popular support. Plant Republican power there, or anywhere in the South, and the slaveholders’ world was doomed. “Patronage, power, divisions

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3 William H. Barnwell, Views upon the present Crisis: A Discourse, Delivered in St. Peter’s Church, Charleston, on the 6th of December, 1850, the Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, Appointed by the Legislature of South Carolina (Charleston, 1850), 13; Thomas Y. Simons, Jr. Speech... in Favor of South Carolina Being Represented in the Democratic Convention. Delivered at a Meeting of the Citizens of Charleston, Held in Hibernian Hall, Feb. 26, 1860 (Charleston, 1860); Charleston Mercury, October 18, 1860; William D. Grimball to Elizabeth B. Grimball, November 30, 1860, John Berkeley Grimball Papers, DU. See also J. C. Coit, An Address Delivered to the Freemen of Chesterfield District, on Tuesday, Second Day of Court Week, March, 1851 (Columbia, 1851), 32; Charleston Mercury, October 20, 1860; William D. Porter to James H. Hammond, n. d. [September?], November 11, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC.

4 Charleston Mercury, December 5, 1860.

5 Calhoun’s attempt to protect his section from federal dictation on one side and popular democracy on the other drove him to the awkward solution of his “concurrent majority” theory. Charles M. Wiltse, John C. Calhoun, 3
at home would do the work,” Congressman Laurence Keitt warned. Postmasterships, customs office appointments, and other plums would be doled out to southern “doughfaces,” and these pliant types would enact the Republicans’ program without a second thought. One morning soon, planters would wake to find their slaves unshackled, their property worthless, their civilization demolished—all accomplished not by overcoming state-rights principles, but by upholding them. And then it would be too late.6

Now was the time for action. “[I]f the people don’t take some decided measure this time,” one diarist declared, “I will never trust to South Carolina again.” “We must face our enemies at the North and TRAITORS SOUTH,” radicals raged. Caution itself came to seem a species of treachery. Republicans had “raised a pirate’s flag” against law and civilization: who would not stand against them now, defending “the hope of mankind” slave society embodied? “Politicians may advise truces, legislators may make laws,” Charleston’s William Colcock warned, “but the spirit of abolitionism will break down all barriers and the war against slavery will never cease.” Disunionists “resolved to make the plunge & take all the chances.”7

This time, astonishingly, they succeeded. What—and who—propelled South Carolina over the brink?8 How did they accomplish that disastrous goal? And why, of all places, was it

6 Laurence M. Keitt to James H. Hammond, October 23, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC; Charleston Mercury, August 30, 1856, September 8, 1860.

7 Entry of November 11, 1860, Ada Bacot Diary, SCL; Charleston Mercury, October 6, 1860; Simons, Speech... in Favor of South Carolina Being Represented in the Democratic Convention, 4, 3; William F. Colcock to Mary W. H. Colcock, June 11, 1850, Colcock Family Papers, TU; W. L. Hodge to Thomas Corwin, October 30, 1860, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC.

8 A popular description of the historical problem this study examines—how and why revolutions succeed—is found in Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference (Boston, 2000). Although I did not encounter Gladwell’s book until a dozen years after its publication, its central questions—how individuals with particular characteristics disseminate ideas, policies, and projects, what makes those ideas “stick” with a
Charleston—the most divided, conservative city in the Old South—where the movement for secession passed the tipping point?

Most thought they knew that disunion would fail again, as it ever had. Breaking the nation meant breaking the South and its peculiar institution, slavery, Charlestonians had warned across three decades. And would secession not end, inevitably, in fratricidal conflict—perhaps even race war? This time, though, sober arguments fell upon deaf ears. Carolinians “say they are aware it will result in ruin and distress,” one Yankee wondered, “but they don’t care.” Either secession’s upshot would be proslavery revolution or antislavery catastrophe, “triumph” for the master class, “or the tomb.” Some feared that waves of armed abolitionists would flood the South on the heels of Lincoln’s election, emulating John Brown’s stab at Harper’s Ferry a year before. 9 Or suppose federal troops were dispatched to prevent the disunionist working-out of the logic of state rights? The Illinois Ape in the White House meant bayonets at South Carolina’s throat. Surely that was cause enough for the Vigilant Rifles to offer their services.10

It is doubtful that Bill Gist knew anything of Sam Tupper or the Vigilant Rifles.11


Scanning down the list of 109 names enclosed with Tupper’s letter, there were only two or three the governor had reason to recognize. It is unlikely that he had met even these men. Gist was a wealthy planter of temperate politics from Union District, high in the upcountry. These names belonged to Charleston men, living far—geographically, socially, culturally—from the world of rural slaveholders he inhabited. A few—William Henry Waring, Charles Elliot Rowand Drayton, John Harleston—claimed kin to once-powerful lowcountry clans. But most patronyms petered out in obscurity: Armstrong, O’Neill, Yates, Ryan, Knauff, Brown, Smith, Jones.

Attached to Tupper’s letter was a note of introduction penned by George M. Coffin, senior partner in Coffin and Pringle, the prominent cotton factorage house, and private in the Vigilant Rifles. In case Gist missed the Coffin connection, a third note was sent along from Thomas Y. Simons, Jr., representative from Charleston to the General Assembly, and Gist’s aide-de-camp. “Tommy Skimmons” was a potent figure in the Queen City but detested beyond its bounds for his political moderation and slippery, glad-handing style.

There was no love lost between Gist and Simons, either, though in months past they had connived to boost themselves into higher office. If Gist could gain a federal Senate seat, that opened up the governorship for his crony. The scheme was clever, but Lincoln’s triumph split the alliance. While Gist viewed Republicans’ victory with increasing alarm, his partner remained steady in pursuit of the main chance. Gaining office and protecting interests was the

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shameless core of Simons’ politics—every man’s politics, he would have protested—not guarding abstract principles. Those who knew him must have seen his letter and its proposal as just another bagatelle.\(^{15}\)

Gist surely wondered. Yet the Vigilants were not playing possum. One hundred nine men, uniformed and equipped “at \textit{their own expense},” armed with “Minnie Rifle[s] with Sabre bayonets” could take any federal installation in Charleston—even Fort Moultrie or Fort Sumter, if they could find boats. They wanted no easy assignment either. Accepted into service, Tupper hoped to “be allowed to lead the first ‘forlorn hope’ of Carolina troops that are sent against the enemy.” His men would be stalwarts and suicide warriors both. Their company name, the bold language of Tupper’s letter, and other details made plain their identity: the Vigilant Rifles were Minute Men, apparently the first company of volunteers to stand up for the South in the wake of Lincoln’s election. These men were the very tip of the spear which sought to defend slavery and sustain southern society. Who were they?\(^{16}\)

In collective terms, there is little we know for certain about the Minute Men of 1860; as individuals, almost nothing at all. A few scholars have written a few paragraphs of generalities


about these radical organizations, but almost nothing definitive.¹⁷ There were Minute Men at the height of South Carolina’s conflict with the federal government in 1832-33 and groups rather like Minute Men mustered in the crisis of 1851-52. Both of those movements pattered out in compromise—which is to say, failure. That was no great surprise. Like the Revolutionary heroes from which Minute Men bands took their name, these groups were uniformly local and defensive in outlook. In their first reincarnation, they stood for lower tariffs and the state’s right to “nullify” unconstitutional federal laws. The second wave likewise championed southern rights against federal “tyranny,” though its program of resistance was vaguer.¹⁸ Just how far radicalism might take them remained unspoken, but neither group aimed directly at any sort of practical action, much less breaking up the Union.

The Minute Men of 1860 shared little with earlier militants. They spouted the same rhetoric about defending homes against dastardly intruders, but claimed that this goal could be won only by winning independence from the Yankee-dominated Union. They were, it appears, the shock troops of the southern revolution, committed to disunion by any means necessary.


They never fought under their own banners—many went unarmed and most others carried only pistols—but in South Carolina they worked steadily to swing political sentiment over to secession. Their support proved crucial to disunion’s success. If Carolinians hesitated to choose, Governor Gist told insiders, “I would go to Charleston, make a speech & advise the taking of the forts at once.” By their presence alone, Minute Men gave that threat teeth. Gist never needed to play his trump card.19

Just how the governor answered Sam Tupper’s letter, we do not know, but four months later Captain Tupper did command his troops during the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter.20 Men of the Vigilant Rifles would fight in defense of their homes all across the slaveholders’ republic over the next four years. Their actions declared them rebels, quite in earnest. Who dared to say they were merely acting?


20 Federal reports of Confederate troop dispositions around Fort Sumter indicate “minute men” in locations where the Vigilant Rifles were stationed. George W. Snyder to Robert Anderson, “Reinforcing Fort Sumter” memorandum, April 28, 1861, Abraham Lincoln Papers, LC; OR, series 1, vol. 1: 39.
INTRODUCTION:

One hundred and thirty years later, I encountered the Vigilant Rifles in the same way Bill Gist did, by reading Sam Tupper’s surprising letter. First I found a faded Xerox in the governor’s papers at the state archives in Columbia. Then I located the original document crammed inside a box of captured military muster lists and payrolls at the National Archives in Washington. I had been searching for rosters of Minute Men companies in South Carolina, hoping to learn what sort of men joined and what sort of men led these radicals. Did big planters dragoon the small fry into arms? Did young men become Young Turks to prove themselves? Did local politicians play leading roles? Once I turned up my lists, I knew, the answers would appear.

But when I turned up Sam Tupper’s list, what appeared was confounding. Even before I tried tracing his volunteers through the census, I saw the problem: the Vigilant Rifles were from Charleston. There was no way to answer my questions about planter-yeoman relations using these documents; there were no farms in Charleston. Age or wealth or political leadership might prove important in the decision to become a Minute Man, but that knowledge could shed little light on the organization’s character in smaller towns like Columbia, Winnsboro, or Spartanburg, or in rural communities where a church or store or crossroads focused activity. For what I wanted to know, Tupper’s list was next to useless. Charleston was different than anywhere in South Carolina, different than anywhere in the South.

That obvious fact came as an epiphany to me, since most historical literature on the secession crisis implicitly denies this point.\(^1\) There were, of course, not one but at least eleven

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\(^1\)Stephanie McCurry’s study of lowcountry planter-yeomen politics, for example, culminates in the signing of the Ordinance of Secession at Institute Hall in Charleston, though her treatment of the region makes almost no reference to Charleston or the problem of town and country in general. Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds:*
secession crises, overlapping yet distinct: South Carolina quit the Union on December 20, 1860, and nine other states followed on nine different dates before Tennessee lagged out on June 8, 1861. But within each of those conflicts, southerners contested separation through scores of smaller, semi-permeable struggles, linking county cliques and dividing dinner tables. Those few scholars who have offered unitary explanations of the birth of the Confederacy acknowledge differences of timing and circumstance, but leave the bewildering, all-important details of local action for others to explain.2

Analyzing the complex sequence of events which accomplished disunion has encouraged historians to study the dynamics of national breakup at the state level. This has been both strength and weakness. In broad outline, we now understand well how the legislatures and conventions of the various states brought disunion off. Below the state level, however, differences flatten out and disappear, especially in all-important South Carolina.3 Why did Greenville District voters support disunion? For much the same reasons Edgefield farmers or lowcountry squires did, we are told, and in much the same way. But such dicta are rooted more


deeply in assumption than research. Just how secession came to triumph at the local level, historians do not say, though Charleston militants probably acted much like their country cousins. Treating Sam Tupper’s list as a special case meant rejecting that logic.

It was a lot to reject. After a century and more of painstaking study and passionate argument, nearly all narratives of secession fall into one of two camps, each remarkably abstract. One school opts for a mass conversion experience to explain the Confederacy’s origins. Southerners supposedly awoke spontaneously to the danger Lincoln’s election posed to their interests, rallying to the Stars and Bars. There was little hesitation, less internal debate worth speaking of, especially in hotheaded South Carolina. Even in 1860, the Charleston novelist William Gilmore Simms favored this perspective, calling disunion a popular “landsturm” against northern aggression. The other major approach takes its cue from Republican wartime propaganda, claiming that the rebellion was inspired by a nest of southern traitors (or, says a regional variant, southern patriots of greater insight than their peers). It was supposedly this cabal which conspired in 1860-61 to propel the slaveholding states out of the Union, regardless

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6 William G. Simms to William P. Miles, November 12, 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, SHC. Publicly, radicals like John Honour never failed to argue that secession was “the spontaneous utterance of a people who are duly sensible of the inestimable liberties bequeathed to them by their glorious fathers.” Privately, of course, they knew better. Charleston Mercury, December 12, 1860.
of popular feeling.\footnote{On conspiracy’s role in South Carolina, see Laura A. White, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Father of Secession (New York, 1931); David D. Wallace, The History of South Carolina, 4 vols. (New York, 1934), 3: 151-161; Lillian A. Kibler, “Unionist Sentiment in South Carolina in 1860,” Journal of Southern History, 9 (1938): 346-366; Roy F. Nichols, The Disruption of American Democracy (New York, 1948), 348-364; Schultz, Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina; Lawrence T. McDonnell, “Struggle Against Suicide: James Henry Hammond and the Secession of South Carolina,” Southern Studies, 22 (1983): 109-137; William C. Davis, Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater (Columbia, 2001), 390-412; Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2: 323-426.} Hear the words of Judge Alfred Proctor Aldrich, chairman of the state senate’s Committee on Federal Relations, pronounced six days after the Vigilant Rifles offered their services to the disunionist cause. “Whoever waited for the common people when a great movement was to be made?” The crisis was now: “We must make the move & force them to follow.” Aldrich’s plan to quell opposition was time-tested: “assassinate” the strong, shame the weak, drag the mass along.\footnote{“Alfred P. Aldrich to James H. Hammond, November 25, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC; A[lfred P.] A[ldrich] “Calling a Convention” speech notes, n. d. [November 1860], Beaufort Taylor Watts Papers, SCL.}

Popular uprising or Machiavellian intrigue? There are any number of elegant, often brilliant turns scholars have given these arguments, yet little progress has been made in the past generation to explain just how the United States came to break up in the winter of 1860-61.\footnote{Daniel Crofts, “And the War Came,” in A Companion to the Civil War and Reconstruction, ed. Lacy K. Ford (New York, 2005), 183-203. Most recently, historians have explored the origins of Confederate nationalism across time and space, complicating but still avoiding direct confrontation with the questions of how and why disunion succeeded in the winter of 1860-61. Don H. Doyle, Nations Divided: America, Italy, and the Southern Question (Athens, 2002); idem, ed. Secession as an International Phenomenon: From America’s Civil War to Contemporary Separatist Movements (Athens, 2010); Robert E. Bonner, Mastering America: Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood (New York, 2009); Paul Quigley, Shifting Grounds: Nationalism and the American South, 1848-1861 (New York, 2011); Andre M. Fleche, The Revolution of 1861: The American Civil War in the Age of Nationalist Conflict (Chapel Hill, 2012).} Deflecting contemporary claims and latter-day variants has become academic child’s play in an age disdainful of the “will of the people” and conspiracy theories alike. Simms, for example, simply may have exaggerated his “landsturm” analysis, Romantic that he was. And whoever heard of Alfred Aldrich anyway? The consequence is stalemate. Since publication of David Potter’s landmark narrative, The Impending Crisis, three decades ago, a short shelf of state-level
studies and a couple of valuable biographies have appeared. Each has made worthy contributions, but collectively, they have failed to revive—much less resolve—an increasingly tired debate. Currently, scholars are weighing the implications of William Freehling’s masterwork, *The Road to Disunion*, but those looking for a breakthrough must be disappointed. Freehling fought valiantly to answer old questions, not raise new ones. The limits to the secession paradigm—how we go about explaining, “what caused disunion, and, by extension, the Civil War?”—seem set in stone.

Sam Tupper’s tale can never be told under those constraints. The trouble is, as one radical reminded the *Charleston Mercury*, “revolutions are not merely willed, they are to be carried out.” Deciding is never nearly the same as doing, and the Vigilant Rifles vowed to be doers. Secession scholars have quite missed this point, wrangling endlessly over why southerners came to choose political revolution in 1860, disclosing little about how militants actually accomplished it. Note Eric Walther’s 1992 collective biography, *The Fire-Eaters*, which expertly traced the growth of a common consciousness among some of the South’s most radical leaders, potential conspirators if ever there were such. Alas, Walther’s fire-eaters hardly


did anything of consequence come 1860. They almost never joined active secessionist groups, or gave real speeches to actual people at specific times and places which had any discernible effect. Nor did they march in parades, disseminate pamphlets, or put their heads together with other cadres on particular occasions to plot a common course. Most were sick or dead, or out of the country, inactive, or not very important at the crucial moments when the Confederacy was taking shape.12

This is the same difficulty which plagued John McCardell’s brilliant synthesis, *The Idea of a Southern Nation*, back in 1979: a great idea radical southerners had, but how did they—or someone—pull it off? Two years earlier, Drew Faust’s *A Sacred Circle* claimed that alienated intellectuals were important in getting the South up to speed for disunion. But again, when crisis came, Faust’s eggheads all went missing—save only the eccentric Virginian Edmund Ruffin.13 He wrote some letters, gave some speeches, signed up as a private in South Carolina’s Provisional Army, and fired a symbolic first shot at Fort Sumter. Pulling that lanyard seems revolutionary enough, but not nearly enough to make a revolution. Analyzing this odd triggerman brings us little closer to understanding how the overthrow of the Republic was actually achieved. Thinking about his pen pals is a pure waste of time.14


Repeatedly the question is begged: if not these men, who organized the disunionist rallies and processions which mobilized support? Who stood for election to the secession conventions, who nominated them, and who mustered the votes to gain their victories? Who guided legislative action behind the scenes? Who gave the stump speeches and the volunteer toasts? Who serenaded fence-sitting politicians and organized mobs to quell the opposition? Of all this, we know almost nothing. Which means that we know precious little for certain about secession itself. Whoever they were, the Vigilant Rifles volunteered to do something practical to achieve disunion. I believed they deserved closer scrutiny.

Exploring the social and cultural forces which generated Sam Tupper’s letter would also advance my understanding of disunion’s development. For if secession was a spontaneous popular movement, just how did it spread? In The Great Fear of 1789, the French Revolutionary historian Georges Lefebvre offers an excellent model for southern scholars, tracking the passage of specific ideas through particular towns on definite dates. By contrast, Steven Channing’s prize-winning Crisis of Fear dissolves such complexity and development. In his work, South Carolina seems gripped by the same disunionist determinations almost always at the same moment everywhere. Channing knew more than he told: Crisis of Fear provides valuable details in abundance, but—unorganized—they go mostly to waste. If there were neighborhood meetings or particular events which turned the tide of opinion, they rate no notice in his pages, or

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16 Georges Lefebvre, The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France (New York, 1973); Channing, Crisis of Fear. Channing even botches Tupper’s name, calling him S. Y. Tripper. For examples of the uneven spread of rumor and fact in South Carolina leading up to the secession crisis, see John S. C. Abbott, South and North; or, Impressions Received During a Trip to Cuba and the South (New York, 1860), 156-157.
in virtually any other study of secession. As with Christianity, it seems, the Confederacy began with a virgin birth.\textsuperscript{17}

Compared with the enormous and dynamic historiography of the English, French, Bolshevik, National Socialist, and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, among others, our understanding of the origins, mechanics, and meanings of the southern slaveholders’ uprising remains impoverished and conceptually threadbare.\textsuperscript{18} In each of these fields, scholars have moved from pretext to context, developing important insights about the political process and the social and cultural \textit{milieu} in which it developed by trolling up apparently minor, everyday happenings at the local level. So should we. There are countless exceptional, supposedly

\textsuperscript{17} The single exception is the Charleston and Savannah Railroad celebration of November 2, 1860, which acts as a stroke of luck for secessionist plotters in Freehling, \textit{Road to Disunion}, 2: 408-413.

unimportant or parochial incidents in the disunionist South which might prompt new lines of inquiry.\textsuperscript{19} Consider four neglected items from South Carolina in October, 1860.

A few days before Sam Tupper wrote his letter, a shadowy faction of Charleston merchants and politicians came together under the banner of the “1860 Association,” circulating a series of secessionist pamphlets across the state and further afield. They were the only group of their kind, yet scholars have devoted little attention to their activities and impact. No one has offered an examination of the themes, structures, or rhetorical style of the radical tracts themselves. Especially in a society like the Old South—overwhelmingly rural, with relatively few newspapers and job printing establishments—figuring out how disunionist arguments were shaped and spread, who espoused them, when, where, and why, is an important task.\textsuperscript{20}

In the same month, the Charleston-born, New Orleans-based editor James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow noted in the back pages of his influential magazine his attendance at “a very large political gathering” at the Williamston springs, on the Georgia-South Carolina border, sometime in the past summer. No historian has ever mentioned this rally, although it was one of the largest secessionist meetings held in the upcountry before Lincoln’s election, galvanizing popular support for radical action.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, it may be that, beyond Charleston, opposition to


disunion in the South fought and lost its crucial battle here. Who organized the meeting, and why? Who spread word of the rally and how? Who addressed the crowds that came and who stayed away? What difference did the day’s events make? Documentary evidence is plentiful, but so far—inexplicably--no one has tallied it up. In truth, we know little of the local history of disunion anywhere in South Carolina or further afield. How was separation accomplished at the county and community levels?

And what of anti-secessionist feeling? How was it quashed in these crucial days? In South Carolina, disunion’s triumph is supposed to have occurred relatively painlessly, especially once Republican victory made the alternative plain. But by late October, merchant-planter Christopher Fitzsimmons described Charleston’s legislative delegation as “very much divided” on the question of disunion, “and the same is said to be the case throughout the State.” Three weeks later, piedmont politician Richard Griffin still saw “a minority of considerable strength” in the General Assembly opposed to separate secession. In early December, radicals recognized that there were yet sizeable pockets of opposition, especially in the upcountry and in Charleston, led by effective popular leaders. At summer’s end, the Chief Justice of the state supreme court, the Attorney General, both of South Carolina’s federal senators, several former and current congressmen, and such potent planters, lawyers, politicians, and editors as Wade Hampton, Benjamin Perry, Beaufort T. Watts, Michael Patrick O’Connor, and James L. Petigru all strongly opposed disunion over Lincoln’s election. Yet they remained divided and ineffective. How this dissent was thwarted remains unknown.

Bonham, July 15, 1860, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL; Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, August 16, 1860; Greenville Southern Enterprise, August 2, 1860; Greenville Patriot and Mountaineer, August 16, 1860; Anderson Intelligencer, August 14, 1860.

22 Christopher Fitzsimons to James H. Hammond, October 19, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, SCL; Richard C. Griffin to D. L. Dalton, November 6, 1860, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL; Isaac W. Hayne to Samuel McGowan, November 20, 1860, Samuel McGowan Papers, SCL; Charleston Mercury, December 5, 1860; James
The question of who did the thwarting—who stood in the vanguard of secession at the community level—and what motivated them, is also puzzling. By early October, George Tillman of Edgefield District warned moderates that “a secret, armed opposition” was taking shape “in every District of the State,” under the umbrella of the “Minute Men for the Defence of Southern Rights.” Already “Several Secret Meetings… of the Sensational Kind” had been held, but Tillman could only guess about the group’s leaders, members, aims, and methods. Historians have done little more. Did they plan to march on Washington, as some claimed, to prevent Lincoln’s inauguration, or to “encounter” Republicans “by revolutionary force in the Union” rather than by secession proper, or were they determined to accomplish disunion no


23 Because devotion to the Union usually coexisted with love of South Carolina, opposition to secession was seldom unconflicted. On this issue, see, e. g., Charles W. Dudley to Charles F. Benjamin, August 9, 1871, Theodore W. Parmeter to H. A. O. Aldis, October 24, 1872, both in Miscellaneous Letters Received, March 10, 1871-December 30, 1872, Records of the Commissioners of Claims (Southern Claims Commission), 1871-1880, Record Group 217: Records of the US General Accounting Office, NA.

24 George D. Tillman to James H. Hammond, October 9, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC.

25 Stephen West’s admirable work errs in labeling too broad a range of groups as Minute Men, neglecting important differences and the determined localism many displayed. West, “Minute Men, Yeomen and Mobilization for Secession.” “To the militant,” Susan Sontag reminds us, “identity is everything.” Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York, 2003), 10.
matter what? So far, we know little about the paramilitary groups which spearheaded disunion at street level.

It was with this last problem that my project began. Understanding why Carolinians stepped forward as Minute Men is particularly important. Had South Carolina not led the way, seceding unilaterally without risking a popular referendum, no other state would have leapt into the breach. Timing made that leap even trickier. Hesitation of a hundred stripes—“unmanly weakness, dreads, doubts, indecision, imbecility”—had thwarted nationalist schemes for decades, Carolina radicals knew. Delay action now for just a few weeks, they worried, and the separatist movement in Alabama would stall. The Georgia campaign would collapse altogether. So, many foresaw, the drive for southern independence would unravel, leaving South Carolina a tiny separate nation—“too small for a republic, too big for an insane asylum”—scrambling back toward state status. Those who stood in the radical vanguard, then, played a crucial role by preventing delay. Without their action, the South would not have created its slaveholding Confederacy in the spring of 1861 and, for good or ill, there would have been no Civil War—certainly not as it finally unfolded.

On one other point, most ultras concurred in the fall of 1860: if not now, it would be never for the secessionist cause. This was the last chance of retrieving their world from disaster. Hotheads like Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr., and John Townsend trumpeted that warning to South

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27 Charleston Mercury, October 18, 1860 (quote); Papers of Jefferson Davis, 6: 369-370.

Carolina audiences, and that many modern historians believe as well. Once Republicans installed southern Judases in federal offices across the region it would be too late to resist. Political patronage would corrupt loyalties, divide the South’s friends, and nurture abolitionism in their midst. Like Samson shorn, slaveholders would be powerless to ward off the fatal blow Yankees longed to strike. Upon these truths Sam Tupper’s Minute Men agreed.29

How then to deal with these Vigilant Rifles? Their experience could hardly be collapsed with that of rural Minute Men, and I was unwilling to discard their evidence simply because it did not answer to my liking the questions I posed it. I never aimed at bricolage, but sometimes the evidence chooses the historian.

Tupper’s list and the letters that accompanied it held clues to a mystery in its own right, I saw: how and why radical secessionism took shape and triumphed in Charleston, transforming a notorious citadel of unionists, slowcoaches, and money-minded foot-draggers in the space of weeks into the South’s most rabidly fire-eating city. “From Charleston flowed the impulse, to a very great extent, that moved the State,” contemporaries agreed.30 Could these documents explain that ill-starred inspiration? I decided to focus on the Vigilant Rifles to understand who they were, why these men became Minute Men, what the social and cultural context of their decision was at the local level. Naively, I put aside abstruse models and methods to see where the paper trail led.

Identifying the Vigilants was the first task. Constructing biographical information for each man would better acquaint me with the details of life in Charleston in the months leading up


30 Charleston Mercury, December 12, 1860.
to disunion. The circumstances of the formation of the military company, the reasons why these particular men stepped forward would unfold. Buried beneath a mountain of worthless information, I assumed, the answers waited, glittering. Dig, and I would find my treasure. Which is to say that I planned to lick the problem I had posed just as most historians do most of the time. Soon I was beaver ing away at city directories and tax lists, census records and manuscripts, piecing together the odd facts of 112 men’s lives. My files, my confidence and, I thought, my knowledge grew with each day’s labor. Soon the mystery would be solved.

Then Walter Steele showed up. In no sense did I intend to cross his path. Each day, as part of my research, I read a few issues of Charleston’s newspapers for the period: the radical Mercury, the commercial-minded Courier, the often-pandering Evening News, and others. Three or four generations ago, when southern manuscript archives were yet in their infancy, scholars like Ulrich Phillips and Avery Craven became masters at using newspapers to understand political developments. Now everyone gleans good quotes or colorful details from the online search engines they click through, but few bother to study a body of newspapers in extenso. Too many pages, too much “irrelevant” information to sift! It strains the eye and breaks the back. When scholars face an embarrassment of riches in terms of manuscript evidence, delving deeply into newspapers often seems pointlessly difficult, bootless, career-killing.

I do enjoy searching for needles in haystacks, though, and poring over a few pages each day—long before those pages showed up online—revealed much about Tupper’s company I might otherwise have missed. It was exciting to see the disunionist cause gaining strength and confidence, and I delighted in the details of daily life I came across. Part of that fun was sharing with friends the quaint advertisements in each issue of the Courier or Mercury. We would recite the menus of turtle soup, Boston halibut, and mutton chops eateries like the French Coffee House
or Burn and Davis’ Charleston Restaurant offered. We considered the benefits of Peruvian Syrup, Colleton Bitters, Sand’s Sarsaparilla, or Dr. Eaton’s Infantile Cordial for our various ills. “Death to Cockroaches!” we exclaimed when one located the heroic headline Van Schaak and Grierson’s drugstore (“at the Sign of the Negro and the Golden Mortar”) used to sell Adolph Isaacsen’s Genuine Electric Powder. The humor helped pass the time as I turned the pages.31

But time and again, when friends were gone, Walter Steele kept popping up. Every few issues, a new advertisement for “Steele’s Hat Hall,” located on fashionable King Street, appeared in one newspaper or another. Children’s hats and caps, straw plantation hats, men’s dress and casual hats in a score of styles—Steele hawked them in summer and winter, in tiny corner notices and eye-catching displays, always joined to a persuasive and witty come-on. I began to look forward to each pitch as a little reward to myself, if not to my labors. Then I came upon Steele and Company’s ad in the Mercury of October 5, 1860, short weeks before Lincoln’s election. “Politics! Chess! Hats!!” its headline announced, weaving together the topics to entice readers toward a purchase.

IF WE DWELL ONLY UPON HATS, WE MAY TIRE YOU, so we will mingle one with the other, and if we eventually succeed in selling you one of our finest HATS for FOUR DOLLARS, it will repay us for the trouble of writing, help us pay the printer for setting up the type, and end in harmony. We all know, or should know, that Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Trigonometry, and Conic Sections are branches of Mathematics. Mathematicians often bring forward suppositious cases to arrive at a just conclusion. We find politicians playing a four-handed game of political chess upon the chess-board of our common Uncle. A kind of “loose,” “consultation game,” where the players are arranged as follows: Messrs. LINCOLN and HAMLIN have the white men. Opposite to them are BELL and EVERETT, playing with pieces of uncertain and indescribable hue. BRECKINRIDGE and LANE, on the one hand, have the men black as an “Ethiop’s skin,” while squatted in front of them are DOUGLAS and JOHNSON, using pieces of a mixed color. In the legitimate

31 Leonard Mears and James Turnbull, comps., The Charleston Directory: Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, A Subscribers’ Business Directory, Street Map of the City, and an Appendix, of Much Useful Information (Charleston, 1859), 9, 58.
game, the persons sitting opposite to each other play as partners, but in this political game each party appears to be laboring for itself, while the real players are the “wire-pullers.” This game now playing may be called a double centre, counter gambit, and a very complicated game at that. But the game of Hat or no Hat is the game now being played at STEELE & CO.’S “Hat Hall.” It is not a head and tail game, it is “all head.” Put down $4, and you win the Hat—no betting, no “wire-pulling.”

I was baffled. If the point was to sell hats, why ramble on about politics—and chess, of all things? Playfully manipulative as Steele was, he was no mad hatter. He expected readers to see in these things not disconnected entities but interrelated symbols freighted with political—and commercial—meaning. That was the trigonometric key to his talk. Such suppositious patter might yield a profitable connection, leading customers to 221 King Street, Steele’s Hat Hall. But, a century later, the link was lost. And if he aimed at some sort of wit, that missed me too. Confusion dispelled my pleasure.

And so I did, again, what most scholars in similar situations do most of the time. Seeing no immediate use for this document, I discounted it as trivial, odd, or simply irrelevant, and pushed ahead. I had no time to spare on foolishness.

But as I read on, Steele’s ad appeared day after day, and putting aside the puzzle it posed proved easier said than done. What did his strange triangulation mean? Could hats have anything to do with politics or chess in the minds of Steele’s readers? Was there really a mathematic to his pitch? Why trivialize politics at the height of national crisis by comparing it with a game, and why call that game chess, when Steele’s description of the game seemed nothing like chess? The seeming illogic whirled in my mind.

32 Charleston Mercury, October 5, 1860. “Double [center] counter [gambit]s” meant treachery to Southerners, though I did not know this then. The Reconciliation of the Unfortunate Quarrel between “Charlie of the South,” and his Brother Jonathan, “Away Down East.” A Dialogue in One Act, being a Sequel to the Poems and Responses of Charleston and her Satirists; (which, it is most fervently hoped will be the concluding Poem of the Series) (Charleston, 1848), 10.
“Intelligibility is a system of relationships,” the eminent Victorianist Walter Houghton promised. Was there then some connection here, however tenuous and convoluted, which seemed natural to Charlestonians in 1860? Could Steele’s spiel have been more than pure humbug? Politics, chess, hats, and the relations between them, I came to realize, might offer a new perspective on disunion in South Carolina if only I understood how Charlestonians viewed these connections. Seemingly trivial, unrelated details, they might in fact offer clues crucial to solving the problems I was grappling with.33

Call these “words of power,” as literary critic Northrop Frye denotes them, “conveying primarily the sense of forces and energies rather than analogues of physical[ity].”34 What then? Expressed as a question, that concession became both mystifying and worrisome: what did politics, chess, and hats, and the dynamics between them have to do with—mean to—the men who became Vigilant Rifles? The moment I considered it thus, my tidy, contextualized collective biography began growing and transforming in directions I neither desired nor had anticipated. Quite unbidden, my project sprang to life.

Steele and his mathematicians were correct, I think: “suppositious cases” may indeed lead “to a just conclusion” here, if the peculiar principles of social geometry and cultural accounting which held sway in Charleston can be delineated. That is a very big “if.” “Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears,” the novelist Italo Calvino reminds us, “even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.” We must especially resist discounting that warning, tracing out a satisfying, neat, functionalist history “too probable to be real.” Teasing out


metaphors rather than plunking down models is vexing labor, but it is the only work historians are really fitted for.\textsuperscript{35} If any consider my analysis in these pages messy, implausible, frustrating, I have sometimes strained to let it be so. The past is just like that.

Here, though, let me mitigate mess by sketching some big themes of this long study in short order. Secession, I argue, was not a coordinated movement which swept across the South, dominated by anything like a united cabal, party, plan, or ideology. In Charleston—oddly and crucially the “ground zero” of disunion—it was not even the central goal of the men who ultimately accomplished it. Rather, disunion there was driven by a series of discrete, disconnected events performed at street level, focused on asserting internal unity, nearly all of which accomplished nothing practical, except to close off avenues of political retreat until, finally, the mousetrap snapped. Come 1860, it was Charleston’s manifold troubling social contradictions which drove disunion forward. So it was not men with a history of political extremism or a strong stake in slavery who propelled the separatist movement, but rather young, single, unpropertied men—clerks, mostly—usually with no stake in slavery who took the leading role, often unwittingly or unwillingly.

The complex, intersecting reasons for this vanguard status can be summed up in the triangulation of fear, honor, and interest. White, male Charlestonians—particularly those of the \textit{petit bourgeoisie}—came especially to fear each other, their own shortcomings, and their future prospects for political unity and economic prosperity. They were anxious to behave honorably at the hour of crisis, performing masculinity properly before their fellows, not least to avoid being pointed out as the true source of crisis. They recognized that marching in parades, serenading, wearing cockades, and other public demonstrations worked doubly to their interest. Whether

secession succeeded or not, these men were determined to be seen as having performed their part correctly as patriots, not foot-draggers. This was, in many ways, a revolution driven by social conformity, enacted by the most conservative segment of Charleston’s population, aiming ultimately at something quite other than disunion itself.

Tracing out the origins, permutations, and consequences of fear, honor, and interest through the precise and peculiar meanings of politics, chess, and hats, this study shows how the events of 1860 drew upon a host of other aspects of social contradiction in antebellum Charleston, stretching back across three decades: the conflict between honor and respectability, the corrupt and divided nature of local politics, the aggressive cult of chivalry and chess mania, the political economy of hats, and the voluntarist hyper-masculinity of firefighting culture. The same men—nearly all of them heretofore unstudied and of apparently minor importance appear again and again in these various snapshots of contradiction and crisis, changing clothes, transferring memberships, shifting allegiances, inching the Queen City imperceptibly toward the tipping point. Careful study of clues within and between these incidents casts up commonalities and slippages that, cumulatively, offer a microhistory of the coming of the Civil War that is utterly new, richly human, and quite confounding.

A short word, too, on method: some will see this study as an example of the not-so-“New Cultural History” formerly in vogue, although never so much among Americanists. Yet I hope it goes a little farther than that. My attitude toward that estimable scholarship is rather like Huck Finn’s complaint about the widow’s cooking. There was nothing wrong with it, “only everything was cooked by itself.”

In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better.36

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36 Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (London, 1994), 11-12. Ethnohistorian Henry Glassie makes Huck’s point a bit more precisely: “I begin with texts, then weave contexts around them to make them meaningful,
That is the best kind of theory I can offer here. Searching for meanings that people, places, objects, and events held for actors in the past has become almost paint-by-numbers in recent decades. Few have considered how meanings intersect, how cultural grammars influenced (and were influenced by) social and political dynamics. I aim here to sketch a contrapuntal history in the same way pianist and social analyst Glenn Gould hoped to render the contradictions inherent in cultural geography.\(^{37}\) How Charlestonians struggled with the tensions between the elements considered in these pages, how that struggle led to Civil War, is the contextual problem I aim to resolve.

That the relations between these elements are serendipitous and contrived, contingent and artificial, there is no denying. Steele posited only supposititious connections between politics, chess, and hats. It is I who link those to the process of disunion directly. Still, I hope this interpretive essay will not be read simply as an arbitrary I-say.\(^{38}\) Many questions examined here are impossible to answer with anything more than the educated guess I call deep empiricism. Many gaps in the record remain where only conjecture is possible. Yet I do not see these as failures of research or flaws of method. We cannot really as historians tromp through the past to make life comprehensible.” Henry Glassie, *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: The Culture and History of an Ulster Community* (Philadelphia, 1982), xvi. Cf. Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley, 1989); Victoria Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley, 1999).


\(^{38}\) My analytic strategy here rests on the notion of wit as a “playful judgment,” anything but trivial, striving to “unearth something hidden and concealed.” The crux of wit, Freud emphasizes, is that “new and unexpected identities are here formed which show themselves in relations of ideas to one another, in relations of definitions to each other, or to a common third.” Sigmund Freud, *Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (London, 1916), esp. 6, 11, 90. Those familiar with the concept of “lateral thinking” will recognize this as an example of “provocation.” Edward De Bono, *Six Thinking Hats* (London, 1990), esp. 135-169.
gathering up evidence for our arguments like so much firewood. At best, I think, we can spy upon the past, overhearing schemes, weighing silences, trailing ambiguities, gathering clues. This microhistory is intended as a compassionate and faithful part of that broader cross-cultural task.

These are not, in the end, such strange ideas. For hundreds of years, learned men and women have understood the phenomena of *camera obscura*: by cutting a small hole in the wall of a blacked-out room or compartment, the view outside is projected upon the opposite wall. These drawing tools supplied the model for the first cameras, but were also effective weapons of espionage, and by the eighteenth century were often disguised as books. This work follows in that tradition. Like the first photographers who captivated Victorians with new notions of art and new ways of seeing, in this study I have struggled to compose a “picture from nature.” My success, if any there be, comes despite my best efforts. While I was beating the bushes for customers to photograph, the Vigilant Rifles strolled into my studio unbidden. I posed them for a group portrait, yet, as the results show, there was no suppressing individual peculiarities. And

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the backdrop for their picture—Steele’s enigmatic headline—was chosen neither by me nor by them, though some critics might accuse each of influencing the other. 41

The final product, still dark with shadows and hazy around the edges, is only a crude daguerreotype of one corner of secession and a few of the men who made it, frozen at a particular moment in time. Whether the picture presented here is a true mirror of nature, others must judge. But sometimes, as I have already argued, the unanticipated may offer a clue to verisimilitude. By that standard, I am a fortunate detective-daguerreotypist indeed, for Sam Tupper and his men and their world came out looking unlike anything I had ever expected.

PART ONE:
THE CITADEL BESIEGED

Generally I am opposed to painting which is concerned with conceptions of simplicity. Everything looks very busy to me.

Jasper Johns, 1959

Fear, honor, and interest went hand-in-hand in antebellum Charleston. The connections between them were by no means natural or unconflicted, yet they formed a triad unmistakable to all who walked the city’s streets. They shaped all aspects of life in the slaveholders’ citadel and drove it toward secession in 1860. The sign of their conjuncture was the blue cockade.

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CHAPTER ONE:
ENVISIONING CHARLESTON

Charleston was founded in 1670 at the tip of the low, sandy peninsula where, as natives say, the Ashley and Cooper Rivers meet to form the Atlantic Ocean. It has always been that kind of place. The unplanned offspring of a risky commercial venture launched by the Earl of Shaftesbury and assorted partners, the city prospered quickly. By the 1720s, plantation agriculture was flourishing in the hinterland, and a lucrative deerskin trade yielded to still more profitable commerce in rice, indigo, timber, and slaves. The region’s warm, wet climate made it “the pisspot of the World” for at least one colonist, but the same winds and currents which brought annoying rain showered welcome trade on the town.¹

Then as now, Charleston was pre-eminently a “sea-drinking” city. For ships carrying European wares or African slaves to the West Indies, the quickest route of return eastward meant following the Gulf Stream north and catching trade winds off the Carolina coast. Charleston merchants capitalized on that imperative, scooping up unsold goods at bargain prices and marketing the colony’s crops as cargo for the voyage back. Local artisans refurbished ships, grocers stocked them with provisions, and taverns amused their crews. On this basis, a proud culture of parvenu aristocrats gained the wherewithal to deny its grubby origins. Soon the sons of former traders and slave-drivers were sneering at rural rabble and urban moneychangers alike. By 1800, with the first cotton crops trundling down the new State Road to swell the profits of trade, Charleston had become the fifth largest city in the United States, numbering 8,800 whites,

950 free blacks, and more than nine thousand slaves collected in four wards. Shaftesbury’s gamble had paid off handsomely.²

But already the city’s star was on the wane. For elite Charleston, the nineteenth century came to seem a great ghastly error. Culturally, the gentry’s achievement toppled into excess. John C. Calhoun himself claimed in 1807 that the fires and epidemics which plagued Charlestonians were signs of God’s “curse for their intemperance and debaucheries.”³ Certain there was reason for divine displeasure, then and thereafter. Politically, too, the Age of Revolution played poorly in the townhouses of merchants and slaveholders. Charleston’s men of rank and status could never quite master their “disposition to treat all mankind in the same manner they have been used to treat their Negroes,” one Yankee noted. They suffered endlessly under the humiliation of changed times, especially once the rural hoi polloi snatched away the rod of government, shifting the state capital a hundred miles north to a clearing at the forks of the Congaree called Columbia. Economically, the close of the transatlantic slave trade, the development of steam navigation, and the rise of New York to supremacy as a commercial and financial entrepôt reduced the Queen City of the South to a colonial outpost, easily bypassed on


the road to riches. The chosen seemed nearly forgot. Below Broad Street, the antebellum era became one long, vain struggle to retrieve past glories.⁴

For others, though, this Charleston was a place of promise in a time of rising expectations. While Pinckneys and Rutledges and Lowndeses moped about the good times gone, new men were climbing to the seats of power: close-calculating merchants like Ker Boyce and Henry Gourdin, shrewd bankers and money men like George Trenholm, Frank Elmore, and Moses Mordecai, crafty lawyers like Andy Magrath and Bill Porter. The story of Henry Workman Conner’s ascent reads like a bourgeois fable. Straggling into Charleston from the hills of North Carolina in 1822, he parlayed a small inheritance into a thriving mercantile business, investing heavily in commercial real estate and loaning out profits at interest. He wound up at the head of the South Carolina Railroad, the Charleston Gas Light Company, and the Bank of Charleston, with a string of other ventures percolating along in the southwest. More warming still was Kit Memminger’s rise. An immigrant boy lifted from the Charleston Orphan House by Governor Tom Bennett in the 1810s, he became a leading lawyer, a powerful legislator, a friend to reform, and a very wealthy man.⁵ Such examples could not but inspire middle-class Charleston with “the glad spirit of enterprise” so typical of Victorian optimism. For Jasper Adams, President of the College of Charleston, the “Characteristics of the Present Century”

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seemed cheering indeed: “the enlargement of man’s dominion over physical nature,” “the cultivation and advancement of the sciences,” the expansion of Christian civilization through colonization, “with all its renovating, purifying, and elevating influences,” the growth of “civil and religious freedom,” and--most encouraging--the upsurge in efforts to improve “the moral and spiritual welfare of Mankind.” With luck and pluck, any decent white man might win out, to the benefit of all. Men like Adams were profoundly Victorian, enamored of progress and “healthful” reform, little moved by the complaints of traditionalists committed to struggle against the currents of the age.⁶

Charleston’s new men congratulated themselves on the high principles harnessed to common sense which elevated their city and carried them to positions of wealth and prominence.

“Charleston is a salubrious city,” Thomas Logan declared in 1836,

possessed of a delightful climate, and blessed by an uncommon share of health.… We suffer under no intolerant religion, and are now exempt from the withering effects of civil discord. Our laws are just and wholesome, and we have the executive to enforce them. Our people are honest and moral—our slaves contented and happy. Let our industry then be as unbounded as our ambition, and armed with the motto of our State—Animis Opibusque Parati—we must prosper.

Those who did not seize their chances could not complain of being left behind. The old elite had made Charleston a place of luxury, extravagance and corruption. Its new masters determined to shape the Holy City in their own image: striving, measured, realistic, purposeful.⁷

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Gaining an understanding of this special place on the eve of the Civil War, recovering the textures of life, and the temper of the times, is not easy a hundred and fifty years later. To appreciate the affective power which undergirded antebellum social relations, we must fix Charleston in our mind’s eye, seeing its allusions, boasts, silences, myths, and prophecies as contemporaries did. We need to understand how they looked at the city and what they saw, what connections they made between the elements their vision abstracted from the social gestalt, and what those subjective links in turn may reveal about Charleston culture and society. No simple task, but without it the past dissolves into distorted shapes and sensations, mirroring merely our own whims, needs, and prejudices.8

Charleston in 1860 declared itself visually through a welter of conflicting, contentious signs.9 Each hinted at meaning and inflected the sense of symbols around it, yet ultimately each relied on viewers to decode its significance. Silently, only half-consciously at best, observers mapped the terrain they encountered by a constant, intricate process of triangulation, selecting one point and interpreting its meaning by reference to another element, real or ideal, present or absent, and to their relation to these sittings.10

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10 Note especially Alberti’s words: “The first thing to know is that a point is a sign which one might say is not divisible into parts. I call a sign anything which exists on a surface so that it is visible to the eye.” Leon Battista Alberti, On Painting (Harmondsworth, 1991), 37. Good starting points on signs and semiotic theory are Thomas A. Sebeok, Sign: An Introduction to Semiotics (Toronto, 1994); Geoffrey Broadbent, “A Plain Man’s Guide to the
Triangulation was a central consequence of the rediscovery of perspective, the epoch-making revolution in Western vision which defined the Renaissance, rationalism, and all that is modern.\textsuperscript{11} Scholars still debate why fifteenth-century Europeans shifted from a two-dimensional view of the world which understood social order in terms of an imprecise verticality—the incalculable distance the mass of peasants and burghers stood from the throne and, more importantly, from heaven and hell—to one which gave depth and measurability to the world they saw.\textsuperscript{12} That remarkable change in perception produced a new interpretation of geography, art and architecture, personhood, politics, and social relations, which we have come to call realistic.\textsuperscript{13} The ability to figure the position of an object in relation to two known points allowed the construction of maps of all types, yielding an accuracy, finitude, self-confidence, and sense of history two-dimensional man lacked utterly. The first fruits of perspective transformed the social order. Improved gunnery techniques against fortifications revolutionized warfare and urban life. Better tools for marine navigation heightened the profits and possibilities of trade and conquest. New methods of surveying land recast property relations, making claims of private ownership fixed and enforceable. Such practical opportunities in turn gave rise to a formidable theoretical literature on the science of triangulation and its abstract cousin, cryptography. By


1860, the subtle method underlying these technical secrets had become second nature to the man in the street. He viewed the world with a measuring gaze.\textsuperscript{14} By such constant, questioning, near automatic labor of memory and imagination, Charlestonians and outsiders decoded where they were, discovered where they had been, decided where they were headed. More important still, they confronted who they had become, where they belonged, and where their allegiances lay.\textsuperscript{15}

Situating oneself thus, and understanding the circumstances of that situation, requires an existential continuity our own age has largely lost. Change now comes so swiftly and unexpectedly from so many directions as to appear almost random and incomprehensible. Life in antebellum Charleston moved briskly, too, in comparison with earlier generations, and the growing complexity of the age hints at origins of our contemporary crisis of disconnectedness and intellectual vertigo.\textsuperscript{16} Still, men believed themselves rooted by reason and sensation in time, space, and relation to God, trusting their ability to comprehend their environment and shape their circumstances to a degree we can scarcely grasp.\textsuperscript{17} “Do we not live in a wonderful age of the


\textsuperscript{15} Gombrich argues that this process of triangulation, which he calls articulation through schema and correction, is the inborn basis of culture and civilization. That is a point at the heart of Erving Goffman’s brilliant work. Erving Goffman, Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior (New York, 1967), 149-270; idem, Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Social Order (New York, 1971); idem, “The Interaction Order,” American Sociological Review, 48 (1983): 1-17.


\textsuperscript{17} So, for example, Nathaniel Middleton pointed toward “Duty, God, Heaven,” as proper, attainable goals for young Charlestonians, declaring that “[i]t is intended that we should go forward to perfection.” Nathaniel R. Middleton,
world?” William Wightman asked eagerly in 1832. “The stage of passing events is crowded with grand and thrilling circumstances.” To his eye, it was a drama of enlightenment and progress being enacted. Like most men and women, antebellum Charlestonians believed that they perceived their world clearly. We must strain—and guess—to glimpse what they thought they saw and grasp what that image meant to them.\textsuperscript{18}

Stand on the northeast corner of Meeting Street, where it crosses Broad to form the famous “Four Corners of Law,” and walk a short block up to Chalmers (Map 1.1). Before you is a reddish brick-and-stucco structure three stories high, graced with elegant pillars, ornamental ironwork and a coppered roof. Tourists pass it by each day, and recognize it as a sign of something left by those who walked these streets long ago.\textsuperscript{19} As in 1860, the name of the sign is the Fireproof Building, and, sure enough, the building looks fireproof. It isn’t, but that goes not very far toward revealing the meaning of this symbol. We have stood on other street corners, seen other buildings, and perhaps some reputedly fireproof as well, without gaining much insight here. “There is nothing so undignified and mocking of the past as hindsight,” historian Greg Dening observes. Here the past mocks us back, appropriately, with silence.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{18} William M. Wightman to Whitefoord Smith, May 23, 1832, William May Wightman Papers, SCL. This transformation of “space” into “place” is well described in Yi-Fu Tuan, \textit{Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience} (Minneapolis, 1977); \textit{The Collected Essays of Asa Briggs}, 3 vols. (Urbana, 1985), 1: 87-105.


In 1860, though, this structure fairly shouted its story to passersby. Charleston had been ravaged by fire over and over again. It was a constant threat and inevitable scourge, reshaping the city’s culture and economy. Erected in the 1820s as a storehouse for state records—a sop thrown to the lowcountry elite, when the capital migrated to the midlands—the Fireproof Building anchored conservative aspiration at Charleston’s core. The scepter of power, it announced, still resided here, and might yet be restored officially. From its steps, the principles of state rights were declared in the days of nullification. In its shadow, Charleston gathered in 1850 to mourn the fallen Calhoun, and to cheer those who claimed his mantle in defense of their peculiar institution. The repository of Carolinian memory, its windows looked down upon countless parades and rallies, speeches, and riots too, played out across three decades. All these meanings and more came flooding upon Charlestonians as they pursued their daily business past its doors.²¹

Walk north on Meeting a few steps and gaze across to where a stately pillared building stands back from the street, gleaming white. Adorned with what one Briton called “the usual Greek-Yankee portico,” it boasts the marks of a classic marble temple. But the look is overearnest and the structure is sandstone. Now mostly a site for wedding receptions and social galas, it is yet called the Hibernian Hall. The crownless harp on a field of green painted on the lintel, along with the date “1840,” plus the sturdy iron fence enclosing the building hint at its radical original purposes, yet today such clues are opaque. On the eve of secession, though, the varied allusions of this symbol were hard to miss. The classical, towering building bespoke the

presence of the city’s Irish minority--sizeable, vocal, impoverished, and growing--and its quest for social acceptance. Formed as a secret society in the North in the mid-1830s to protect Catholic churches and promote Irish freedom, the complicated politics and ambitions of the Ancient Order of Hibernians presented itself most distinctively through the signs of its Charleston temple. The Irish “do much hard work here,” William Russell allowed when gazing upon its massive Ionic columns in 1861.22 There were lesser structures--taverns and shanties and whores’ cribs, too--which also connoted the Irish scattered about the wards. But the Hibernian Hall sought to portray a different face of those oft-despised immigrants: united, respectable, determined not to be swept away. It declared that the waves of disease and ethnic and class conflict which shook northern cities in the wake of Paddy’s coming might be avoided here, with care and planning, or unleashed to wreck the work of generations. Those alternatives, and that building which seemed to encapsulate them, focused Charleston politics in the mid-1850s when the American Party, popularly called Know-Nothings, rose up to send the Irish and German Catholic scum back from whence it came. By 1860, that strife was old news, but still declared itself from these walls. Few could gaze upon them without the pangs of memory suddenly recovered.23


Pass up the street a few steps more, just south of Queen, and consider the tall, squarish building on the left. It looks like the sort of hotel tourists with children avoid: solid, compact, elderly, and expensive. It was and is the Mills House, though the descendants of Otis Mills have long since left the scene. Almost never does the significance of that name spark a glimmer for travelers who cross its threshold these days: *sic transit gloria mundi.* By 1860, Mills’ house had replaced the grandiose Charleston Hotel and more exclusive digs like Jones’ Hotel on Broad Street as the residence of choice for travelers. If Charleston had a crossroads with the world beyond its borders—and the world of trouble it faced—surely it was here.

Across earlier decades, troubling smaller sites had suggested darkening political prospects. At his death in 1833, Jehu Jones had symbolized the alarming growth of a “third class” of free blacks in Charleston. A skilful tailor, Jones bought his freedom in 1798, and three decades later the alchemy of ambition, elite patronage, and the wit to know when to doff one’s hat had vaulted the ex-slave into the warm shadows of Charleston’s elite. Reckoned a “worthy and respectable member of Society” by Governor John Lyde Wilson himself, Jones could brag of his successful hotel and properties, a faintly honored family, and five slaves to boot. Seeing the likes of Jones and his kin hob-knobbing with notables like Henry Gourdin, Tristam Tupper, and Alfred Huger helped fuel strife between workingmen and commercial types in the 1840s. A generation later, Jones’ descendants had squandered his estate and lost the mortgage on his

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24 Or, properly speaking, the threshold of its replica: the original Mills House was torn down and rebuilt in the 1960s, fiberglass replacing terra cotta, modern plumbing commanding modern prices. Jonathan H. Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City’s Architecture* (Columbia, 1997), 189-190.

hotel.\textsuperscript{26} But for Charleston’s white mechanics, the problem free people of color posed seemed to swell with each passing year. By 1860, they numbered nearly one in five of the city’s black population, stealing jobs (as whites saw it), carousing in the main streets, threatening the superiority of whiteness itself. That threat came clear anytime the ruling race went strolling: strutting slaves who would not “give the wall” to their superior forced him into the dirt, socially as well as physically. How much worse, from that filthy standpoint, to see still wealthier blacks wheeling by oblivious in fine carriages, many built by the local Jewish manufacturer Moses Nathan.\textsuperscript{27}

Such everyday insults, imagined slights, and small social dramas transformed sites like the Mills House into citadels under siege. This was a space teeming with blacks, yet controlled by whites for whites, a middle ground not just to house strangers and visitors, but to test them too, a place to ferret out traitors and abolitionists waiting to complete the bloody work John Brown had begun at Harper’s Ferry the year before. Time has erased all traces, but in 1860 Otis Mills’ hotel was the scene of radical celebrations, speeches, and serenades. On the night Fort Sumter fell, crowds gathered beneath its windows to hear Governor Frank Pickens foretell the


Confederacy’s triumph. Here stands a once powerful symbol of enterprise, danger, and manly resolve, today transposed to a charmingly anesthetic commercial key.28

Cross Queen and head north half a block to the modern granite building with the small, squarish windows, a bank perhaps. There is no sign now of what this spot once meant, save a metal plaque affixed near eye level. Even this icon, easily missed, fails to inform passersby that the South Carolina Institute for the Promotion of Art, Mechanical Ingenuity, and Industry once stood upon this ground, bracketed by the Circular Congregational Church and Nicholas Fehrenbach’s “Teetotal Restaurant.” Tourists do not stick around here long. The three-story Italianate hall which was the progressive showplace of antebellum Charleston was destroyed by fire in December, 1861. From its construction in 1853, the Institute represented the city’s attempt to revitalize South Carolina’s economy, linking town and countryside, farmers, workers, merchants and manufacturers under a banner of common purpose. It sponsored lectures to nurture a “native mechanic class” and exhibitions to display the fruits of southern industry, aiming to broaden the state’s horizons beyond agriculture—and, some worried, beyond slavery, too. Here a new, strikingly bourgeois gospel took shape, a doctrine of northern fortunes resting on southern toil, of self-directed change and progress, the strength of unity, and the daring required to accomplish such a revolution. Carolinians must do more than grow and ship cotton

for their masters in Europe and the North, reformers argued: they must emancipate themselves.\textsuperscript{29} Certainly those allusions gathered round the men and women who came to Institute Hall—renamed “Secession Hall” a week before the fact—on December 20, 1860, to watch their leaders sign the Ordinance they had prepared, declaring South Carolina an independent republic. In that moment, they believed they knew more fully who they were and what they were doing because of where they had sited themselves.\textsuperscript{30}

In both presence and absence, then, these buildings were and are not just piles of stone, wood, and glass, but narratives embedded within structures, encrypted statements, questions, admonitions, promises, fantasies, fears and warnings, competing, blending, clashing, each making demands upon the observer.\textsuperscript{31} The elongated spires of St. John and St. Finbar’s Cathedral on Broad Street—gone today—or Grace Episcopal Church on Wentworth did not merely point toward a home in heaven. With millennial zeal, they urged those who gazed upon them to incline toward God, rejecting other loyalties. Eyes turned skyward, Charlestonians


\textsuperscript{30} Charleston Mercury, December 14, 1860. Cf. [Robert B. Rhett], The Address of the People of South Carolina Assembled in Convention to the People of the Slaveholding States (Charleston, 1860).

\textsuperscript{31} As Kenneth Ames notes, material objects such as buildings are both texts and more than texts: they are things. In this sense, their presence within the spectrum of what Sartre calls the “practico-inert” is both more dynamic and more material than that of “mere” words. Kenneth L. Ames, Death in the Dining Room, and Other Tales of Victorian Culture (Philadelphia, 1992), 3; Jean-Paul Sartre, Search for a Method (New York, 1968), 155-159, 173; idem, Critique of Dialectical Reason, vol.1: Theory of Practical Ensembles (London, 1971), 79-341. Marx made the same objection to discourse theory a century and a half earlier. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets (Moscow, 1976).
might overlook (if not escape) their sinful city. All symbols work that way, testing identities, trying allegiances.\(^{32}\)

Taken individually and collectively, too, these signs served as props and stage and chorus for an unfolding drama of urban life. There was no independence of thought or action, no individuality \textit{per se} so long as one stood within this theater. There was no exit either:

gravestones are powerful symbols, especially in a place so devoted to ancestor worship.\(^{33}\) At every moment, Charlestonians confronted countless other signs and emblems. “Actions, appearances, and artifacts,” scholars tell us, “all carry symbolic significance.” A greeting, a clothing style, a flag, a cup of tea, the beat of a drum, the tilt of a head may disclose meaning about relations of power, status, order, loyalty and inclusion, the deepest hopes and fears a community shares. In Charleston, men and women responded to the incessant prompting of the world around them as best they could, following the instruction of their elders, patterning actions after peers and superiors, reading from the fragments of script they carried, constantly improvising. We should not complain that they did not do differently. People see, after all, only what they are prepared to see, culturally and psychologically, translating vision to words and


words to deeds. Ultimately, Charlestonians in 1860 did what they did because they saw what they saw.\(^{34}\)

What, then, did they see? Proceeding as we have, meandering down Meeting Street for a block or two, helps focus the problem at hand, but is ultimately misleading. Nobody simply landed in the Four Corners and went a-strolling. They followed, rather, a trail of clues leading from the city’s edge inward. So must we. There were three ways of coming to Charleston in the fall of 1860. Each revealed a different face of a complex, divided city. Each showed visitors a society shaped by merchant capital and gripped by political radicalism. Everywhere newcomers confronted the open hand of commerce and the suspicious gaze of the zealot. Everywhere was the blue cockade.

CHAPTER TWO:
WAYWARD LOYALTIES

Approached by sea, antebellum Charleston presented visitors with a series of memorable and forbidding scenes quite unlike the peaceful, cheery landscapes contemporary artists painted. In John William Hill’s 1850 lithograph, Charleston was White Point Gardens and mansions lining the Battery, broad Meeting Street sprinkled with carriages and couples taking the air, sailboats scudding along the shore. The “bird’s-eye view” the artist took consciously mingled realism with a more fanciful perspective, promising verisimilitude yet both exaggerating and suppressing details. The wharves and warehouses which crowded the city’s eastern edge are barely visible in Hill’s picture. The shipping which was Charleston’s raison d’être is pushed to the margins. No plume of smoke rises from the railroads, foundries and factories concentrated north of the city market: they are wholly invisible here. Stare hard at the center of the image, just above the Four Corners, and a procession of some sort stands out, though what it portends remains uncertain. There is no bustle or throng in these streets. All is measured, tranquil, and bathed in the light of a cloudless sky. The scene is an oversized tourist postcard, advertising a seaside neverland.

It was an idealized image local elites strove to cultivate, a comforting illusion of wealth and ease uncomplicated by commerce or production which northern and foreign visitors parroted endlessly in the travel accounts they penned. Charleston was “quite a bandbox city,” the actor Louis Tasistro declared, “so neat, spruce, and new-looking, one might suppose it just taken,

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ready-cut, out of the quarry.” Touring Charleston in 1854, the British aristocrat Clara Bromley especially approved its “wide, clean, and airy” streets. A year later, Lillian Foster admired the “retirement” and “repose” of the city’s houses, “which makes them look more like the splendid palaces of opulence and rank, surrounded by the gardens of fashion, than the habitations of a commercial city.” Even the abolitionist James Redpath could not resist Charleston’s “thoroughly English appearance and construction, its old-time customs, its genial climate.”

Charlestonians were “a very social, kind, happy people,” considered Boston’s Louisa Minot, “and do not nail themselves down the whole day to business… which makes them better & less sordid than we are at the North.” Theirs was a “town built for gentlemen,” novelist Nathaniel Parker Willis agreed; “its streets are walked by gentlemen who look tranquilly noble, and its drives are graced by ladies who sit in their carriages with the air of princesses at leisure.” Charleston’s merchants seemed positively blithe. “There was very little business doing among the cotton brokers and shippers,” one Briton navigating East Bay Street noted in 1849, “but as they all stood at the doors of their counting-houses with their hands in their pockets and discoursed quite playfully of bad times, or criticized Mr. So and So’s brilliant Madeira, and made up little parties for the coming races, I began to draw conclusions as to how they would conduct themselves in prosperity.” These travelers saw a Charleston which was slow-moving, “quaint,” “antique,” but all the more precious for its complacency.

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example of selective vision: true enough as far as they go, but divested of unpalatable elements, connections and contexts to shape a more soothing meaning. The realm of production was banished from view here, dynamics of exchange reduced to the pleasures of shopping. Charlestonians became modern-day lotus-eaters, drifting in a dream world of effortless consumption. For footsore tourists who gawk along below Broad, cameras and guidebooks at the ready, Charleston still looks much this way.

The view was quite different from the deck of the *James Adger*, a three-masted side-wheeler plying between New York and Charleston every four and a half days. Steaming down the main ship channel toward Charleston’s inner harbor, passengers watched the low wooded shoreline of Morris Island slip by to the south as they crossed the bar (Map 2.1). Looming in front of them, the waterfront seemed a maze of mighty fortifications. To starboard, as they approached Sullivan’s Island, the “frowning batteries” of Fort Moultrie came into view, “bristling with heavy cannon.” To port, the citadel of Fort Sumter, only just completed, rose up “like a battlemented cloud” in the middle of the harbor. The *Adger* came about into the south channel, following its pilot boat, and slowed to avoid the flotilla of small craft perched off James Island near Fort Johnson. As they drew near land at last, the mansions of the Battery and East Bay Street swung briefly into view, but newcomers would have been more impressed by the


5 On the *James Adger*, see *Charleston Courier*, October 15, 1856 (when she ran aground near Castle Pinckney), January 24, 1859, September 14, 1860; *Charleston Mercury*, November 14, 1860 (when she collided with and sank another schooner).
Source: Albert B. Hart and Herbert E. Bolton, eds., *American History Atlas Adapted from the Large Wall Maps* (Chicago, 1930), Map A15 inset.
fortress of Castle Pinckney looming off the starboard rail at the tip of Shute’s Folly Island. This Charleston was prepared to defend itself against intruders.6

At first glance, there was little inviting about the city’s shoreline once the Battery had slipped away. Northward stretched a long row of stone and wooden wharves, twenty-nine in all, flanked and surmounted by a wall of massive warehouses. “The aspect of everything was very different from any seaport I had ever visited,” one sailor remembered of his first trip to Charleston in 1833. “It was cheerless in the extreme. The tall storehouses, their doors and window-shutters cas[ed] in iron, appeared to me like so many prisons.” Then, all the wharves except that of the shrewd Ulsterman Jimmy Adger were still stubby timber docks supporting rows of wooden sheds. Three decades later, the granite jetty old-timers remembered as “Adger’s folly” had been twinned and extended one hundred yards out into the bay and its owners hailed as “the Rothschilds of America.” All along its surface, imposing warehouses of brick and iron stood sentinel, ready for business. By the year of secession, replicas of Adger’s achievement and the bastions of commerce which crowned them had grown and multiplied up and down the harbor, “shut[ting] out the prospect of the ocean,” and casting an even deeper shadow across the port.7

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7 Cushing, Wild Oats Sowings, 90 (quote); “Answers to Queries,” June 29, 1833, William Ogilvy Papers, SCL; John C. Brown, A Hundred Years of Merchant Banking. A History of Brown Brothers and Company, Brown, Shipley and Company, and the Allied Firms... (New York, 1909), 257, 262 (second quote); John B. Adger, My Life and Times, 1810-1899 (Richmond, 1899), 36-37; Charles Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston (Charleston, 1842), 32; Charleston Mercury, September 25, 27, 28, 1858; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, September 4, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 12, 1860; Don H. Doyle, New Men, New Cities, New South: Atlanta, Nashville, Charleston, Mobile, 1860-1910 (Chapel Hill, 1990), 126.
As the ship came to dock at Adger’s South Wharf, near the foot of East Bay Street, passengers could see their anchorage crammed with vessels of every sort, swarming with activity. When the *James Adger* tied up early on September 14, 1860, the great commercial season was still weeks away. By late November, the harbor would be crowded with ocean-going steamers bound for New York, Liverpool, and Edinburgh, their holds packed full of cotton and rice. Wharves were piled high with the mountain of cotton a fleet of paddle-wheelers and smaller boats had gathered from inland market towns, and the pounding of the steam-powered presses merchants used to repack and compress their bales echoed across the city.⁸

By that time, Charleston’s stores and warehouses were already bursting with the wealth of manufactures the big ships brought from afar, and schooners and brigs from secondary ports like Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Boston were unloading all the finished goods Yankee wit and industry could devise, from wool and cotton textiles to pianos to pocket knives to washing machines. “[W]hat jim-crack can possibly be invented,” the Charleston jeweler-turned-industrialist William Gregg asked, “of which we are not the purchasers?”⁹ At this season, the answer was none. For planters and country storekeepers come to town, this was a time of celebration, the culmination of another year of work and worry. They would spend and count the cost another day. For those who orchestrated the great annual commercial carnival—the shopkeepers of King Street and the bankers of Broad, the hoteliers, barkeepers and restaurateurs, the fancy girls lingering behind lace curtains on Beresford Street and plying their wares more brazenly near the Market, the carriage drivers, porters, pickpockets, police, and the army of

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clerks who recorded every transaction within the bounds of decency, these brief weeks meant steady labor and, with luck, a fatter bank account at the end—or perhaps a new hat.

Yet even now the port hummed with activity. On the day before the Adger docked, there were thirty-five ships moored at the wharves along East Bay Street. Out in the harbor, the steamship Catawba, fresh from Havana, and the schooner Fame, bound for Maine, lay at anchor. The British schooner Wren, too, en route from Jamaica to New York, waited out quarantine for sickness. Yellow fever was a constant threat, killing over six hundred people in 1854 alone, and city officials took no chances. Before sunset, three other ships departed Charleston and six arrived to take their places. At Adger’s South Wharf, opposite fashionable Tradd Street, the nine hundred-ton Marion, one of the Adger’s three sister ships, was loading for its run to New York two days hence. To the south, clustered around Vanderhorst’s Wharf, were two massive ships and three two-masters, each capable of carrying more than one hundred tons of freight. Nearing 1100 tons, Ravenel and Company’s Mackinaw towered over every vessel nearby, save John Fraser’s 1265-ton Eliza Bonsall, moored at Central Wharf. Just returned from Liverpool, both awaited fresh cargo. Alongside the Mackinaw, the 868-ton Emma was busy loading cotton consigned for the mills of Manchester. Around Brown and Hyams’ schooner E. D.

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10 This discussion is drawn from information in Charleston Courier, September 12-14, 1860. See also “Charleston and Her Steam Marine,” De Bow’s Review, 25 (1858): 100-101; Ships’ Manifests, 1857-1860, in Series 7.2: Records of the Office of the Collector of Customs, Charleston, South Carolina, Record Group 365: Records of the Department of the Treasury, NA.


12 By December, a second Emma was servicing the Georgetown rice trade. This schooner was “the first vessel ever launched” under the Palmetto flag. Charleston Mercury, December 2, 1860.
McClenahan and the brigs John Bell and Heyward, owned by the commission merchants Poujaud and Salas, crews and dockworkers sweated to make ready for the outward voyage. Rice and Yankee finished goods were loading into the holds of each, bound for Cuba and the Antilles.¹³

Beside the Marion, at Adger’s North Wharf, the schooner John Roe was readying for New York, as was the 390-ton Theodore D. Wagner, moored at Boyce and Company’s landing just beyond.¹⁴ Next to the Wagner, the schooner Frederick Nickerson and the brig Tanner were unloading New York cargoes while the Lilly prepared for the trip back to Boston. Stretching from South Atlantic Wharf opposite Unity Alley to the State Wharf at the foot of Pinckney Street, the same scenes were repeated over and over: the 1165-ton steamship South Carolina loading for Boston at Accommodation Wharf; the Industria, a Spanish bark of five hundred tons, fresh from Malaga, anchored at the flourishing warehouses of Mordecai and Company; the Welsh bark Harvest, discharging goods at the Northeastern Railroad wharf. Relays of sailors, dockworkers, riggers and sail-makers, refitters and provisioners, carter and draymen labored over each vessel. To or from the hold of each ship, the ingredients of cargo and crew were assembled, stored, or dispersed, a task touching hundreds of Charlestonians, white and black, slave and free.

Nearby, knots of seamen lingered, clutching the poor pay doled out in cheap offices nearby, trading news and boasts, recruiting for a spree.¹⁵ Whether to sail on with mates or jump

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¹³ A description of the “scene of bustle and activity” involved in unloading one ship, the Adger’s sister ship Nashville, is found in Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, September 5, 1860. Shipping merchants used news of speedy turnarounds as a device for attracting customers. Charleston Mercury, February 18, 1856.

¹⁴ The Wagner carried up to 1400 bales of cotton on its three-day run to New York. Charleston Mercury, September 26, 1856.

¹⁵ The rough culture of Charleston’s docks consumed no end of printer’s ink. For a representative sample of mayhem, see Charleston Mercury, January 3, 8, 10, 16, 17, 18, 19, February 1, 5, 1856.
ship and enjoy the pleasures of the harbor for as long as the money lasted was a question seldom weighed soberly or alone. The cleverest captains knew how to ply their men with liquor once the work of cargo handling was completed, rolling them groggy into hammocks or corraling them in one of the rowdy tenements which lined Elliott Street. Unluckier skippers paid criminal gangs of “runners” to shanghai seamen—and local police to look the other way. The tide would not wait for milder measures. On this day alone, more than sixteen thousand tons of cargo capacity anchored in the East Bay and scores of sailors swarmed over decks and dock. For all its aristocratic airs, Charleston in 1860 was a city of commerce and labor, and these ships pumped its life blood.

Not only did the Adger and Henry Missroon’s three other ships speed the mail and news from New York to Charleston every forty-eight hours. All ships carried dispatches from abroad, privileged communications on the state of the market in other towns and cities and the drafts and bills of exchange which were building an international financial community. Telegraph lines had linked Charleston to the North since 1848, but secrets could not travel safely over wires without encryption. Equally important as the transmission of information, the efficient shipping network of which Charleston was a part helped create a national labor market in these years.

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16 Charles Barron to John Barron, November 30, 1839, Charles Barron Papers, SCL. On the system of advance payment which underlay much of the disorder of dockside culture, see Charleston Mercury, March 21, 1856; June 17, 20, July 28, 1857.

17 Charleston Mercury, November 23, 1855; January 8, March 21, 1856, June 20, 1857, November 20, December 14, 1860; Charges against Henry Schnippel, Claus Busing, January 31, 1856, Charleston Police Department Morning Reports, CLS; State v. James Johnston, May 1, 1857, Criminal Journals, Records of the Court of General Sessions, Charleston County, SCDAH.

18 There had been many more ships in port in earlier decades, especially during the winter months, but these were smaller vessels returning at less frequent intervals. Cf. Charles Barron to John Barron, November 11, 1839, Charles Barron Papers, SCL; Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 12. By the 1850s, Charleston merchants were shipping cotton as far as Russia and Sweden in their own bottoms. Rose P. Ravenel, Piazza Tales: A Charleston Memory (Charleston, 1952), 3.

When construction of the Blue Ridge Railroad across the Appalachians required three thousand navvies in the early 1850s, they funneled mostly through the Queen City, and not a few Irishmen and Germans stayed behind. Each fall, too, and in response to more peculiar rhythms, skilled workers from the North and the Canadian provinces went “on the tramp,” shipping south in search of work in warmer climes. Scores of printers, carpenters, tailors and others passed through Charleston each year, some staying only a day or two, many returning winter after winter.

Most tangible of all was the flood of goods each ship stowed and bestowed. By the time a vessel tied up at wharfside, draymen, porters and handcart men were already waiting to carry its cargo to the stores and shops which dominated Hayne and King Streets. The threat of sudden violence kept native whites, free blacks, and immigrants from underbidding each other in a fashion more effective than city ordinances could compel. The need for expedition, too, usually sent all parties hurrying along at their work, regardless of price. Soon heavy-laden wagons went careening along main roads (though they were barred from the good plank road of commercial King Street), racing to reach Charleston’s railroad terminals before the next train. Pedestrians

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20 See, e.g., Charleston Courier, December 24, 1853; Charleston Mercury, January 30, 1856; Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, November 29, 1860; Peter Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States of America, Interspersed with Original Anecdotes, Illustrating the Manners of the Inhabitants of the Great Western Republic (Glasgow, 1830), 330; William Thomson, A Tradesman’s Travels, in the United States and Canada, in the Years 1840, 41 & 42 (Edinburgh, 1842), 46-47.

21 In some cases, mechanics went south as sailors, deserting their ship when it made port. Charles Barron to John Barron, November 11, 30, 1839, Charles Barron Papers, SCL; Thomas J. Cumming to George A. Cumming, May 1, 1847, Thomas John Cumming Collection, SCHS; Ravenel, Piazza Tales, 26.

22 Morton A. Kellar, ed., Solon Robinson, Pioneer and Agriculturist; Selected Writings, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1936), 1: 387; H. Pinckney Walker, comp., Ordinances of the City of Charleston, from the 19th of August 1844, to the 14th of September 1854; and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating to the City of Charleston, and City Council of Charleston, During the Same Interval (Charleston, 1854), 99. Virtually any session of Charleston’s Mayor’s Court or City Council heard complaints of draymen’s collisions with pedestrians, carriages, livestock, sidewalks, buildings, and just about anything else in their path. See, e.g., Charleston Mercury, November 1, 1855, January 8, 29, July 29, October 21, 1856, March 12, June 18, August 22, 1857, March 31, October 19, 22, 1859.

23 The South Carolina Railroad took 349 drayloads of goods from the Nashville alone on September 1. Charleston
knew enough to look sharp or pay dear. Along Meeting and Market Streets—the city’s wholesale district—“the sidewalks [were] lined with boxes and packages,” and by late fall the length of East Bay Street was piled high with cotton bales.  

Consider the freight just one smallish schooner, the 258-ton *Frederick Nickerson* (named for the manager at the Mills House), brought from New York on September 12 after a five-day voyage. There were fifty-nine parcels of merchandise aboard to be distributed across the city: goods for transshipment inland via the South Carolina Railroad, items for dispersal through the large factorage houses like Holmes and Stoney, W. C. Duke and Company, and Caldwell and Robinson located directly on the wharves, commodities to be carted or carried to the shops of the city’s commercial district. Hardware of various sorts went to the Bissell brothers’ new store at King and Wentworth, to S. N. Hart and Company four blocks south, to Wilmans and Price, and Courtenay, Tennant and Company on Hayne Street, to W. R. Morton and Henry F. Strohecker’s shops on Meeting, to Graveley and Pringle on East Bay. Flour for Claussen’s South Carolina Steam Bakery was carted up to Market Street. Perishables went to John F. O’Neill, Farnum and Dotterer, S. S. Farrar, Brother, and Company, and J. A. Burckmeyer on East Bay, the Oppenheim brothers and N. M. Porter and Company on King, and Hamilton and Smith, located in the Market, grocers all. There were books for McCarter and Dawson at 116 Meeting, furniture for E. R. Cowperthwait at 267 King, drugs and chemicals for Ruff and Dowie at 153 Meeting, dry goods for Brady and McDonnell at King and Market, saddles and tack for Jennings, Tomlinson and Company at 157 Meeting, grain and hay for T. E. Ryan at 71 East Bay, stoves for Adams and Damon at 18 Broad, hats for Williams and Brown at 161 Meeting, plus a shipment of unknown character for Lewis M. Hatch, who sold “Oils, Belting, Guano, and Safes” from his

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24 *Charleston Mercury*, September 14, 1860.
shop at 120 Meeting Street. This was only part of the Nickerson’s treasure, and in season there were often two dozen ships of its size or greater loading or unloading cargo at any time. Along the East Bay and within the city’s commercial core--the Third Ward between Broad, King, and Wentworth Streets--Charleston witnessed a vast parade of merchants’ wares on a daily basis. There was nothing serene or “airy” about these thriving, crowded thoroughfares.25

In the fall of 1860, the shops, wharves, and market district of east Charleston were even more boisterous and vital than usual, and more threatening. From store windows and across major intersections, the commercial district was draped with flags, banners, and other symbols of political contention. Another election season—local, state, and national—was at hand, and the streets were filled with demonstrations of all sorts: bands, serenades, minor parades. But the most striking exhibition, which attracted more attention than any of these, was paradoxically more discreet. Sometime in early autumn, men began wearing blue cockades in their hats as a sign of loyalty to the cause of southern rights. The simplest badges were fashioned from a rosette of ribbon fixed with a gold button. More elaborate constructions added tassels or even homemade artwork. The most stylish used specially stamped palmetto buttons, sold at Charlton Bird’s store (at the sign of the gold spectacles) on King Street, two doors down from Steele’s Hat Hall.26 But it was less important what the cockade looked like than that it was judiciously displayed. It declared the wearer’s allegiances unmistakably, and warned those lacking such a sign that their best course was silent conformity.27

25 Charleston Courier, September 13, 1860; Charleston Mercury, September 14, 1860; W. Eugene Ferslew, Directory of the City of Charleston, to Which is Added a Business Directory, 1860 (Savannah, 1860).

26 Strikingly different cockades have survived at the Charleston United Daughters of the Confederacy Museum, the South Carolina Miscellany, Joseph Starke Sims Papers, Dalton, DU, the DuBose Civil War Collection, Atlanta History Center, and the Decorative and Industrial Arts Collection, Chicago Historical Society.

27 Other communities used other methods to eliminate dissent. In All Saints Parish, the local secession association required all male residents to sign a set of radical resolutions. In Fairfield District, all peddlers were banished, by
Docility was demanded most of all at water’s edge. As coast dwellers have always known, wharves and beaches demarcate a liminal sphere, a dangerously ambiguous place between land and water, inside and out. Whatever crosses that ground is foreign, and must be transformed, subsumed, expelled, or destroyed lest it corrupt local identity or subvert tribal integrity. No one had to explain that primordial, xenophobic logic in antebellum Charleston. Since the 1820s, the shadowy South Carolina Association had patrolled the city’s streets and docks in search of troublemakers seeking to tamper with slaves or introduce dangerous doctrines. By 1860, local vigilantes had become less secretive about their activities. The poet Henry Timrod noted the “grave and thoughtful men” who patrolled Charleston’s streets, “still echoing with trade,” eager to lay aside the clerk’s pen for “the patriot’s blade.” They perched down by the docks and at the new customs house, checking over ships’ manifests for dubious passengers arriving from the North, prodding packages in search of abolitionist tracts or weapons. Still danger mounted. By late October, alarmists considered it “well known” that

order of the Horeb Vigilant Association, regardless of their origin or license. Charleston Mercury, December 15, 20, 1860.


30 Hayne, ed., Poems of Henry Timrod, 97-98; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, January 31, 1860; New York Tribune, December 13, 1860. Charleston’s city council also required steamship companies to post bond for steerage passengers who landed there. Initially, this ordinance was intended to prevent the “destitution of the North” from being “transferred to Charleston.” In the autumn of 1860, however, “rigorous compliance” was enforced to prevent political “calamity” from erupting. Charleston Mercury, November 15, 1860.

Charleston was “overrun with Abolition emissaries” plotting insurrection. Vigilantes turned away an odd assortment of potential “evil-doers,” from importunate Scots to opinionated New England matrons to demented seamen.\textsuperscript{32} More commonly, though, men brandished the blue cockade against a more tangible, internal political threat: the men who wore no hats.\textsuperscript{33}

As in any port city, dockside was the most cosmopolitan place in antebellum Charleston. A harsh subterranean economy and an exotic, transgressive culture flourished here, populated by ragpickers, prostitutes, street urchins, runaways, gamblers, and thieves.\textsuperscript{34} Here Europeans and Americans, Hispanics and blacks toiled alongside each other, their languages, colors and customs all mixed up, sharing labor and liquor, swapping stories and songs, exchanging ideas and prejudices. To native-born white Charlestonians, contemptuous and fearful of these intruders yet vitally dependent on their labor, maintaining social control required a nice balance indeed. From 1823 until its repeal in 1856, the state’s Negro Seaman Act required that any free black sailor entering port be jailed at his captain’s expense until his ship was ready to weigh anchor.\textsuperscript{35} As the 1852 case of Manuel Pereira showed, however, distinguishing fugitive slaves

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\textsuperscript{32} Charleston Courier, October 30, 1860. Vigilantes shipped several supposed abolitionists northward during this period, notably the cabinetmaker J. O. Beattie, and Henry Clarke, a compositor employed by Evans and Cogswell, Charleston’s largest printing establishment. Charleston Mercury, October 17, 30 (quote), December 17, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 30, October 9, 1860. They found nothing amiss at dockside, however, until December 20, when a committee ordered Captain Horton of the schooner Charles Dennis out of port for expressing “opinions not congenial to this clime.” Charleston Mercury, December 21, 1860; Charleston Courier, December 21, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, December 22, 1860.

\textsuperscript{33} The threat of hatless men was a common theme in Victorian culture. See, e.g., Dickens’ initial description of the convict Magwitch. Charles Dickens, Great Expectations (London, 1985), 36.


\textsuperscript{35} Important Act of the Legislature of South Carolina, Passed at the Session in December to Prevent Free Negroes and Persons of Colour from Entering This State (Charleston, 1824); John R. Horsey, comp., Ordinances of the City of Charleston from the 14th September 1854 to the 1st December 1859, and the Acts of the General Assembly relating to the City Council and the City During the same period (Charleston, 1859); 8; Philip M. Hamer, “Great
from free blacks, or even free blacks from whites (in this case, a Portuguese seaman) could be far from easy. 36 And ultimately it was not race or ethnicity but class which worried elite Charleston most.

Such fears swelled each year in mid-September, about the time the Adger docked now, as summer rains tapered, sweltering heat subsided, and “needy foreigners” flooded in from the North. Across the 1850s, anxious men hunted the hidden connection between the coming of these “wretched, squalid, bestial beings” so willing to contest blacks for the lowest wage work, the warm pools of stinking water which collected in cellars, back alleys, and marginal waste grounds around the city, and the onset of epidemic disease. The clouds of mosquitoes which bedeviled Charleston at this season were seen as an annoying “scourge,” but hardly the cause of infection. Even the wisest minds triangulated errantly, equating impoverished outsiders with danger and disease. “It is the introduction of these strangers among us that brings yellow fever,” one scholar explained. Fever became cultural shorthand for a host of illnesses--typhoid, typhus, dengue, and more—not least because the “putridity and corruption,” “stagnation and stench” which warned of peril all seemed to point back through “pestiferous streets” to recent arrivals from the North. 37 Biological and political fears mingled and multiplied.

[W]e are getting a population exactly like that which nightly renders the streets of Philadelphia, Baltimore, &c., the scenes of hideous disorder. We are losing a valuable, manageable, and healthy [slave] population, for one, in every sense, the reverse. We see the submissive, acclimated, non-voting negro pushed aside by the turbulent, feverish, naturalized foreigner… The result is inevitable: they must

36 Adams, Manuel Pereira. Even at the moment of secession, William Braddock was lodged in the Charleston Workhouse as a suspected runaway. He had been taken off the steamer Spaulding en route to Boston four months earlier. Charleston Mercury, August 16, December 20, 1860.

introduce amongst us the elements, both of physical and moral (may we not add political) evil.

Only a lively police presence—coupled perhaps with segregation—might curb this social menace. Education and uplift could accomplish little of lasting value. “The lawless, ignorant, and drunken man can have none other than a squalid and filthy woman,” elite Charleston believed, “with her naked and shameless children.” Shiftless ways played a central role in producing “yellow fever air.” By “groveling in filth, stench, and putrefaction,” aliens seemed bound to make the “whole atmosphere” of the city foul and “deteriorated.” Irish immigrants especially seemed to combine diseased constitutions with moral disorder, as “their constant scenes of revelry and drunkenness” displayed to locals whenever epidemics broke out. In 1852, “[t]he road to Magnolia Cemetery presented the daily and hourly spectacle of drunken men and women,” one outraged physician declared,

reeling from the interment of their friends and relations with maudlin grief or riotous mirth. At night the streets were filled with inebriates far beyond anything of the kind we have ever witnessed before. We seldom walked the streets at night without seeing some of these reckless creatures either lying on the side-walks or reeling towards their homes, which they seemed destined never to find.  

Thankfully, most foreigners passed through the port quickly, finding little work, less charity, and no end of prejudice and suspicion. As they left—or were momentarily brought to heel—disease faded for a season. With Malthusian regularity, though, biological and social disorder would reappear, and Charleston’s battle against “immigrant fever” would be fought and refought again.

But suppose the threat was not primarily external? Though all understood that yellow fever, like abolitionism, might be slipped into the Holy City by malign foreign carriers, a still more worrisome theory claimed that the pathogen could generate spontaneously, through the

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unhygienic treachery of low-born native whites. “Our Uncle Toms do well enough,” one doctor allowed; “it is the white paupers who need our aid.” Unchallenged, “the destroyer” would surely slip “into the seats of luxury and ease.” Misunderstood microbes here intersected with the antislavery virus elites dreaded most.39

A free black drayman, a Yankee ship chandler, a Cuban sailorman, an Irish dockworker: which was above betraying Carolina’s domestic institution? These were men who went about bareheaded, or wore cheap straw hats or grimy peaked caps--the symbol of the emerging proletariat--not the stiff beavers and silk hats of their betters. Their bodies, muscled and sunburned, tattooed and scarred, clad in the rough, eccentric fashion of their class, set them apart from those who lived beyond the contested terrain of Charleston’s waterfront world. Physically, socially, politically, they could not display the blue cockade. For them was reserved only the fatalistic silence of the disenfranchised, a status the men who wore the badges were determined to enforce.40

Charleston’s press commemorated and reinforced that silence, and the political invisibility it denoted. The Mercury and the Courier seldom mentioned the city’s black laboring population. Bearing no signs of political or social affiliation, they were easily erased, if not forgotten. White proletarians filled newspaper columns daily—or, at least, a squint-eyed bourgeois version did. This folk drank and fought and wound up in jail, broke into houses, beat

39 “Yellow Fever in Charleston in 1852,” 148-150; Charleston Courier, December 22, 1853; Charleston Mercury, October 9, 1858; W[ragg], “The Public Health,” 114.

their wives and abandoned their babies, stole hats and wallets, sold their bodies, jumped ship, manhandled and mishandled cargo, succumbed to drink and disease, stabbed friends and strangers alike, and sometimes paid for their deeds at the end of a rope. Cap in hand, they stood stupidly before the respectable sermonizing of the Charleston Port Society and the teetotal reproofs of the Marine Temperance Society, obdurately untouched by “Seamen’s Fair[s],” “Benefit Pic Nic”s and more mundane performances of Christian charity. Nothing reined them in; nothing raised them up.

In lieu of reform, daily reportage coolly noted wounds dressed, fines assessed, and offenders pushed out the door. So when Guillam Simon of the brig Chicopee stumbled into the Guard House in July 1859, “his head badly cut and bruised,” he—predictably—joined shipmates caught up in a parallel dockside “stabbing affray.” Simon did “not know who had maltreated him,” but recalled that he took his beating “at Daly’s tavern, on the Bay.” Whatever caused this brawl mattered little to locals: the drunken sailor was bandaged, bound over for morning court, and would be gone from Charleston in a day or two. When police found tipsy James Moore wandering south of Broad “without his hat & could not find his Ship,” it signified two days in the poorhouse for the two-dollar fine he could not pay, nothing more. Likewise, when Charleston’s coroner considered how Morris O’Grady had died by the blade of Martin Conner,

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41 This portrait is derived from a general reading of Charleston Mercury, 1860; Charleston Courier, 1860. See also John England to Pierce M. Butler, March 7, 1838, Beaufort Taylor Watts Papers, SCL; Darlington Flag, December 24, 1854; Charleston Courier, February 22, 1853; Charleston Mercury, October 5, 1854.

42 Minutes, 1822-1855, Charleston Port Society for Promoting the Gospel Among Seamen Papers, LC; William B. Yates, An Historical Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Religious and Moral Improvement among Seamen in England and the United States, with a History of the Port Society of Charleston (Charleston, 1851); Charles E. Chichester, Historical Sketch of the Charleston Port Society for Promoting the Gospel Among Seamen, with the 63rd Annual Reports and List of Officers and Members (Charleston, 1885); [Caroline Gilman], “Seamen’s Fair,” Rose Bud, or Youth’s Gazette, 1 (1833): 105-106; Charleston Courier, April 26, 1849.

the Mercury’s reporter noted only that the “examination of witnesses was quite tedious, and consumed most of the day.” Even those like drayman Tom Dunn, “brought up for the fiftieth time for drunkenness and rioting in the streets,” could be dismissed, so long as the cargo they trucked kept moving.44

Here was a reassuringly dysfunctional caricature, sustained by the political voicelessness elite restrictions imposed. To the press, the men and women of the wharves were reactive, aimless, impotent creatures, forever afoul of the Mayor’s Court. Apart from a few missing watches and the occasional drunken curse, the respectable classes had little to fear from dockside rowdies. Rage they might, newspapers declared, but their raging came to naught.

A closer gaze reveals a more troublesome view of waterside working people. There was self-hatred and nihilistic violence aplenty in their ranks, but also vital ideas about liberty and social order, confused and half-formed yet potent, coupled with a dangerous, unpredictable willingness to act, even against long odds. When the second mate of the bark Carolina was stabbed in a shipboard scuffle in August 1856, authorities put the killing down to “previous acts of insubordination,” carting half the ship’s crew off to jail. Such measures were both salutary and preemptive. Too often, disgruntled seamen took to “the shore to settle their difficulties,” tearing up taverns, brawling en masse, and battling civilians and police who sought to restore order.45 Too often, boisterous youths and local ruffians took the chance to pitch in. Periodically, newspapers warned of the presence of “dangerous” transients, or decried the “riotous conduct”

44 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 1855, February 19, 1856, July 14, 1859; Charge against James Moore, March 2, 1856, Charleston Police Morning Reports, CLS. Unsurprisingly, neither O’Grady nor Conner appear in any city directory for the period, unless O’Grady’s slayer had transmuted into the “Martin Connolly, Scavenger” listed in 1859. Leonard Mears and James Turnbull, comps., The Charleston Directory: Containing the Names of the Inhabitants, A Subscribers’ Business Directory, Street Map of the City, and an Appendix, of Much Useful Information (Charleston, 1859).

45 Charleston Mercury, August 2, 1856, July 14, 1859.
the City Guard had broken up along the wharves. Across the 1850s, rowdyism sparked fierce dockside riots in New York, Baltimore, New Orleans and elsewhere. How long before similar scenes unfolded on the East Bay? The mutineers of the Aramingo might be locked up in the workhouse, but there was little prospect that punishment would make them any less rebellious. By 1860, Charleston’s streets were “crowded” with “street beggars” and ragged youths of both sexes, eager to “go about pilfering whenever they can.” And for every fire the press attributed to accident or careless servants, all knew, there were others deliberately set by disgruntled proles seeking plunder. How did it happen that Henry Mazyck’s waterside warehouses went up in flames, burning eighty thousand dollars’ worth of cotton in the bargain? Even as they dismissed the possibility of organized working-class violence in their midst, Charleston’s city fathers in 1856 argued for creating an armed mounted guard to crush rioters quickly. A southern Peterloo seemed preferable to the chaos hesitating half-measures might breed.

Ultimately, men of property opted for circumspection over saber-wielding cavalry. It is hard to say now just how real the threat of proletarian violence they imagined truly was. Only hazy descriptions of waterfront skirmishes have entered the historical record, though the liveliest became part of the ship lore and tavern talk which swirled along the docks. Drinking, wenching, and fighting apart, the roistering seamen Sam Kelly shipped with could find nothing better to do while ashore than to purchase pocket watches on a lark and ritually smash them. Others found

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47 Charleston Courier, March 5, 1860; Charleston Mercury, March 27, 1856.

48 Charleston Courier, October 1, 1858; Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, Ending May 18, 1860 (Charleston, 1860). Oddly, Dee Dee Joyce’s fine anthropological study ignores the role of fire in shaping ethnic identity and social relations in antebellum Charleston. Joyce, “White, Worker, Irish, and Confederate: Irish Workers’ Constructed Identity in Late Antebellum Charleston, South Carolina” (Ph. D. diss., Binghamton University, 2002).

49 Charleston Mercury, February 26, 1856.
grogshops to wreck, constables to fight, storehouses to rifle, alarms to send up. Most contented themselves simply by drinking a snootful, cavorting “boisterously” in the streets, and bedding down in the gutter, beyond the mastery of clock or man. A too frank report of wharfside life would be “demoralizing,” the Courier allowed.\footnote{Samuel Kelly, An Eighteenth Century Seaman, Whose Days have been Few and Evil, to which is added Remarks, etc.; on Places he Visited during his Pilgrimage in this Wilderness, ed. Crosbie Garstin (New York, 1925), 54; Charleston Courier, August 6, 1858. For more examples of what elites worried about, see Entry of November 25, 1815, James Carr Journal, SCL; Autobiography, n. d., David Wyatt Aiken Papers, SCL; Charles Barron to John Barron, November 11, 30, 1839, Charles Barron Papers, SCL; Jack K. Williams, 


The same types who celebrated disorder so openly as a species of freedom also packed the cheap seats of Charleston’s theater to hail the adventures of Jack Sheppard, Jack Cade, and other lawbreakers performed upon the stage, or to rollick over some farce mocking the gentry. They spat, yelled, and whistled, cursed and caroused, and picked a pocket when they could. That far misrule went and no farther.\footnote{Charleston Mercury, January 7, March 27, November 8, 1856; Pamela M. Adams, “The Audiences in Charleston’s Theatres, 1790-1860,” (master’s thesis, University of South Carolina, 1983); Thomas Smyth, The Theatre, a School of Religion, Manners and Morals! Two Discourses, Delivered on the Opening of the New Theatre in Charleston (Charleston, 1838), esp. 10, 19-20, 26-27, 40; W. Stanley Hoole, The Antebellum Charleston Theatre (Tuscaloosa, 1946), 174, 199. An 1817 dispute between a popular actor and the theatre manager mushroomed into a full-fledged riot, eventually put down by the City Guard with “Muskets and Bayonets.” A Succint Account of the Disturbance which occurred at the Charleston Theatre, on the Evening of the 12th of March, 1817, with the Addresses to the Public, by Mr. Holman, the Manager, and Mr. Caldwell (Charleston, 1817), 7-8; “The Charleston Theatre Riot,” Theatre Symposium, 2 (1994), 27-63. From 1818 onward, no “play, farce, interlude or after piece” could be performed in Charleston without the city council’s approval. Eckhard, comp., Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, From the Year 1783 to Oct. 1844, 12.} Inside the theater, rebellion was transformed into play while “an efficient POLICE” stood ready to enforce “the most strict order and decorum.” Outside, vigilantes helped ensure that repetition of these tales came as boast and drama, not deed, and that signs of past struggles went unhonored--if not unread--by the hatless men who toiled along the East Bay.\footnote{Playbills, November 25, 1851, April 7, 1856, Charleston, S. C., Theatre, HTC.}

Appearances often deceive. The men without hats were politically invisible, but come election time this proved a boon to anyone who took them in tow. In the 1840s, working-class
“b’hoys” fought propertyed “hunkers” to a standstill at the polls till bribery split their ranks. Now, every autumn, faction leaders passed down the rows of saloons and boarding houses which lined Elliott Street, handing out dollars and drinks in exchange for votes. “Highest prices paid for dead sailor’s chests, old papers, easy consciences,” one ad mocked. Legally, the seamen and transients who populated this netherworld were not entitled to cast ballots, but few poll managers had the temerity to stop them. In 1824, ex-governor John Geddes’ backers felt “very afraid he will lose his Election” for mayor “if the Strangers leave the City,” a sentiment most candidates for office shared. By 1860, “degrading bribery and heart-sickening corruption” had become “habitual,” and Elliott Street a byword for political corruption. A few might keep their hands clean, perhaps, but for most the road to office passed inevitably through this slum.

No one expected any better from the men who worked and loafed dockside, or the politicians who stooped to their level. Across the 1850s, though, Charleston newspapers warned of an even greater threat: the counterfeit gentleman. In article after article, men and women of apparently respectable status were revealed as thieves, frauds, and swindlers, even slave-stealers and abolitionists. The most ludicrous incident of this sort occurred in 1843, when the fledgling showman P. T. Barnum hoodwinked locals with his “Feejee Mermaid.” Prominent citizens nearly came to blows over the authenticity of Barnum’s exhibit (a monkey’s body sewn onto the

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53 Eugene Sue, Jr. [pseud.], *The Mysteries of Charleston: A Brief View of Matters and Things in General, the Internal Arrangements and Progressive Improvements, Past, Present, and Future, in the Great Metropolis of Charleston, With a Peep into the Various Ramifications of Society in its Several Aspects, Moral, Social, Political, and Financial* (Charleston, 1846); *Charleston Courier*, October 13, 1858.

54 William Waters to Zalmon Wildman and E. M. Starr, August 16, 1824, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL. As it turned out, Geddes won, and subsequently killed his opponent, Edward P. Simons, in a notorious duel.

55 See, e.g., *Charleston Mercury*, October 18, 1854, November 6, 9, 1855, October 30, 1856, October 8, 9 (quote), 1858, July 4, 1859; *Charleston Courier*, October 4, 1858, January 12, 1860.
tail of a fish, then shellacked). Not that they cared so passionately about the existence of mermaids: it was their ability to spot a fake or pick out imposture that mattered.56

That skill was erratic at best. For all their vaunted insight, Charlestonians demonstrated again and again disastrous gullibility. In March, 1860, the trusting and credulous opened their parlors and wallets to Charles Alden—a fellow southerner—on the strength of his “very gentlemanly appearance and polite address.” How could they know that he had come to fleece them in a bogus investment scheme? Likewise, when the bluff, well-mannered northern stranger passed through in 1854, who could peg him for the antislavery zealot James Redpath, come to stir up trouble?57

More disturbing still was the case of William Henry Brisbane. Charleston-born and bred to the upper crust, he suddenly turned on his own kind, went north, and became a raving abolitionist. In 1849, Brisbane masqueraded as a non-slaveholder, flooding the state with pamphlets urging yeomen to rise against the planter class. His scheme failed, but the incident threw Charleston into turmoil once more, stoking fears of betrayal and subversion.58 Bad enough that roughneck strangers lurked at waterside; worse by far that others dressed and acted like gentlefolk, passed among them, and perhaps plotted their doom. In the autumn of 1860,


57 Charleston Courier, March 5, 1860; Redpath, The Roving Editor, 50-70.

Charleston’s elite looked hard and listened carefully to catch the traitors they felt sure were lurking in their midst.

Treachery wore a thousand masks. Before Barnum, before Jeremy Diddler, before Melville’s *Confidence-Man*, the prototypical humbug of the age was a Carolinian, David Hines, who raised forgery and swindling to high art. Mastering the craft of impersonation in Charleston in the 1820s, the clever country boy pursued a self-described “life of action, enterprise, and ingenuity” for the next three decades. Posing as a well-mannered gentleman in a score of aliases, he fleeced trusting folks across the South. Truly proud of his double-dealing exploits, Hines wrote his memoirs from prison in 1840, winning national celebrity. “It is a pity that Dave is such a rascal,” Charleston’s Peter Porcher declared, for he seemed altogether honorable, “generous and disinterested.” The trouble was, his every word and gesture was a sham, the all-too-realistic performance of “the deceivingest fellow you ever did see.” Two decades later, “the venerable gentleman” still “maintain[ed] his respectability and dignity,” roaming the region as the purported “traveling correspondent of a paper in South Carolina,” landing in various jails, merrily scamming the unwary. Novels like *The Clockmaker* and plays like *New York as It Is* described Yankees as hoaxers *par excellence*, but Carolinians knew better.

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59 The novelty of this problem was one of degree, not type. Goods of dubious value, for example, had been hawked in Charleston from the early eighteenth century. See, e.g., the extravagant testimonials for “Chinese Snake Stones” in broadside, 1744, Francis Torres Papers, SCL.


61 *Columbia Telescope*, May 27, 1831; Petition of David T. Hines, October 16, 1833, Petitions and Schedules of Insolvent Debtors, Records of the Court of Common Pleas, Charleston County, SCDAH; David T. Hines, *The Life, Adventures, and Opinions of David Theo. Hines: of South Carolina; Master of Arts, and Sometimes, Doctor of Medicine... in a Series of Letters to his Friends* (New York, 1840); Peter C. Porcher to Elizabeth S. Porcher, April 29, May 12, 1839, Peter Cordes Porcher Papers, SCHS; *Charleston Mercury*, January 28, 1859; *Charleston Courier*, June 14, 1859.
For all their claims of social unity, Charlestonians feared most that diddling flourished, homegrown, among them.62

Nothing affirmed those anxieties more strongly than the ironic achievement of Ker Boyce. Born to a struggling Newberry District farm family in 1787, Boyce had little education and less hope of inheriting a viable patch of land. Instead, he wangled a clerkship in a local store and lucrative minor political posts as deputy sheriff and tax collector. By 1817 he had traveled the new State Road to Charleston, opening a store on upper King Street. Loud, drawling, and amiably down-home, Boyce was a surefire success in haggling with rednecks come to the big city. Respectability among Charleston’s commercial elite was less easily won, but by teaming with George Henry, the uncouth trader gained a pliant partner for the factorage business. Doors opened, and their fortunes flourished. In 1825 Boyce and Henry shifted operations to East Bay Street, as river transport crushed the wagon trade. From this citadel, the “cur of Newberry” embarked on a course spanning thirty years that made him one of the state’s wealthiest men, and perhaps the most powerful.63

Boyce and Henry’s operations expanded steadily, purchasing and extending a major East Bay wharf in 1836 and transforming Hayne Street into the center of the city’s jobbing trade. By that time, Boyce was trumpeting railroad development in the state and investing in cotton factories along the fall line. In 1830 he ran for the General Assembly on the nullifiers’ ticket, losing narrowly. Two years later he tried again, winning and holding his seat until 1839. That


year he entered a bitter race for the state Senate, squeaking out victory under charges of corruption. Votes had been bought, campaigners threatened. When the Senate launched an investigation, though, Boyce short-circuited its role, resigning, running again, and winning in a landslide. He served eight years in the upper chamber, shaping legislation, making governors and federal senators, offering warm, misspelled words of advice to Calhoun himself.64

“[A]s rough as a bear in manners and ignorant as a man can decently be,” no one was likely to confuse Boyce with Cicero. Pure “Hunker,” his power was rooted in the control of capital and, through it, men.65 From 1819 to 1822, Boyce dispensed favors as director of the Bank of the State of South Carolina, and from 1826 to 1835, as director of the Charleston branch of the Bank of the United States. He played a key role in creating the Bank of Charleston in 1834 and guiding it thereafter, serving as president from 1840 to 1842. Throughout his political career, both in office and behind the scenes, the merchant’s motto was quid pro quo. Boyce ascended steadily, even eyeing the governorship, thanks to the support of his friends. Said friends in turn were well compensated. Henry became city warden in 1836, probably the limit of his ambition. James Hamilton became governor and state senator and soaked up a seemingly endless line of credit in star-crossed speculations. Young William Aiken, master to hundreds of slaves and lord of a bountiful plantation through the untimely death of his father, put his trust in Boyce’s aid. Even Calhoun endured his meddling because the Machiavellian storekeeper had extended crucial loans to the senator and his kin. He was self-interested, to be sure, but a


65 Sue, Jr. [pseud.], The Mysteries of Charleston. The term derived both from the dug-in conservatism of Boyce’s group and their peddling propensities.
patriotic son of South Carolina nonetheless, a model for young clerks and shopkeepers equally anxious to rise.\textsuperscript{66}

He was also, it turned out, a monumental fraud. At Boyce’s death in 1854, Charleston mourned the loss of one “whose heart throbbed for the promotion of every industrial enterprise in the State.” Surely none had done more to promote the material well-being of his community. Then the truth came out. All along, it emerged, Boyce’s heart had pounded after profit, regardless of its source. Though Boyce had purchased railroad and factory stock in South Carolina, his will showed that “three-fourths of a million of his capital [wa]s invested in New York, and large sums in the far west.” Far from fattening South Carolina’s purse, the king of Hayne Street had been hand-in-glove with the Yankees, siphoning off precious capital for private gain. This was a humbug worthy of Barnum or Hines, and one self-doubting Charleston did not soon forget. As they gazed on the shopkeepers of King Street and Broad, the jobbers and wholesalers of Hayne and East Bay, few could but consider the wayward loyalties of merchant capital and the uncertain politics of those who bought cheap and sold dear.\textsuperscript{67}

There were other, more ambiguous signs of fractured class unity. Look at the petition Charlestonians submitted to the City Council in November 1854, urging stronger quarantine laws. When infectious disease or fevers struck the port, they explained, workers fled and trade collapsed. Signatures filled nearly half a column of the Mercury’s report, yet the absence of the names of Charleston’s small shopkeepers, middling merchants, and artisans pointed up


\textsuperscript{67} William Gregg, “Practical Results of Southern Manufactures,” De Bow’s Review, 18 (1855): 791. Such fears of Charleston’s merchant class were of long standing. See Defence of the Shopkeepers of South-Carolina, and Particularly of the Grocers, Against the Late Law ‘For the Better Regulation of Slaves and Free Persons of Colour,’ in a Series of Letters, as Originally Published in the Charleston Mercury, with Additional Remarks (Charleston, 1835).
worrisome divisions of purpose within respectable white society. Almost entirely, it was the big brokers, factors and gentry who backed this petition. For these, adding one’s name seemed both a moderate, progressive gesture and a sensible act of self-interest. So, too, some withheld support (as they had on earlier occasions) “[b]ecause it would be injurious to the business of Charleston, and particularly of Hayne street.” Others, searching for signs of incipient abolitionism, inferred a more malevolent motive still.68

Between the shopkeepers of King, the bankers of Broad, and the commission merchants along East Bay, conflict flared repeatedly and fanned outward. When foreign and northern creditors called in debts in the Panic of 1857, Charleston bankers flouted state laws they had helped write, suspending specie payment. That put the pinch on retailers and working people, left without cash to resolve accounts or draw wages. Three years on, as outsiders withdrew capital in anticipation of secession, bankers slammed vaults shut again, triggering financial crisis. In both instances, the sober men of Broad Street insisted they were protecting the public good. In both, the victims of tight times cried treachery, blaming their neighbors for the troubles they faced.69

Likewise, the slave badge crackdown Mayor Charles Macbeth launched in August 1860 showed worrisome disunity. Since 1800, civic ordinances had required owners of slaves hiring their time to buy metal badges identifying their bondmen. Free blacks were to carry papers proving they had been born free or manumitted. But owners ignored the law as an intrusion in the master-slave relation and police played along. When Macbeth responded to working-class

68 Charleston Mercury, October 7, November 9, 1854; Alfred F. Ravenel to Cleland K. Huger, September 22, 1849, Cleland Kinloch Huger Papers, SCL. Cf. Mayor Charles Macbeth’s arguments against a tighter quarantine in Charleston Mercury, October 31, 1859: “Our city is a commercial one. Its trade is its life-blood.”

complaints by sending constables door-to-door in search of badgeless slave workers and undocumented free blacks, Charleston’s “higher classes” erupted. Former mayor General John Schnierle himself appeared at city hall, threatening to “beat… to Death” anyone who interfered with his property. Other slaveholders, “highly incensed” at the new policy, lashed out in similar terms.  

Within days, Macbeth had called off the hunt. Newspapers suppressed all mention of the commotion but could not blot out rumors of internal conflict and fears of disunity. Among radicals on the eve of secession, suspicion grew that the loyalties of “middling men” were less certain than those of other citizens, perhaps deserving closer scrutiny. Up and down the commercial district in that season, at doorways and shop windows, faces surmounted by the blue cockade peered in, stared hard, and turned away slowly.

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CHAPTER THREE:
BONE AND SINEW

Those who came to Charleston by rail ran a similar gauntlet and saw equally startling sights. Just as the realm of exchange fanning outward from dockside to the trading houses of East Bay and the shops of Hayne and King suggested danger and disorder to disunion’s advocates, so the province of production aroused alarm. Once, a sprinkling of craftsmen’s workrooms and a few machine shops had dotted Charleston’s backstreets. Now, massive factories squatted on city blocks and the pounding of engines mingled with pealing church bells. Once, mechanics had walked the city’s streets by ones and twos, “followed by a negro carrying their tools,” bearing “nothing more of their trade than the name.” Now, rural “poverty and destitution” drove empty-handed men to “gow knocking about through the city” in search of waged labor, and “the stifled sob of the famished workman” went “unheard in the mighty din of accumulation.” Changed times stoked dark fears.¹

“[T]he headlong impulse of the age drowns every cry but gain, gain,” conservatives fretted, transforming tradesmen into “operatives,” productive citizens into obedient “hands” to be used and discarded according to capital’s whim. Questions piled upon troubling questions. Was man “to become a mere money-making, cotton-spinning, iron-founding machine?” What would happen when “the great mass of our poor white population begin to understand that they have rights,” exerting them in the political arena? Was there any way to avert the growth of “clubs, combinations and trade-unions,” to stem the growth of a laboring class with “nothing to lose and

everything to gain… tempted to try the chances of revolution”? Such worries warped Charlestonians’ political calculations disastrously at the hour of disunion.²

Elites argued endlessly over the root cause of risk: was it the expansion of industry *per se*, or the growth of a benighted white working class in their midst? No consensus was in sight by 1860, and certainly no solution. In Europe and the North, as they saw it, the “love of gain” had “nearly effected the conquest of Christendom.” Worse still, on the eve of Lincoln’s election, that “offspring of the devil,” capitalism was taking root in the Holy City itself. “It cannot be the will of God,” protested Frederick Porcher, “that his creatures shall exist in hopeless degradation, toiling harder than slaves, with none of the slaves’ security.”³ But should Charleston regard such fellows as unfortunates or enemies? Would education, opportunity, and a watchful police suffice to avert the class conflict that threatened to immolate industrial society, or were stronger measures required against capital itself?

To men of property, the danger the white working-class “mob” posed in 1860 seemed clear, imminent, perhaps unavoidable. “They will invoke the aid of legislation,” the *Charleston Standard* warned,

they will use the elective franchise to that end, they may acquire the power to determine municipal elections; they will inexorably use it; and thus the town of Charleston, at the very heart of slavery, may become a fortress of democratic power against it. As it is in Charleston, so also is it to a lesser extent in the interior towns…. [I]t is to be feared that even in this state, the purest in its slave condition, democracy may gain a foothold, and that here also the contest for existence may be waged between them.

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Long-term survival meant clamping down on divisions within the white community, overcoming conflict between rich and poor, curbing and eradicating its causes. “It is impossible with us,” John C. Calhoun had crowed in 1838, “that the conflict can take place between capital and labor” which so disrupted northern society. But a generation later impossible had become undeniable. Its remedy—if such there was—demanded radical action.⁴

Rural transformation had unleashed urban crisis. The great virtue of the “domestic institution,” masters insisted, was that it bound all members of society in a single familial unit, each with rights and responsibilities suited to their strengths.⁵ In South Carolina, from the colonial era onward, social capital’s conservative impulse had nurtured an eccentric variety of labor-forms, awkwardly and often ingeniously articulated. In both town and countryside, slaves and masters mingled with independent commodity producers who relied on the efforts of their own hands, with workers skilled and unskilled who traded labor-power for wages, and with women and children performing unpaid work within households. Beyond this, some whites held others as temporarily unfree workers, through apprenticeships or bond-labor arrangements rendered as judgment for crime. Still more survived—often quite nicely—without seeming to perform productive labor at all: merchants, factors, bankers and, less reputably, vagrants, gamblers, horse-thieves, and the like.⁶


Before 1840, the signposts of capitalism’s advent—railroads, factories, banks and stores—conjured no more terrors for slaveholders than the coming of the steamboat or the cotton gin. Indeed, just as Karl Marx noted that chattel bondage “implies wage labour,” it was clear that the cotton kingdom slavery generated could hardly have arisen outside the framework of European capitalist expansion. From a class perspective, the masters’ problem was not to stamp out innovative technologies or differing modes of production, but to establish hegemony over them. By 1860, that victory looked ever more unlikely. In Charleston, the planters’ social web, never more than partially woven, now seemed fearfully frayed.7

For fretting southerns, class conflict became clearest as they traveled by train into the clattering, reeking upper wards of the slaveholders’ citadel. In 1860, Charleston was serviced by the old South Carolina Railroad and the upstart Northeastern line. The two companies neither competed nor converged. The South Carolina bore all traffic flowing north from Georgia or beyond the Blue Ridge via Columbia. The Northeastern connected with the Wilmington and Manchester road at Florence, one hundred miles distant, carrying freight and passengers from North Carolina and all points beyond. Passing through Charleston, travelers had to detrain at one company’s depot and embark at the other’s, more than a mile away. The railroads’ schedules matched up just as poorly. Everyone, then, had a chance to scrutinize Charleston, and

Charleston scrutinized all who entered her domain. On the eve of secession, men and women on both sides of that divide found plenty to dislike and distrust.\(^8\)

Distrust was summed up in the person of James Powers, the Irish-born stonemason who arrived in the city at the end of March, 1859, and tramped up to the midlands, “ragged and forlorn,” along with dozens of other craftsmen and laborers to build the new State House in Columbia. Eight months later he came hurtling back aboard the evening express, abused and assaulted by “‘vigilant’ and violent proceedings.” The trouble was, Powers had drunk too deeply days before, and spoken too freely about slavery. Already incensed by John Brown’s raid into Virginia, a menacing delegation warned the workman to leave the state.\(^9\)

Terrified, Powers aimed to please, but a second band of “vigilants” grabbed him south of the capital, hauled him back to town and clapped him into jail. On December 17, the mob all expected gathered at nightfall and dragged Powers from his cell. Marching to the center of town, hotheads cursed and cheered while two slaves laid on thirty-nine lashes and a coat of tar and feathers, then sent him packing by train, along with warm words urging coastal militants to repeat the procedure. In Charleston, outraged citizens “protest[ed] against such deputation” but quizzed the trembling Irishman thoroughly before tossing him into the Guard House.\(^10\) Across the state, other dubious types had already suffered rough justice. In nearby Grahamville, the

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\(^9\) *Daily Cleveland Herald*, December 22, 29, 1859; *New York Herald*, January 4, 1860; (Boston) *The Liberator*, December 30, 1859. Significantly, first reports in Charleston newspapers of the insurrection at Harper’s Ferry identified skilled white workingmen, numbering six to eight hundred, as the instigators. Charleston Mercury, October 18, 1859.

Yankee James Rivers, “supposed to be an Abolitionist,” had been beaten, tarred, feathered, shaved half-bald, and driven out of town. From Blackville, two “vagabond characters” from Vermont skulking about “for the professed purpose of taking ambrotypes,” plus an unnamed “foot-traveller” found with “an air-gun, a dice box, and some stereoscopic views” on his person, had been forced to flee. A German-born day labourer, “a French tanner,” “[t]wo straggling printers from the North,” “Drummers, Pedlars, Book Agents, Ditchers” and more were abused and banished from other seething communities. 11 The conservative Courier, already fending off claims that the merchant class it represented was fundamentally disloyal, hinted at lynching Powers. 12

What horrid rant had the lout unleashed to merit the vicious treatment Columbians doled out in return? That was the question Charleston longed to solve—quickly—standing ready to outdo its country cousin for vigilante violence at the first hint of antislavery gab from Powers’ battered lips. When at last it came out, the workman’s tale could not have been worse—for his inquisitors. Powers had hardly shouted abolition slogans, it emerged, unless that meant arguing that “negroes should not be employed in mechanical pursuits, but should be confined to field labor and housework.” Such opinions had long been championed by white workers throughout Charleston. No wonder Powers’ fellow stonemasons had threatened to rescue him by force while he languished in jail short days before. What Charleston proles might do next left more than one master shaking in his shoes. Only the swift performance of community ritual could dispel the danger. Released by city officials, Powers had his wounds tended and reckless talk

11 Charleston Mercury, September 13, 1856, November 26, December 17, 1859; Charleston Courier, February 18, 1859; (Savannah) Daily Morning News, December 19, 1859; (Boston) The Liberator, December 30, 1859; Columbia Banner, November 30, December 7, 1859, January 30, 1861; Lancaster Ledger, January 11, 1860; J. N. Chambliss, Jr. to Benjamin Allston, January 6, 1860, Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers, SCL.

12 Charleston Mercury, March 28, 1859; Charleston Courier, March 28, December 19, 1859.
hushed by vigilantes who spirited him aboard the next train north. Powers and the problem he posed vanished before most white residents had time to fathom the irony of his offense. If only Charleston’s elite could banish so easily the distrust they felt for the workingmen in their midst.\(^\text{13}\)

Powers’ grimy, troublesome likeness lurked all around on the eve of disunion in disturbing, alien forms: Germans and Jews, Yankees and sand-hill “crackers,” the inevitable Irish. Since the late 1840s, Charleston had become a major crossroads not only for cotton but especially for hard-pressed Irish Catholic immigrants, mostly sojourners from Erin via the North. The steadily swelling ranks entering the city’s glutted labor market found themselves shunted to the most marginal districts, at dockside or above Calhoun Street, battling free blacks for semi-skilled employment, and coming off second-best. The hardness of their lives aroused hatred of urban slavery—and blacks in general--inspiring the badge crackdown Mayor Macbeth instigated in the summer of 1860. After all, if locals denied Powers’ claim that using bondmen in non-domestic, non-agricultural occupations had “a tendency to degrade such employments,” just what was the difference between chattel slavery and wage slavery?\(^\text{14}\)

Already, debt-ridden native whites feared that economic forces were driving them down below enslaved blacks.\(^\text{15}\) Jeering slaves thought so, too. For decades, saucy chattels had sent up cat calls in Charleston’s streets, hooting the sham racial ideology which held them in chains, pointing up its class basis: “He great blackguard that—he got no negur. Where his horse? He

\(^{13}\) Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, January 28, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 19, 1859. For similar sentiments, see Charleston Courier, September 28, 1860.


\(^{15}\) For a broader analysis of these fears, see Lawrence T. McDonnell, “Work, Culture, and Society in the Slave South, 1790-1861,” in Black and White Cultural Interaction in the Antebellum South, ed. Ted Ownby (Jackson, MS, 1993), 125-147.
always walk.” Among white men, surely only “mechanics and mechanical Tutors” tramped the city’s streets across early decades, a plain sign of dependence and degradation. Bondmen’s taunts might have been reckoned the best sort of friendly advice, rendered by those who saw most keenly what dishonor was. In Charleston, “[h]e who is without horses and slaves incurs always contempt,” Briton John Davis affirmed. But who could be surprised by that, elites answered? The worker who failed to link his fortunes with men of property and status was bound to find hard times. To get along was to go along: that tough lesson of deference and unity rang truer than ever in 1860. If leading citizens regretted the beating Powers took for his big talk, or workingmen deplored the tar and cotton wool which defamed his ultimately uncontroversial views, they left no sign. The cheeky fellow should have kept his hammer ringing and his trap shut.16

Suspicion mounted as travellers crossed Charleston’s northern border. Riding the Northeastern line, passengers first glimpsed the city’s outskirts as a warm silhouette of spires as their train swung wide across the salt marsh toward the Cooper River. Running down the eastern edge of the Seventh Ward, though, visitors gazed in vain for signs that they had reached the aristocratic Queen of the South. To the right stood a few clusters of nondescript wooden houses, quarters fit for working people, mostly. To the left, Charleston petered out in swamp. As their train trudged into the Chappell Street station, not mansions and gardens but gray warehouses and

workshops greeted newcomers. The reception they encountered upon stepping down from the cars was no more inviting.  

First appearances were just as deceiving on the South Carolina’s route. To the British traveler John Vessey, who toured Charleston in 1859, emerging from a wilderness of swamp and pine forest to see slender steeples barely two miles distant “seem[ed] like magic.” Even more surprising changes lay ahead. The South Carolina Railroad, America’s first, and at one time the world’s longest line, ran down the center of the peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, depositing passengers four times daily at its depot on Hudson Street. Completed in 1833, the road was hailed as the commercial salvation of the city, badly bruised by the long depression of the 1820s. Three decades later, more than a dozen railroads linked virtually every district in the state to Charleston, revolutionizing commerce, culture, and social relations. By that stage, however, the locomotive seemed to worried observers less a clattering token of progress than the sooty symbol of a disastrously Faustian social bargain.  

Long before it was a technological fact, railroad development in South Carolina flourished as social fantasy, the mechanical cure-all to vexing economic and political problems. Despite its size and financial power, Charleston in 1830 was yet a pre-industrial city, differing little from market towns of early modern Europe. Like most urban hubs under the reign of merchant capital, it survived by taking in its own laundry and battening on the peasantry. 


Fortunately for Charleston, neighboring rural toilers, white and black, slave and free, produced and propelled astonishing volumes of a host of marketable commodities into its grasp. One glance at the maps Robert Mills drew in 1825 to accompany his analysis of the state’s economic resources shows the centrality of this parasitic relationship. South Carolina’s countryside was the locus of diverse and immensely lucrative production, humming both with agricultural growth and thriving small-scale industry. Rice, cotton: it was easy to sum up Charleston’s hinterland in monosyllables of splendidly profitable monoculture. But the grassroots sources of the city’s wealth were far more varied. Timber cutting provided ready cash throughout the state, and hard-rock mining went along steadily in the upper piedmont. Gristmills, sawmills, and widely varied manufacturing establishments took advantage of the state’s abundant water-power, especially above the fall line. Textile production advanced by fits and starts in a handful of speculative factories and, on a smaller basis, within “almost every house” in the countryside.

It was just this interdependence of family and industrial experience, household and community that Carolinians saw as superior to the artificial division of labor and hard-bitten individualism raw capitalism required. Domestic production took a host of other forms as well, from making brooms and shoes to manufacturing farm implements and distilling liquor. By


1830, South Carolina’s countryside had become the heart of cotton’s kingdom, but the staple’s reign was far from exclusive. Great planters and small farmers, rural mechanics and perambulating day laborers found a host of ways to link arms, reap profits, and keep their bellies full. As farming folk have always done, they kept one eye on the weather, the other on the main chance, turning ploughman, weaver, fisher, lumberjack and more according to the season and the opportunity at hand.⁴²

For Charleston’s factors and traders, it all spelled rural wealth to be tapped and developed. Bankers and merchants at the forefront, Charlestonians promoted railroad construction with dreams that enlarged trade would enrich and invigorate city and countryside both, promoting social unity between the regions. Closer commercial ties between the Queen City and its rural hinterland, conservatives hoped, would rein in hotheads advocating free trade and the nullification of federal tariffs. Likewise, lower transportation costs would undercut sectionalist complaints within the city and mute the secessionist “vituperation & slangwhanging” of the Mercury set.²³

Economically, too, Charlestonians’ purpose was profoundly conservative. City fathers had no wish to advance industry within their precincts. There was, by their lights, already far too much dirt, noise, social danger, and risk of fire. Indeed, Charleston’s promotion of railroads to join rural producers and urban markets went hand-in-hand with proposals barring “the modern

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²³ Advantages to Charleston, and South-Carolina, to be derived from a Direct Trade; with Reflections on the Rail Road and Canal Communications of the South. With a Map (Charleston, 1839); A Charlestownian, The Cause of the Decline of Real Estate in the City of Charleston, with the Remedy for the Evil, Being a Series of Articles Originally Published in the Evening News, Under the Signature of “Free Trade” (Charleston, 1847); Proceedings of a Meeting of Citizens of Charleston City and Neck, and Report of Committee in Relation to Charlotte Rail-Road (Charleston, 1847); Thomas Cooper, Lectures on the Elements of Political Economy (Columbia, 1830); South Carolina State Gazette and Commercial Advertiser, July 7, 1827; Charleston Mercury, July 18, 19, 1827; David R. Williams to James Chesnut, November 2, 16, 1828, David Rogerson Williams Papers, SCL.
Idol[‘s]” invasion of the city proper and restricting steam-powered machinery in the lower wards after 1837.  

Old fears of conflagration here mingled with emerging ideals of the city as both rational and sentimentalized commercial hub. By 1830, Charleston sheltered a wide variety of manufactures, “extensive iron foundries,” and “seven or eight steam engine establishments,” employing as many as fifteen hundred mechanics, who earned a healthy two dollars per day on average. Yet men worried that these emerging social relations might veer suddenly from opportunity to oppression. Along with machines and factories came “a peculiar way of thinking on subjects of economy,” fearfully foreign to southern minds.  

“Employers most frequently estimate the work to be done by the cost of material and the hire of hands at a low rate,” one mechanic explained, “allowing nothing for losses, wastage, unavoidable delays, and that which should be equally considered, the time of the contractor and the cost at which he has obtained his knowledge.” The tendency of profit-minded enterprise, many concluded, was “to usurp political power and oppress the poor.”

So what would happen when the poor pressed back, demanding higher wages, a voice in public affairs—an end to slavery itself? Here was “in truth the only party from which danger to our institutions is to be apprehended amongst us,” Kit Memminger believed. Encouraging industry in Charleston not only nurtured a Yankeefied capitalist ethos among men of property. It would engender an antagonistic working class, “[t]he same men who make the cry in the


Northern cities against the tyranny of Capital—and there as here would drive before them all who interfere with them—and would soon raise here the cry against the Negro, and be hot Abolitionists. And every one of these men would have a vote.” 27 Would economic progress not inevitably end in social disaster?

Railroad-building seemed a splendid solution to that burgeoning political problem. Just as economic development was meant to swell cotton production, Charleston railroad promoters expected workshops, factories, and villages to sprout wherever tracks were laid. 28 By this logic, opportunity would draw industry and mechanic labor outward beyond Charleston’s boundaries, stimulating the countryside, diffusing danger, and purifying slavery’s stronghold in a single stroke.

Railroad boosters never aimed to transform rural life. The transportation revolution they imagined simply replaced poorly maintained, seasonally impassable roads with the clock-conscious, cost-effective certainty of the iron horse. On this basis, they believed, farmers would be drawn away from cotton monoculture, and a broad range of goods, restricted to local markets by high conveyance costs, would gain wider circulation. Their goal was to catalyze the countryside’s already growing vitality by overcoming physical and fiscal bottlenecks, funneling agrarian and industrial wealth from the hinterlands, through their hands, to Europe and the North. 29 More than this, Charleston commercial firms would provide a conduit for all manner of

27 Christopher G. Memminger to James H. Hammond, April 28, 1849, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC.

28 Derrick, Centennial History of the South Carolina Railroad, 16-19.

finished goods from beyond the region, linking planters, rising farmers and mechanics to the consumer items so useful in asserting honor, taste, and respectability. This sort of trade had defined the city since early days.\(^{30}\) Railroad proponents had no idea of altering its terms or deflecting its course. Rooting and regularizing relations of production and exchange, boosting output, they expected simply to skim off a portion of the windfall profits their efforts earned in balancing stability and growth. That is how such men have ever thought.

A generation later, though, South Carolina had hardly traded its way to prosperity. Emerging from seven years of economic depression in 1844, Charleston gazed out at an economy and society which looked disastrously unlike the world it had known before the locomotive. On one side, prosperous plantations multiplied across the midlands and the upcountry, focused increasingly on slave labor and cotton production. On the other, non-slaveholding farmers found themselves squeezed onto smaller plots and marginal lands, driven into agricultural tenancy, or compelled to leave the state altogether. A despairing caste of landless farm labor was establishing itself at the same time and--by the same capitalist process--a lordship of land and labor employing it was arising from the planter elite and its lieutenants.\(^{31}\)

Worst of all, for many Carolinians, these years seemed like boom times. Indeed, by 1845, a “Rail Road Mania” gripped the state, promising rapid growth and wondrous wealth. For those with deep pockets or long lines of credit, these were splendid years, and in Charleston especially it was easy to miss the perfect storm of ruined lands, heavy debts, and stagnating crop yields capsizing republican ideals and shaping a white southern working class. The astonishing


deindustrialization of the countryside—the abandonment of small mills and workshops, the shift from “home work” and piece rates for “domestic” items like cloth and shoes to wage-based factory labor or simple unemployment—was an appalling death-by-a-thousand-cuts for many farm families, carried out too far from King Street’s bustle for city folk to take much note of. In Charleston, the great cry of the hinterlands for more credit, more capital translated into asking urban banks to solve rural problems. That was like throwing gasoline on a fire.

Railroad expansion meant to widen King Cotton’s empire, strengthening slavery by broadening its base. Lowering hard-pressed blacks was supposed to raise near-destitute whites. And, long before Emerson’s set—or Marx’s—began moaning about how capitalism debased human nature, elite Charleston saw the problem and believed it had found the only workable solution. When capitalist “Utility,” the “Earth-born God,” threatened “to convert the world into one great work-house, or Panopticon,” crushing every independent moral impulse “until it brings about that millen[n]ial state of things in which each individual will live, like a working Bee in his cell, hoarding up his own little peculium, and keeping a watchful look out that his neighbor does not… acquire any larger share of the means or enjoyment of life, than himself;” slaveholders strode forward in defense of “Genius, Virtue and Heroism… Pride and Ambition.” Linking progress and stability, individual opportunity and social responsibility, advancing civilization

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33 Free Trade, Hard Times: Printed in the Charleston Courier, September 1857 (Charleston, 1857); A Compilation of All the Acts, Resolutions, Reports, and Other Documents, in Relation to the Bank of the State of South Carolina, Affording Full Information Concerning that Institution (Columbia, 1848); J. Mauldin Lesesne, The Bank of the State of South Carolina: A General and Political History (Columbia, 1970), esp. 101-116.
without erecting “Temples of Mammon” in their midst seemed impossible on any other basis.

“[T]he interests of labour and capital can never be permanently or properly reconciled,” explained William Henry Trescot, “except under the institution of slavery.”34

By mid-century, though, that exception had proven palpably false. The growth of commercial agriculture and the flood of foreign manufactures carried by rail into the hinterlands had wrecked rural industry in South Carolina and driven laboring whites down below the level of bondmen. Now the ox was in the ditch. How could property-holders find “safety” from the “thousands of poor, ignorant, degraded white people among us,” asked William Gregg, “who, in this land of plenty, live in comparative nakedness and starvation?”35 The political implications of their tumble pushed intellectual leaders of the master class first to deny the possibility of a fall, then to proffer a series of self-deceiving remedies for their plight. In the 1840s and ’50s, elite Carolinians knit debates over railroad development, bank charters, the slackening of usury laws, and the encouragement of industry based on wage labor into a single political problem: devising a successful strategy of economic dominance and class rule.

Utterly confounded and increasingly alarmed, what else could they do? “It is hardly possible to imagine a situation more truly deplorable,” Robert Mills had declared in 1826, “than that of a person born to better prospects, reduced by unmerited misfortunes to poverty, and doomed to pass his or her life in one continued and hopeless struggle, with want, shame, and despair.” Thankfully, such cases were anomalous, he believed, and soon to eradicated altogether. While Europe and the North worried over burgeoning class conflict, economic

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34 S*****s, “Modern Improvements,” 219; Trescot, The Position and Course of the South, 9; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders’ New World Order (New York, 2008).

growth in the South would dispel such tensions. “[E]very negro employed in the coarser tasks of all the mechanic arts, releases to a less monotonous range and wider limit of avocation, some better mind,” promised better-minded Sam Dickson. Working his way across the state in 1841, the British tradesman William Thomson noted that mechanics in rural South Carolina still considered themselves “men of honor,” resenting “any indignity shown them, even at the expense of their life, or that of those who venture to insult them.”

Bosses, too, watched that overbearing ways did not blacken their name with workingmen or consumers, nurturing a nice sense of paternalist reciprocity. So it always would be, solons believed smugly. “The nature of our domestic arrangements,” Dickson told Charleston reformers, “has effected... the absolute extinction of the mob.”

If only! Instead of disappearing from their midst, wage laborers—or “wage slaves,” as critics called them—multiplied alarmingly in these years, growing in visibility and fractiousness. Still worse, planters grumbled, these toilers did not seem as grateful as slaves for the chance to labor, nor did they wish to work as hard. Across the 1840s and ’50s, outmigration staved off the sort of social upheaval which roiled northern cities in these years. Yet politicians and ideologues viewed the growth of a landless white underclass with mounting alarm. By 1845, William Gregg counted fully fifty thousand “miserable” white adults, “but little elevated above

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36 Mills, Statistics of South Carolina, 340; Samuel H. Dickson, Address Delivered at the Opening of the New Edifice of the Charleston Apprentices’ Library Society, on the Evening of the 13th January, 1841 (Charleston, 1841), 20; William Thomson, A Tradesman’s Travels, in the United States and Canada, in the Years 1840, 41 & 42 (Edinburgh, 1842), 23. See also Charleston Courier, June 4, 1838.


38 Dickson, Address Delivered at the Opening of the New Edifice of the Charleston Apprentices’ Library Society, 26.

39 For examples of slaveholders’ surprise at these self-respecting attitudes, see Delle M. Craven, ed., The Neglected Thread: A Journal from the Calhoun Community, 1836-1846 (Columbia, 1951), 142; Entries of June 6, 16, 23, July 2, 3, 4, 6, 15, 23, 24, 28, 1857, David Wyatt Aiken Farm Journal, SCL, James H. Hammond to Beaufort T. Watts, September 9, 27, 1844, Beaufort Taylor Watts Papers, SCL.
the Indian of the forest,” forced to sell their labor-power for wages in the countryside. Five years later, ex-governor James Hammond confirmed Gregg’s dismal arithmetic. The well-posted Columbia planter James Taylor doubled their tallies. Poverty trumped prosperity in South Carolina, he warned, and so did its votes. “So long as these poor but industrious people could see no mode of living, except by a degrading operation of work with the negro upon the plantation, they [were] content to endure life in its most discouraging forms, satisfied that they were above the slave, though faring often worse than he.” But what could keep discouraged whites so fatalistically content? Who could say when they would turn upon their betters with fire and sword? Waste no worries on the chimera of slave revolt or meddling Yankees, Taylor told his fellows. “It is this great upbearing of the masses that we are to fear, so far as our institutions are concerned.”

The first fruit of Taylor’s warning showed itself in Charleston in the mid-1850s, as young men tumbled from the countryside into the city, unskilled and empty-handed, driving off immigrant workers, and striving against local blacks for the chance to sell their wit and strength for cash. As cries of “Tight Times” and “Hard Times” echoed across the state, workers’ tales of rural mischance, foreclosure, and entrapment in the laboring mass attained a frightening familiarity.

Ultimately, railroads were only the chief sign of capital’s coming to the Palmetto State. They had been summoned by prospects of the vast profits cotton conjured, and served admirably—along with banks, insurance companies, and various joint-stock ventures—as

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vehicles for their extraction. As it turned out, though, the locomotive’s linkage of Charleston to hinterland wealth also joined its fortunes to their fate. The so-called “market revolution” railroads sponsored transformed life in the Queen City as fully as it did in rural South Carolina, in ways few anticipated or desired.42

Elite Charleston’s determination to maintain the peace and order of its genteel life offered a typically Carolinian compromise: the South Carolina Railroad’s southern terminus was built on what was then the city’s northern boundary. From there, passengers and freight had to be hauled miles downtown or to the wharves by wagon or omnibus. But that border could not be long defended. Three decades later, the railroad’s repair shops and warehouses had spread ominously south across Boundary Street. The repeal of the city’s restrictive ordinance pushed the road itself down to John Street, deep in the Fifth Ward. The inner sanctum of the lower town remained inviolate but besieged.43

It was, in the end, less the locomotive than the Age of Iron which elite Charleston hoped to hold at bay. Railroads stood as convenient shorthand for a host of threatening changes the master class could neither easily integrate nor banish. Nearly all related to the rise of a proletarian “rabble” in their midst. Far from dwindling away, by 1860, Charleston’s white working class had advanced both in numbers and militancy. As faces on the shop floor multiplied and grew less familiar, as strange names, odd accents, and alien habits strove with

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tradition, personal ties between boss and worker frayed. During these decades, too, master artisans in Charleston shifted from the workbench to the store counter, washing their hands and rolling down their sleeves. By mid-century, many shared only a memory of tradecraft with the men they hired. Overwhelmingly Carolinian by birth, and steadily parading their respectability, skilled workingmen and their kin still seemed to many middling Charlestonians an alien presence and a worrisome source of social division.

It had not always been so. Artisans had played an important role in the city’s Revolutionary history, and from 1794 onward, the Charleston Mechanic Society celebrated skilled labor’s contributions to civic life. “If there is any man in society upon whom we look with esteem and admiration,” declared the Saturday Bulletin, “it is the honest and industrious mechanic.” The signposts of merit were obvious: “commencing in poverty,” the patient youth raised himself “by his own unaided exertions” to “a respectable station in life.” The example of blue-collar respectability proved that “[u]ntiring industry and virtuous ambition” would “never fail of their reward.” Across the early national period, propertied artisans served as examples for working-class youth, training them as apprentices, guiding and employing them as journeymen, sponsoring libraries and lectures for their moral improvement, maintaining fire companies and voluntary associations to link their labors with the larger social project.

44 Beyond the South, this story has been told best by Paul E. Johnson, A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837 (New York, 1978).

45 Charleston Mercury, June 5, 1856, February 4, 1857, February 8, March 14, November 12, 1859, January 16, 1861; Charleston Courier, February 5, 1855, February 4, 1859.

46 Yates Snowden, “Notes on Labor Organizations in South Carolina, 1742-1861,” Bulletin of the University of South Carolina, 38 (1914): 5-9; Constitution of the Charleston Mechanic Society, Instituted at Charleston, South Carolina, 1794 (Charleston, 1858); Charleston Saturday Bulletin, August 18, 1838.

Ultimately, Charlestonians believed, grit, sweat and skill would pay off in the shape of snug households, solid reputations, and a workshop of one’s own. Each generation ushered the next along the path of economic success and social recognition. “[T]here is no ministry more sacred than that of the intelligent mechanic,” Bill Porter avowed. But as craft-proud master mechanics became cost-conscious shopkeepers, their concern for underlings faltered. When immigrant, seasonal, tramping, and even slave workers might do the same job cheaper than white Charleston-bred hands—and with less backtalk—master craftsmen came to see little purpose in favoring custom over cash. By the late 1820s, instead of apprentices, journeymen, and masters cooperating in a pattern of lifelong education shaped by kinship, age, and ability, bosses began freezing out journeymen, forming the Charleston Apprentice Society and a subsidiary Library Society to train up poor children in the habits of industry. Soon, with “LABOR and INTELLECT link’d hand in hand”—though segregated in clear categories of workers and management—the supply of available wage workers would be no longer restricted by the dictates of craft. Independent, half-trained youths, owing nothing to fellow workers, would toil more cheaply and pliantly.48

Literate laborers, unsurprisingly, were among the first to rebel, though attempts to form a clerks’ union in 1825 came to naught. As late as 1841, elites declared that “the way to rise individually, socially and politically,” was yet “fairly open” for working-class youth, “and the ascent is as easy to him as to any other of his compatriots.” But that victory for “free labor” had been won by transforming young workers into semi-skilled “two-thirds,” lacking the craft

48 William D. Porter, “The Value of the Arts and Sciences to the Practical Mechanic,” in The Charleston Book: A Miscellany in Prose and Verse, ed. William G. Simms (Charleston, 1845), 162; Charleston Courier, September 20, 1856; John A. Moore to Fraser and Fraser, July 20, 1833, Thomas Boone Fraser Papers, SCL; Dickson, Address Delivered at the Opening of the New Edifice of the Charleston Apprentices’ Library Society, vii. Not all proved suitably pliant, however. See, e.g., Charleston Courier, June 1, 1854. On these changes broadly considered, see Stuart M. Blumin, “Black Coats to White Collars: Economic Change, Nonmanual Work, and the Social Structure of Industrializing America,” in Small Business in American Life, 100-121.
knowledge, social ties, and traditions to step upward by their own effort, and hungry enough to toil for two-thirds of a journeyman’s wage. Worse, it looked like the bosses’ victory had been won at the cost of craft and class solidarity masters and workmen once shared.49

At the very moment they cut free from traditional ties of duty to employees, bosses demanded that workingmen hold fast to just those obligations of duty toward superiors and the broader community. The fortunes of the “honorable mechanic” were integral to the well-being of other social classes, they declared, and of Charleston itself. “Who are the props and pillars of our public edifice? Who are the ‘bone and muscle’ of our society?” asked the Courier. “We say the mechanics and husbandmen of the land.” Workingmen of wisdom would “be each content with their lot,” the Mercury affirmed. True happiness lay in “the discharge of the duties” of one’s station, and for those aiming to ascend, “our institutions interpose no bars to the success and happiness of the moral and industrious” laborer.50 But by the mid-1840s there seemed little chance for most mechanics to rise, and the proud sense of manhood artisans drew from craft skill had withered and shrunk.

“If a man is poor,” William Thomson warned, “there are a hundred and fifty ways in which he will feel it.” There were as many ways, too, men might lash out in self-defense. Amid the first strikes in the state by railroad laborers, printers, and builders, an angry mechanic disparaged the new, prevailing attitude toward journeymen:

Ay, keep him down, what business has the poor man to attempt to rise, without a name—without friends—without honorable blood in his veins? We have known him ever since he was a boy—we knew his father before him & he was but a mechanic—and what merit can there be in the young stripling? Such is the cry of


50 Cheraw Gazette, November 15, 1836; Charleston Mercury, April 13, 1842. See also Charleston Courier, June 4, 1838.
the world when a man of sterling character attempts to break away from the cords of poverty.

It had not always been so, the writer implied, and hard-pressed mechanics would not suffer such indignities in silence for long.\(^5\)

Stepping off the train in September 1860 for a first glimpse of Charleston, it was easy to see why naysayers had tried to banish the locomotive to the city’s edge, why they regarded the new regime of bosses and two-thirds with doubt and dismay, why they fretted over the tide of masterless men who came to their city seeking a wage. South from the terminal on Columbus Street stretched the railroad’s workshops and forges, the most extensive in the South, employing over two hundred hands. To the east, on Meeting Street, sixty to seventy more mechanics worked at William S. Henerey’s foundry and machine shops. The main building was two and a half stories high and one hundred sixty feet long, equipped with “all the latest and most improved machinery” for working metal, “drills, planing machines, lathes, &c.” To the rear rose a casting house with two steam-powered blast furnaces, a fifty-foot smokestack and a searing smithery equipped with five forges.\(^6\)

Just west of here stood the three-story factory of Wharton and Petsch, the largest firm devoted to building railroad cars in the South. Since setting up in 1853, they had manufactured more than a thousand box and platform cars for the South Carolina Railroad alone. In September


1860, fully one hundred machinists, carpenters, blacksmiths, and mechanics were hard at work here, earning from ten to twelve dollars per week. It was steady labor: one hundred box cars for the Mississippi Central Railroad, twenty-five for the Northeastern Railroad, and fifty each for Florida’s Pensacola and Fernandina lines meant a good six or seven weeks’ work without interruption. The company ran two shifts of hands steadily, hammers echoing “to eleven and twelve o’clock at night.”

Wharton and Petsch provided work for a variety of smaller foundries and woodworking shops in the area, but were supplied chiefly by the Eason brothers’ massive factory sited a block south on Columbus Street. The Eason works paid eighty operatives in 1860 and had been “the nursery and finishing school” for southern metalworkers for decades. The first southern locomotive was built there in the 1830s, and in addition to producing castings for other firms, they did “a driving business” manufacturing “Machinery for Engines, Rice Mills, Saw Mills, Grist Mills, Threshing Machines, Ginning Machines, and every description of Mill Gearing, Shafting, and iron work generally made in a complete Foundry” for sale across the state and beyond.

They were not alone. Two blocks south off King Street, Hacker and Riker’s Washington Foundry and Car Factory had pursued a similarly thriving trade for more than a decade, even opening a branch in New Orleans. Employing fifty hands, they supplied railroad cars and machinery to firms in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and further afield. Gazing around at this maze of smokestacks, foundries, workshops, and factories for the first time, visitors might have

53 Charleston Mercury, August 2, September 5, 1860.
54 Charleston Mercury, July 6, 1860; Charleston Courier, May 27, 1859.
wondered whether they had truly come to the “Athens of the South,” or landed amid the mills and slums of some New-World Birmingham.\footnote{Charleston Courier, March 1, August 27, September 3, 1853, August 17, 22, 25, 29, 31, September 3, 7, 12, 1860; Charleston Mercury, July 18, 1860.}

“[D]readfully filthy,” Charleston seemed, “very ugly, and outrageously built!” Journalist Frederick Law Olmsted was appalled by what he saw. There was in Charleston, he declared, “as much close packing, filth, and squalor, in certain blocks, inhabited by laboring whites,” as in any comparable city in the industrial North. Man for man, too, the Yankee found “greater evidences of brutality and ruffianly character” here than anywhere in the nation. Arriving by rail in 1857, the Scots traveler James Stirling likewise brushed aside the moonlight and magnolias other writers emphasized. Charleston possessed “one or two good streets,” he allowed, “but even in them shabby wooden houses alternate with the finer buildings.” There was, to his eye, “no middle class” in this city, “only rich and poor.” Eagerness to foretell slavery’s doom tempted tourists to exaggerate what they saw, but even native William Gilmore Simms admitted that in Charleston “the palace” contended with “the hovel.” “[T]he aristocratic element must give way to the industrial” in this milieu, Stirling declared. Anyone alighting from the cars on Line Street would have agreed.\footnote{Léon Beauvallet, Rachel and the New World. A Trip to the United States and Cuba (New York, 1856), 306; Frederick L. Olmsted, A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States, with Remarks on Their Economy (New York, 1856), 404; Stirling, Letters from the Slave States, 249-250; [William G. Simms], “The Palmetto City,” Harper’s Monthly Magazine, 15 (1857): 6. Beyond the problem of growing resident poverty, Charlestonians faced a substantial number of “the transient poor,” embracing “persons from all parts of the State, and from foreign States.” In 1860, the city helped nearly 900 “outdoor pensioners” and 150-odd non-residents at the Almshouse, about two percent of Charleston’s white population. Charleston Mercury, January 23, 1861.}

Nor was factory life confined to the neighborhood around the railroad terminals. “The busy hum of industry,” the Courier crowed, “is heard all around us.” Along Charleston’s swampy west edge, steam-driven lumber mills, woodworking factories, and gigantic rice mills employing slave workers flanked the Ashley River. Foundries and factories clustered at the east
end of Hasell and Cumberland and along Concord Street, servicing the port’s steam marine and building engines of all types. A sugar refinery worth $80,000, a thriving shoe factory more than three stories high up on roughneck John Street, two competing gasworks capitalized at over $250,000, even a stained glass factory all operated within earshot of Broad. There was an ironworks on State Street, a block from old St. Phillip’s Church, and a carriage factory and tin smithery on Archdale, short steps from fashionable King Street. Scattered throughout the lower wards, too, were a score of sweltering rooms and workshops where women and men plied traditional crafts, especially in the needle trades. Elites confronted the sight, sound, and smell of industry everywhere as they traveled about Charleston. Rumor had it, one wit declared, the steeple of St. Michael’s itself would soon be converted to a shot tower. The terrain reserved for “the aristocratic element” was shrinking steadily.  

To William Carlisle, editor of Charleston’s commercial-minded Courier, these changes were good news. Once, city fathers had sought to restrict and marginalize steam-powered factories, just as they had excluded locomotives. Not only were they considered a blight on the urban landscape; they posed a dire threat in a community which had been devastated repeatedly by fire. In 1860, the risks were as great as ever, but civic attitudes had shifted. Though flames ravaged major factories—and jeopardized the whole city on occasion—across the 1850s, progressive Charleston was quick to lay the blame on incendiaries, not industry itself.  

“Such establishments are beneficial in the highest degree to the growth and prosperity of Charleston,”

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the *Courier* had long asserted. “It not only raises among us our own mechanics, but serves also, in an eminent degree, to keep them here, and to establish that class of men who have been so truly called the ‘bone and sinew of the country’.”

For Carlisle, there seemed little reason for propertied Charlestonians to fear the growth of a proletarian class: highly skilled, steadily employed, and earning from nine to twenty dollars a week in rigidly segregated shops, the mechanics he saw resembled no one’s idea of wage slaves, surely. They stood proudly apart from the soft-handed swells of the lower town, but also rejected kinship with the come-and-go crowd of jabbering foreigners who worked the wharves. For the disgruntled few who threatened to kick over the traces, the bosses and their political allies had developed a watchful police and a sturdy workhouse, mandatory schooling, blacklists, and terse laws against working-class “combination.”

When labor’s militant vanguard, the Charleston Typographical Union, walked out against the *Evening News* in October 1860 over the use of scab labor, its owner never flinched. John Cunningham strode unafraid into a clandestine union meeting, warning strikers that “Capital had the means in its power of resisting the demands of the workman”—and, doubtless, he was right. The printers’ protest failed within days and all but wrecked their union. Still, Cunningham, Carlisle, and their editorial brethren kept word of the strike out of their papers: there was no point in tempting fate.

What could not be denied was best projected outward. Selfish bosses, riotous workers, degraded immigrants, industrial squalor: these were the signs of the failure of Northern society,

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59 *Charleston Courier*, June 9, 1835.

60 George B. Eckhard, comp., *A Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, From the Year 1783 to Oct. 1844. To Which Are Annexed the Acts of the Legislature Which Relate Exclusively to the City of Charleston* (Charleston, 1844), 236-237; H. Pinckney Walker, comp., *Ordinances of the City of Charleston, from the 19th of August 1844, to the 14th September 1854; and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating to the City of Charleston, and City Council of Charleston, During the Same Interval* (Charleston, 1854), 2-3.

61 Minutes of October 1, 1860, Charleston Typographical Union No. 43 Records, SCL.
Charlestonians declared, a devilish system of exploitation which would surely come to smash.

At the South, civilization remained safe from that catastrophe only so long as slavery moderated and restrained industrial growth. By 1860, though, perhaps the balance had tipped. Disunionist political revolution now looked to some a better risk to run than Jacobin social revolution.

Charleston’s fear of internal disorder was evident to anyone arriving at the Line Street depot, or coming south to the city on the Northeastern route. Each passenger’s name and place of abode was recorded by the railroad and turned over to city officials.62 As they detrained, newcomers fell under the gaze of local police and the men of the blue cockade, each straining to read the character and identity of arrivals by their appearance and demeanor. A strange name, a peculiar face, queer clothes, a nervous fidget—anything which might prevent one from blending in and passing onward—could prompt attention, and perhaps questions, and perhaps worse. No one needed to see the secessionist banners hanging outside the Line Street station to recognize the danger Charlestonians felt. No one needed to glimpse the Citadel, the state’s fortress-like military academy guarding the railroad’s southern terminus, to know that this people was prepared to defend its all too rapidly changing world.

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62 The city ordinance requiring marshals to report “the arrival of all persons of suspicious character,” as well as “the strangers that come into their respective wards, and where they reside,” was enacted in the wake of the Denmark Vesey plot of 1822. Eckhard, comp., Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston, 162. By the winter of 1860, that spy system extended as far as Washington and New York. P. O. Bryan to Charleston Courier [January 16, 1861], P. O. Bryan Papers, SCL. On the waterfront, those legal requirements enlarged the duties of “wharfingers,” who policed the proceedings of individual docks.
A third route taught like lessons. Before the locomotive, when the State Road was new, almost all of Carolina came to Charleston overland, past the sickly swamps which lay north of the city, through the commercial netherworld of taverns, stables and cotton buyers straddling upper King Street on the Charleston Neck. “Large stores were established there,” the artist Charles Fraser remembered in 1854, “and, as wagons were the only means of transportation then used, extensive wagon yards were laid off for their accommodation. The cotton, as it came, was either purchased out of the wagons, or bartered for goods, and afterwards resold at a premium to shippers on the Bay.” Three generations before secession, cotton had begun to shape all aspects of the city’s existence.¹

By mid-century, Fraser had forgotten how difficult and dangerous the overland trek once had been. In 1820, Charleston seemed all but besieged by robbers and brigands. “Gangs of white desperadoes occupied certain houses” north of Charleston, journalist William King recalled, and “infested the roads” funneling toward King Street. With “fear and trembling,” travelers scanned the woods for danger, “carrying rifles in their hands,” as they dashed for the apparent safety of the upper wards. Finally, councilmen deployed three militia companies to stamp out bandits, but ever after wagoneers stayed watchful, moving in armed columns and avoiding strangers. They were far from home free. The threat of the counterfeit turned doubly

dangerous as rough paths became smooth roads and Charleston’s streets and shops beckoned rough men with smooth signs and come-ons.\(^2\)

The coming of crops heralded the gentry’s annual return from their plantations, beginning in November, when the Firemen’s Parade capped “Gala Week” festivities, and peaking toward the end of February, when Charleston celebrated Race Week.

Schools were dismissed. The judges, not unwillingly, adjourned the Courts, for they were deserted by lawyers, suitors and witnesses. Clergymen thought it no impropriety to see a well contested race; and if grave physicians played truant, they were sure to be found in the crowd on the race ground. Every stable in the city was emptied—every saddle and bridle put into requisition, and those who could procure neither horse, saddle, nor bridle, enlisted as pedestrians.

During this jubilee of wagers, balls, and conviviality, everyone flocked to the Washington Race Course, just west of King Street beyond the city limits, to watch the best horses run head to head. Revelry and excitement “pervaded all classes of the community,” Fraser remembered, yet at bottom the festival had a less than frivolous purpose. Against the anti-structure of reckless gambling, the solemn, regular order of commerce was reaffirmed.\(^3\)

“[I]n all this round of gaiety and enjoyment,” the artist noted, “business was not neglected.” Throughout the state, the winding-up of accounts was “generally postponed to the race week in Charleston, where the planter came to settle accounts with his factor, or to receive the proceeds of his crops, as well as to pay off the annual bills of the merchant, who had supplied him with groceries and other articles, throughout the past year.” Then, all men of honor and gentle profession were in attendance, saluting and congratulating each other’s good fortune.

Inevitably came the tap on the shoulder, the solemn look, the proffered bill, the hasty promise of


\(^3\) Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston*, 61.
payment anon. Voluntarily or otherwise, those coins would surely come. And so “the circulation of money thus produced, had its effect… in enhancing the general good humour.” Everyone loved Race Week.4

After the last pairing had been run and the last account totted up, the city endured a more mundane occupation by its squirearchy. At the end of March, commencement exercises at the College of Charleston offered new opportunities for toasts and speeches, and April 27 brought another Firemen’s Parade. But already the crowds were dwindling. By late May, warm weather and fear of disease had driven planters back to their estates or a healthful retreat in the mountains. Then Charleston sank into the doldrums--punctuated only by celebration of the Battle of Fort Moultrie (June 28) and the Fourth of July--till the train of burdened wagons reappeared in November, creeping down King Street to begin the annual cycle once more.5

By 1860, wagon days were long gone. The building of the South Carolina Railroad and the rise of a well-heeled cotton factorage system on East Bay and a jobbing trade on Hayne siphoned off most of upper King Street’s commerce. Over time, the intensity of Race Week wilted, partly from the hard times which dogged the gentry after 1837, partly from the urban sensations of theater, circuses, and minstrel shows with which it had to compete.6 Now a near-constant round of processions clogged Charleston’s streets: fraternal societies, craft organizations, ethnic groups, orphans, and more tramped down Meeting Street and up King in self-celebration. By 1850, there were thirteen firemen’s parades alone crammed between

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4John B. Irving, The South Carolina Jockey Club (Charleston, 1857); Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 61-63.


6Visitors still found Race Week thrilling in the 1850s, but old hands thought it had lost much of its zest. Jane M. E. Turnbull and Marion Turnbull, American Photographs, 2 vols. (London, 1859), 2: 97-103; J. Milton Mackie, From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics (New York, 1864), 94; Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 62.
November 21 and May 12. New celebrations—Calhoun’s birthday on March 18, raucous St. Patrick’s Day the night before, the Citadel commencement at month’s end, and the South Carolina Institute’s annual fair in early April—enriched and diversified public festivities. Incorporating the unruly Neck district into Charleston proper as “Upper Wards,” Five and Seven to the east of King Street, Six and Eight to the west, likewise refocused the boundary between town and country, order and disorder.

Now when visitors reached the north end of King it was not wagon-yards and glad-handing merchants which welcomed them, but tumble-down shacks and dangerous-looking saloons. “I find some of the grandest rascals here of any place imaginable,” one country boy declared in 1847. “And of all places for dirt and fools this is the greatest, of course.” When the wind blew westerly off Cooper River, the smoke and clatter of William Henry’s machine works wafted in with the stink of Lewis Hatch’s fertilizer factory, offering a particularly noisome greeting. Still there was a gauntlet of vice and crime to be run, though its character had greatly changed. Now the Neck was a threshold of pariahs and ne’er-do-wells, a “ghastly crew” of mulattoes, Jews, Irish day laborers, German tavern-keepers, deserted women, runaway slaves, the most riotous and hard-pressed of the city’s proletariat. For police in this neighborhood, picking the likes of Tom Tierney out of the gutter, or breaking up the quarrels of Maria Sweeney and Billy Finnegan was routine. For wardens of the city orphanage, it was lamentable but unremarkable that Catherine Cudworth surrendered her six-year-old daughter Alice to their care in 1856. Like many widowed mothers struggling to avoid the Poor House, she had already given


8 Stocking to Sylvester Stocking, November 9, 1837, Anonymous Papers, SCL (quote); The Diaries of Donald MacDonald, 1824-1826, ed. Caroline D. Snedeker (Indianapolis, 1942), 369-370; Peter Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States of America, Interspersed with Original Anecdotes, Illustrating the Manners of the Inhabitants of the Great Western Republic (Glasgow, 1830), 280; Gregory A. Greb, “Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants, 1815-1860: Urban Leadership in the Antebellum South” (Ph. D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 1978), 82; Freehling, Prelude to Civil War, 39-42.
up five-year-old Nathaniel four years earlier, and six-year-old Ella Mary and her eight-year-old twins Edward and Eliza two years before that. ⁹ For readers of the city’s newspapers—especially the anti-immigrant *Evening News*—there could be no surprise in learning that Otto Weiters or Herman Panzerbeiter had been hauled to court again: “groceries” like theirs were infamous as dens of gambling, liquor, violence, and interracial carousing. ¹⁰ Carriages coming down King Street moved a little faster as they passed through these slums.

By the eve of secession, though, even this frontier was in flux. Along its southern edge, pavestones were laid at last, gaslight glimmered and small enclaves of respectability sprouted, home to threadbare clerks and tradesmen. The citizens of the Upper Wards were “hard-working men,” not “border ruffians,” Up-Town John protested to the *Courier*. Down on East Bay, the “Neck Boys” were seen as “unfaithful sentinels at the outposts, ready to sell our beloved city for a mass of potash.” But this was a lie, he declared. They were “patriotic,” “industrious” men, paying heavy taxes and getting little benefit in return.

The condition of some of our streets would move you to sympathy and pity for us. You would see side-walks caving in, drains stopped up with filth, ditches full of bright green stagnant water, exposed to the burning rays of a noon-day sun, sufficient to generate pestilence for squares around. I will take you round the circuit of one of our boroughs, after last bell-ring, and if you can find a policeman

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⁹ *Charleston Mercury*, March 9, 1855; Susan L. King, comp, *History and Records of the Charleston Orphan House, 1790-1860* (Easley, S. C., 1982), 139. Cf. Barbara L. Bellows, “‘My Children, Gentlemen, Are My own’: Poor Women, the Urban Elite, and the Bonds of Obligation in Antebellum Charleston,” in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family and Education*, ed. Walter J. Fraser, *et al.* (Athens, 1985), 52-71; John E Murray, “Poor Mothers, Stepmothers, and Foster Mothers in Early Republic and Antebellum Charleston,” *Journal of the Early Republic*, 32 (2012): 463-492. For a time, Cudworth’s harsh strategy for family survival worked: in 1860, four of the children were back home on Nassau Street, Edward joining elder brother William to train as an iron molder in a nearby factory, Eliza and Ellen stitching away as mantua-makers—a job title which sometimes implied prostitution. Ten-year old Alice attended school, and Catherine, now fifty, was reported as pursuing no occupation. Perhaps she was ill, or treading a path illegible or illegitimate. But in 1861, disaster struck. City records show that Israel Wise, a Jewish carpenter working for the South Carolina Railroad, moved his sizeable family into the house. Catherine had died, and the Cudworths were gone. Schedule I (Free Inhabitants), Wards 6 and 7, City of Charleston, Charleston District, South Carolina, Eighth (1860) Census of the United States, Records of the Bureau of the Census, RG 29, NA; Frederick A. Ford, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1861* (Charleston, 1861).

¹⁰ *South Carolina Temperance Advocate*, February 16, 1846; *Charleston Mercury*, July 17, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, May 30, 1859.
anywhere within the sound of your voice, I’ll owe you one of Steele’s four-dollar beavers.\textsuperscript{11}

The Upper Wards should secede from Charleston, John concluded slyly. Others, doubting the emerging petit bourgeois character of Neck society he described—though not its problems—opted simply to steer clear of the suburbs.

Below Calhoun Street, where King marked the boundary between Wards Three and Four, the poverty and crime of the Neck seemed worlds away. Before 1820, Charleston’s retail district had been focused further southeast, along Broad and Tradd, and shopping was basically a one-stop affair. Each store carried a wide range of goods, Charles Fraser recalled, “from a two-pence yard of ribbon, through the whole scale of plantation and household commodities. At one counter might have been seen the planter purchasing his hoes and axes, his plows and saddles, his osnaburghs and negro cloth, whilst at another, in the same store, a lady was bargaining for her laces, her satins, and her muslins.” There was little variety in or between these shops, no grasp of the ideology of abundance which defines the modern department store. Shopping “in those days, was altogether a business matter.”\textsuperscript{12} The rise of King Street changed that forever.

Once the abode of “hucksters, pedlars, and tavern keepers,” by mid-century King near “the Bend” outshone the Battery itself as a place of fashionable resort. The British traveler James Robertson found this district in 1854 “thronged with both sexes, in a state of much enjoyment.” But the source of attraction he did not explain. His countrywomen, the peripatetic Turnbull sisters, left a fuller description of the scene, yet they too remained unclear about its spark. “The best shops are situated in King Street,” they explained, “and at about four o’clock the ladies and gentlemen promenade up and down this narrow dirty street, which has nothing to

\textsuperscript{11} Charleston Courier, June 22, 1860.

\textsuperscript{12} Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 12-13; Peter A. Coclanis, “Retailing in Early South Carolina,” in Retailing: Theory and Practice for the 21st Century, ed. Robert L. King (Charleston, 1986): 1-5.
recommend it, except that it is fashionable.” The shops were “fine and large”—particularly the best one, “which is termed the Stewart of Charleston.” Still, why locals might sally forth in such heat and dust to so little purpose seemed baffling. The Turnbells could not see what drew these crowds.13

Others had less difficulty spotting the source of fashion. For Charleston natives, it was the visual attraction of the rows of new shops, with their “gorgeous windows and dazzling display of goods emulating a Turkish Bazaar,” which “invite[d] them to a daily fashionable promenade.”14 The “crowds of people” who strolled past these “[l]arge stores, containing every species of merchandise, their front show-windows throwing into the street a blaze of light,” derived pleasure from situating themselves amid the splendor of consumption.15 A man looking for footwear could find dozens of styles, colors, and sizes at Timothy Bristoll’s shop (“at the Sign of the Mammoth Boot”), right opposite Steele’s Hat Hall. If nothing suited his taste there, he might walk a few doors down to William Bristoll’s emporium, specializing in “boots, shoes, and trunks,” or try any of the twelve other establishments ranging from Peter Corrigan’s store at 150 King (“at the Sign of the Golden Last”) to W. J. Yates’ shop at 354 King. Along the way, he would encounter a wealth of other sorts of merchandise, all enticing him to purchase in passing.

13 Charleston Courier, June 10, 1859, October 22, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 15, 18, December 25, 1860, February 2, 1861; Jeanne A. Calhoun and Martha A. Zierden, Charleston’s Commercial Landscape, 1803-1860 (Charleston, 1984), 37-40; James Robertson, A Few Months in America; Containing Remarks on Some of Its Industrial and Commercial Interests (London, 1855), 50; Turnbull and Turnbull, American Photographs, 2: 96. Cf. the corrupting power of “influence” in antebellum America, understood both as contagion and seduction, in Karen Halttunen, Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America, 1830-1870 (New Haven, 1982), 5.

14 Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 12.

In 1860, there were six bookstores on King Street below Calhoun, three wigmakers, four sewing machine distributors, six china shops, twenty-two confectioners, six daguerreotypists, eight dressmakers, three music stores, twelve druggists, forty-one dry goods merchants, three looking-glass vendors, and much else besides, including four hat shops. It did not take a visit to the astrologer Madame LaMars, over on Queen Street, to discover the magic of commerce, nor a sit-down with fortune teller Rebecca Stevens (sited opposite the workhouse) to tell that fortunes, large or small, culminated in disciplined self-management or disastrous debt. The come-on of consumption was just too strong.

In contrast to the miserly haggling which had characterized shopping in years past, now would-be customers found the marketplace a realm of “hospitality and the exercise of kindness.” Charleston storekeepers “talk not nor quibble about picayune affairs,” the Baltimore Sun noted. “Their ideas and intercourse are all upon an elevated scale. Honor, in its full sense, between man and man, was the governing principle and landmark of action.” Although critical of the slaveholders’ regime, British traveler James Buckingham was likewise impressed by the demeanor of the city’s commercial class. “[N]owhere does there appear to be a more gentlemanly and liberal mode of conducting business of every kind than here,” he declared, “mixed with great civility and politeness, and a freedom from that eagerness of gain which is so characteristic of the North.” King Street shopkeepers faced too much competition not to be ingratiating, but, more than this, they dared to take a soft-sell approach. Confronted with the

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16 James H. Baggett, comp., Directory of the City of Charleston, for the Year 1852. Containing the Names, Occupation, Place of Business & Residence of the Inhabitants Generally, With Other Information of General Interest (Charleston, 1851), 199; W. Eugene Ferslew, Directory of the City of Charleston, to Which is Added a Business Directory. 1860 (Savannah, 1860), 58.
warming abundance of desirable commodities, merchants came to realize, passersby would sell themselves on the need to purchase.17

Charleston’s “daguerrean galleries” offer a fine example of this new psychology. Rivalry was fierce between antebellum photographers: cost and requisite skill levels could be pushed low, a variety of picture-taking processes split the market, and, despite its appeal to vanity, their product was a discretionary expense. To remain profitable, daguerreotypists had to attract a large, steady volume of business. The most successful drew customers by designing shops as inviting portrait galleries, tastefully appointed and brightened by large skylights (apparently decorative, but necessary to the photographic process). This setting affirmed the genteel, “elevated” status of those who sited themselves within it, permitting face-to-face interaction with a range of social peers and superiors (or, at least, their images) which was new and exhilarating.18 In 1853, for example, the Courier enticed visitors with news that the entertainers “STRAKOSCH & PATTI’s Daguerreotypes Can be seen at COOK’S ROOMS’ also the Likenesses of Calhoun, Pierce and Scott, from life, with a beautiful array of lovely faces that cannot be met with elsewhere.” A year earlier, customers had thronged to admire the image of the actress Julia Dean and the risqué “pretty lady in the bloomers.” For awkward Tom Law, the Citadel cadet who visited photographer Jesse H. Bolles’ “Temple of Art” in 1857, it was just the hope “that I could see there the likeness of a young lady, for whom I have some attachment,”

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which drew him in. “As soon as I got in,” he told his diary, “I made it my business to examine the pictures on the table till I found the much desired one. I immediately seized it and took my seat, very well content to look at it till Mr. B. was ready for me.” What the outflanked young soldier did not quite grasp was that Bolles, like all King Street merchants, had been ready for him long before he arrived.19

“Customers, like sheep, are gregarious,” businessman David Gazlay explained in 1855, “and flock where they see others flocking.” The trick was to get them through the door of one’s shop, by hook or by crook. The come-on for “Carvalho’s Grand Sky-Light Daguerrean Gallery” was typical: all and sundry were “respectfully invited to visit this Gallery, whether they wish Pictures or not.” Once inside, “not” faded fast. The transformation of the visitor from curious sightseer to expectant customer, and the ritual of making a photograph intertwined with a skillfully rationalized labor process. Usually the “daguerreotypist” functioned as genial master of the house and tour guide. Ushering newcomers past portraits of notables and local worthies who had graced his studio, he waited for the moment when they asked for a sitting, and he would call forth his “operator,” camera at the ready. Ask they did, in surprising numbers. The allure of the store-as-gallery, consumption as enrichment of status and personality was overwhelming. Sitting (and paying) elevated the purchaser to the level of a notable, if only in the eyes of himself and the “daguerrean artist.” Customers came, bleated, and bought, and King Street prospered.20


Coming out of Steele’s Hat Hall, the temptation to present oneself to “the mirror of nature” was especially strong. Just across the street, upstairs at 234 King, was Ryan and Gardner’s attractive ambrotype gallery. A few doors south, at 223 King (between Van Schaak and Grierson’s “Sign of the Negro and Golden Mortar” and Charlton Bird’s “Sign of the Gold Spectacles”) were Osborn and Durbec, “photographists” producing images on paper using the latest version of Fox Talbot’s popular method. “Cheap Photographs! Cheap Ambrotypes! Cheap Daguerreotypes! Cheap Ivorytypes! Cheap Melainotypes!” they promised. Two doors down, the Glen brothers’ Palmetto Daguerrean Gallery begged patronage, offering pictures as low as a dollar each. Next to Steele’s on the north side upstairs, C. J. Quinby and Company sold “Talbottypes” locally and chemicals and camera equipment to studios across the South. Two doors on, at the corner of Market Street, were the galleries of George S. Cook, daguerrean and photographer both. Those who found nothing to their liking at any of these establishments might still stroll three blocks up to Liberty Street, where Jesse Bolles’ studio presented yet more samples of photographic skill, along with the paintings of portraitist Frederick Wenderoth. The lure was hard to resist.21

George Cook in particular stood as a model for King Street merchants. Born in Connecticut in 1819, he failed in early attempts as a storekeeper, “owing to the want of congeniality of taste.” In 1843 he moved to New Orleans, took up painting, and soon became fascinated with Daguerre’s new machine. When his photographic gallery struggled against cheap competitors, Cook loaded his gear into a wagon and set off after his fortune. By 1849, he...

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had set up in Charleston, though he did not stay long. At this time, daguerreotypists split
between those who imagined they were pushing back the frontiers of culture and others eager to peddle quick pics for easy cash. Cook was one of a handful who found a lucrative middle
ground between suffering art and bargain-basement commerce.22

First he landed in New York in 1851, managing Mathew Brady’s Broadway studio and mastering the methods that would make him wealthy. Brady was among the earliest to rationalize the photographic labor process, hiring other photographers to work for him, then replacing them with semi-skilled hands performing simple, repetitive tasks at cut-rate wages. There were operators whose only job was to seat their subject and take a photo by removing and replacing the camera’s lens cap at a timed interval. The silvered plate inside the camera box was then handed off to a second workman who chemically developed the image out of the customer’s sight and smell. A third fellow mounted the finished product in a metal case and passed it to Brady’s smiling manager for presentation to his satisfied customer, as if by magic. Here was a formula for success which Cook learned well.23 By year’s end, he had purchased his own gallery on Broadway, hired a manager, and shipped back south. In 1856, Cook went into partnership with the innovative Marcus Root of Philadelphia, setting up a gallery there three years later. But from 1852 on, King Street was home base.

Cook could hardly have picked a tougher time to break into the market. Daguerreotypists were fleeing the rivalry and low pay of well-organized northern houses (which Cook had helped entrench) and by 1853 Charleston was fairly swamped with photographers. Cook made out by


combining technical fads with the glamor of northern galleries. First he specialized in enlarging
the work of others. In 1854, he helped pioneer paper photography, a method that cut the cost and
transformed the meaning of pictures, sounding the death knell of Daguerre’s technique. By
1856, credit reports described Cook as Charleston’s “leading Daguerreotypist, doing a good
bus[iness]… [a] Very clever, quite gentlemanly man.” Four years on, his gallery was
Charleston’s largest and among the most prestigious in the South. He did “the Ton bus[iness] in
his line,” creditors noted, “& makes money.” Tax rolls for 1861 count Cook as owning a slave, a
carriage, and a mansion on the Battery. The Yankee boy had done all right.24

As with photographs on King Street, so it went for fancy goods, shoes, millinery, and
other commodities. Just opposite Cook’s gallery, on the northwest corner of King and Market,
stood Andrew Browning’s dry goods store, Charleston’s monument to commercialism. Three
bays wide, it mimicked the grand style of Alexander Stewart’s New York emporium, the world’s
first successful department store. Built in 1846, Browning’s establishment employed the same
psychological goads to consumption as the daguerrean galleries and other shops of King Street,
albeit on a grander scale. It thrived because it was a public attraction as well as a commercial
mart. “We were not prepared, and we confess it candidly, to hear that Charleston possessed not
only a rival but a conqueror of Stewart,” the Baltimore American admitted in 1853. But so it
was: until the New Yorker moved to a new building on Astor Place six years later, Browning’s
was “probably the most beautiful as well as the most extensive establishment in the world.”

The external style of the edifice is quite imposing; but the effect and arrangement
of the interior surpass anything in New-York or London. Extensive rows of lofty
columns lead the eye along the lower floor, from which it ranges upward around
the graceful galleries of three stories, until it reaches the dome-like roof, whence a
flood of mellow light displays at a glance the gorgeous contents of the bazaar….

24 R. G. Dun and Company, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, VI: 124, Baker, HU; Kocher and Dearstyne, Shadows
in Silver, 5-7; List of the Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860 (Charleston, 1861), 64.
The effect of the grand staircase, with the arched entrance to the saloon beyond, is described as extremely subtle.

Browning’s “splendid magazine” concentrated “everything of luxury or necessity that may be required by the notable housewives of the South,” the newspaper promised.\textsuperscript{25} It also distilled in purest form the new logic of bourgeois life which was King Street’s chief product. In small shops and large, its merchants had created a liminal sphere of consumption, made the process of purchasing a attractive and pleasurable, and injected goods with connotations of elevated status and personal worth. They turned shopping into recreation, a psychologically and socially satisfying leisure activity, by lending visual appeal. Those who came to look, paused--sheep-like--to browse, and often stayed to buy. By division of labor and large volume, King Street merchants also undertook to drive down prices, creating the illusion of spending as saving. Though their clustered stores split the market each hoped to capture, common strategy helped enlarge the customer base. That was more than half the game. King merchants were tricksters by nature, one bookkeeper declared, “all Jews and worse than Jews—Yankees, for a Yankee can Jew a Jew directly.” Together, the shining abundance of their shops urged passersby to become purchasers. What they bought, or where, was of lesser importance. Once desire had been kindled, only a moderate skill, hospitality, and the law of averages were needed to make each firm profitable.\textsuperscript{26}


Interpreting King Street’s appeal solely from an individual standpoint, however, neglects deeper political meanings. By 1860, Charleston had more than doubled in size geographically and, though its white population remained relatively stagnant, was undergoing a dizzying round of internal migration. Especially in Wards Three to Six, home to the city’s middle class, the faces and relations of homeowners, renters, and boarders seemed to change constantly. Antebellum city dwellers were “men in motion,” scholars explain, “more like a procession than a stable social order.” That tag would have seemed especially apt in Charleston, where “[s]trange faces meet our eyes at every turn.” “I am here in the city in the midst of a crowd,” Thomas Young wondered, “but never did I feel more lonely & separate from my fellow man.” “[A]midst all the noise and bustle of the city life, I feel like a stranger who has naught to bind him to the people amongst whom he lingers,” John Barrilllon agreed, “a kind of void which requires more than Charleston holds to fill.” Impermanence, self-seeking, and anomie undermined community and bred mistrust. “We are in the midst of a restless age,” one local declared.

[M]an appears dissatisfied with everything around[. T]he wheels of progression are being moved with an astounding increased velocity[. P]ush! push! is the order of the day[. T]he arcane of nature is fast opening to the scrutiny of creation’s type, and ere astonishment ceases at one result, another crowds on us, and we have but little time for the gratification of wonder.


Increasingly, as social relations grew more complex, allegiances and identities overlapped and conflicted. Once, the stability, stark class division, and small scale of existence had allowed the man in the street to recognize those around him by personal acquaintance, or at least by outward appearance. Now a welter of occupations, ethnicities, churches, newspapers, and political factions fractured unity and muddled identity. With whom could a man find kinship? On what real and lasting basis?30

Those doubts troubled men and women across America in the Jacksonian period, and led to a remarkable upsurge in voluntary associations and social reform.31 As comforting traditions of family, status, and community crumbled under the weight of proletarianization, immigration, and urbanization, Americans established a host of more fluid ascriptive ties. “Americans of all ages, all conditions, and all dispositions, constantly form associations,” Alexis de Tocqueville noted in 1835. “They have not only commercial and manufacturing companies, in which all take part, but associations of a thousand other kinds—religious, moral, serious, futile, extensive or restricted, enormous or diminutive.” The world’s foremost nation of individualists became simultaneously and paradoxically a “nation of joiners” par excellence.32

That argument contemporaries developed and many historians still use to explain the unprecedented rise of voluntarism in the decades before the Civil War.33 It is largely persuasive.


But scholars have drawn evidence for this neat dialectical triad (besieged tradition→rootlessness→voluntary association) almost exclusively from the middle-class culture of northern towns and cities. In the South, and certainly in Charleston, things were different. There, individualism fought a well-entrenched, polymorphous code of honor for supremacy literally household by household. There, explanations of voluntarism must take into account both sides of that conflict, understanding the associational impulse not only as a brake upon egoism but as a supplement to and a substitute for—indeed, a class-based assault upon—honor’s ethos.

Comprehending nineteenth-century honor’s dynamics in the early twenty-first century is not easy. The southern code was relentlessly fluid and pragmatic, intensely local, constantly redefining itself. Yet the tale of one slave’s misfortune reveals much about honor’s essence in Charleston on the eve of disunion. A carriage belonging to the prominent Harleston family reached a railroad crossing, the story goes, just as a train approached. “Without a sign of hesitation,” the coachman drove on to near-disaster. When the shaken master, standing in the wreckage, asked his driver why he had not stopped, the slave, “dignified if dusty, answered in an aggrieved voice, ‘I see it, suh! But I t’ink dey would hab stop w’en dey recognize ‘twas we kerridge!’” However apocryphal, the satire illustrates well the aggressive mindset of the Palmetto elite and its retainers.

Through careful management of appearance and behavior in his dealings with the world,


the man of honor laid claim to status requiring deferential acknowledgment. “His associates were his equals,” Charles Fraser recalled, “and he looked down, as from a higher platform, upon all whose circumstances and pursuits differed from his own.” But simple assertion of honor was not always sufficient to establish the claim, as Harleston’s slave discovered to his chagrin. Privilege rested ultimately on potency, not pedigree. “We are all parvenus, pretenders or snobs,” William J. Grayson conceded, but some had the power to make claims of higher status stick.36 That was the kernel of rough wisdom at honor’s core. As anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers explains, “honor felt becomes honor claimed, and honor claimed becomes honor paid”—or refused.37 In this sense, honor was janus-faced, mediating between aspiration and social judgment. On one hand, honor demanded of its votaries constant introspection and ruthless self-measurement, not in terms of what one was, but of what a man’s peers might realistically consider him to be. On the other hand, it required every man to channel his behavior according to the fickle parameters of duty determined by the social group from which he claimed status. “For tis a union that bespeaks/ reciprocal duties,” William Trescot told a Charleston schoolmate, “Mutual attention is implied/and equal truth on either side/and constantly supported.”38

How honor shaped character, for good and for ill, is best seen in the passage of fiction the planter-poet William J. Grayson copied out as portraying “so clearly my Character, feelings & Ideas.”


Many people… think that there is nothing in you; & all the time you are unconsciously reading off their little shams & peculiarities & general traits of character & storing them up in your mind for thought…. [Y]ou have an instinctive shrinking from whatever is base that leads you to idolize human nature & think it better than it deserves & what you cannot condemn you strive to cover over with the mantle of Charity. You are not suspicious & you are tenaciously hopeful…. But, there is a weakness in you too. You are never certain of yourself. You act impulsively & then fret yourself for days with the idea that perhaps the impulse was wrong & the deed faulty.\footnote{Holme Lee, \textit{Kathie Brande; A Fireside History of a Quiet Life} (New York, 1857), 99-100.}

However conflicted Grayson and his class believed themselves to be, though, neither Hamlet nor Hotspur truly summed them up. They were simply propertied conservatives, trusting in the ability of culture and artifice to govern social behavior to their liking. At the core of the web of double-mindedness he described, Grayson identified honor’s other-directed governing principle.

“If you see that anyone looks down on you, you do not resent it but feel oppressed with your own insignificance & endeavour to rise in their esteem.”\footnote{Undated memorandum, William J. Grayson Papers, CU.}

Honor, then, was a profoundly politicized social ethos. Under its sway, personality became irresistibly porous. Men understood themselves and were understood in terms of their outward appearance, public deeds, relations with the world. They triangulated, measuring and re-measuring themselves in social perspective. Love, hate, sadness, anger, regret meant little as private feelings inwardly experienced. Those emotions, rather, attained reality and meaning as acts played out in the presence of others.\footnote{See, e.g., John R. Gillis, “From Ritual to Romance: Toward an Alternative History of Love,” in \textit{Emotion and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory}, ed. Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns (New York, 1988): 87-122; Lynn M. Voskuil, \textit{Acting Naturally: Victorian Theatricality and Authenticity} (Charlottesville, 2004). For an imaginative attempt to explain secession in terms of injured feelings, see Michael E. Woods, “The Heart of the Sectional Conflict: Emotion, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War” (Ph.D. diss.: University of South Carolina, 2012).} Men recognized, identified and bonded with each other because of perceived commonalities. Indeed, the human body literally incorporated honor in the minds of its devotees. An open countenance, a clear eye, a strong voice, a firm handshake
signified honesty and plain dealing. Facial features which were “manly” but not “handsome”—an outward quality connoting inner weakness or effeminacy—displayed secondary characteristics: the intelligence of a high forehead, the prudence of thin lips, the determination of a strong chin, the nobility of a long nose, the virility of whiskers. Carolinians’ preference for “well-proportioned” and “prominent” features and “erect” carriage pointed back inadvertently to the connections between self, sexuality, and politics honor made.\(^{42}\)

Though a man might rise in status over a lifetime, there were precise limits to his ascent. It was hardly an exaggeration to say that with regard to honor a man could no more alter his social position than he could change the nose on his face.\(^{43}\) This was so, southerners believed, because appearances and behaviors were generated ultimately by inter-connective essences over which a person had no control: within the body, by blood and semen; within society, by race, class, kinship, birth order, and other seemingly objective variables. Long after war and social change swept away the code of honor from the South, Carolina historians would still link blood ties with common traits and behaviors. In Marion County, northeast of Charleston, one Lupo or Arnest was much like another: “honest and hard-working people, primitive in their modes of living and habits.” Rogerses were “peaceable, harmless, inoffensive and law-abiding” by nature, Braddys “very ardent in their disposition” and “self-asserting.” Sinclairs “don’t marry much,”

\(^{42}\) Pitt-Rivers, “Honor,” 505; Christopher J. Lukasik, Discerning Characters: The Culture of Appearance in Early America (Philadelphia, 2010); Samuel H. Dickson, Essays on Life, Sleep, Pain, Etc. (Philadelphia, 1852), 44, 198. The ethos of respectability employed a similarly sexualized vocabulary, vying with honor for the same psychological and cultural terrain. Consider the approving notice of Charleston fireman David T. Menard’s “upright deportment and firmness of character.” Charleston Mercury, April 9, 1855.

\(^{43}\) Noses did sometimes change: they swelled and rotted off from the effects of syphilis, for example, and were sometimes disguised by cosmetics or replaced by crude prosthetics. Men found themselves shamed by having their noses slit or bitten off in affairs of honor. Elliott J. Gorn, “‘Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch’: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry,” American Historical Review, 90 (1985): 18-43; Kenneth S. Greenberg, “The Nose, the Lie, and the Duel in the Antebellum South,” American Historical Review, 95 (1990): 57-74. In Europe, attacks on the nose may have been more common between women than men. Bernard Capp, When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England (Oxford, 2004), 97-98; Pieter Spierenberg, A History of Murder: Personal Violence in Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present (London, 2008), 117-118.
while “wherever you find a Hamer, phrenologically speaking, you will find the bump denoting acquisitiveness fully developed, strong and prominent.” As such examples suggest, Carolinians resisted ascribing identity on an individual basis, for seemingly good reasons. Just as bodily representations of honor and self remained distinct but interdependent, personality in southern society seemed influenced both by heritage and propinquity. “LIKE PARENT,” the Rev. Thomas Smyth warned his Charleston flock, “LIKE CHILDREN!!!”

It was that simple. Honor provided a comforting deterministic explanation of the southern social order, both ranking and splitting off men hierarchically and linking them together. In Charleston, true gentlemen worthy of honor were the seed of “the Hugonot & the Cavalier.” To Alfred Huger, their social characteristics were unmistakable: “their granite-integrity—their fixed & Enduring friendships—their dauntless courage & the softness of their affections” presented the most “brilliant combination of Materials & of Character which have influenced mankind from their earliest history.” Not every fellow could come up to that mark, even south of Broad. “Ambition which looks no higher than human applause,” warned Nathaniel Middleton, “is the veriest slavery that exists on earth.” The man of honor’s aim would remain fixed on “Duty, God, Heaven.” As for the “nobodies” who lived around her, one Rutledge told another rather less high-mindedly, “I do not know whether they are gone [from Charleston] or not, nor does it at all signify; they are very pleasant neighbors keeping quietly to their own domain, they are never you know heard of or thought of by us, and if they concern themselves at all about us, it is as ‘the cat knows the king though the king does not know the cat’.” Nobody or somebody, honor required everybody to understand their position and duty, submitting to its

demands. The problem was to balance head and heart precisely, to know when duty required a man to assert himself, when it commanded him to yield.  

From cradle to grave, duty shaped and criticized the thoughts and actions of honorable men, molding southern culture. Against northern claims of individual freedom and virtue, elite southerners championed interdependence and reciprocity. Against absurd notions of social equality, they upheld regulated hierarchy as civilization’s root. Each social obligation unattained or neglected, David Jamison explained, opened the door wider, not only to Yankee “agrarianism, communism, spiritualism and Mormonism, but [to] infidelity, opposition to parental control, to the marriage tie, to law, and all the usages which time has consecrated as the necessary cement of society.” Compromise was fatal to duty, to honor, to their world itself. Carolina paternalists gave countless such warnings. “It is intended that we shall go forward to perfection,” Nathaniel Middleton told Charleston students. “We will enlist under the banner of the Ascii,” Charleston’s Elizabeth Poyas summed up, “those inhabitants of the earth to whom the sun is vertical—like them we will know no shadow.”

The strength of such sentiments waxed and waned in antebellum Charleston, yet their earnestness must have confounded gentlemen of the old school. To an earlier age, honor meant privilege, leisure, and license too, not moral uplift. That paternalism conferred responsibilities on the elite as well as customary rights had been easily forgotten. Before 1820, no one would

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45 Grayson, “Character of a Gentleman,” 68; Alfred Huger to Robert N. Gourdin, August 23, 18[59?], Robert Newman Gourdin Papers, EU; Nathaniel R. Middleton, Address delivered before the Chrestomathic Society of the College of Charleston, at its Organization, November 24th, 1848 (Charleston, 1849), 13, 15; Rebecca M. Rutledge to Edward C. Rutledge, March 9, 1833, Rutledge Family Papers, SCL. In this sense, though honor embraced men and women, white and black, slave and free, young and old, only a small cadre of potent, propertied, adult white males could be said to possess honor, since only they could successfully assert and defend claims to honorable status. For the rest, duty entailed submission to honor’s just claims, above all.

have imagined portraying slavery as a positive good or planter society as the acme of conservative civilization. That chattel bondage allowed slaveholders to grow rich quickly and wield power to their liking was ethic enough. But by 1860 the culture of honor was besieged in South Carolina, as in much of the Western world, and the gentry’s choices had come down to self-reform or self-destruction. The trouble was, though honor embraced all men, it reserved its richest prizes for the upper ranks, barring entrance to all but a handful pushing up from below. That was its political purpose. For men of superior ambition but lesser means, the only alternative was to embrace a different, if potentially parallel status system. On the eve of Lincoln’s election, honor’s position as the dominant measure of personal attainment in Charleston was threatened by the market-driven ideal of respectability.

The culture of respectability took root first within the urban middle class of England and the United States in the early Victorian period as a buttress against hedonistic excesses pinching bourgeois society from above and below. Like honor, respectability structured reputation in terms of outward appearances and behaviors, not inward consciousness: the feelings of the heart were too easily misapprehended or mimicked by those seeking to gull the unwary. Among men

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49 Honor and respectability were deadly foes, yet some Carolinians shifted deftly between these systems. Unsurprisingly, these were mostly men who straddled the worlds of town and country, North and South. Compare William G. Simms, The Life of the Chevalier Bayard: “The Good Knight,” “Sans peur et sans reproche” (New York, 1847); idem, Self-Development. An Oration Delivered Before the Literary Societies of Oglethorpe University, Georgia; November 10, 1847 (Milledgeville, 1847).

50 On the emergence of respectability as a cultural imperative, consider the excellent essays in Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture, ed. Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler (Berkeley, 1999), and The Middling Sorts: Explorations in the History of the American Middle Class, ed. Robert Johnston and Burton Bledstein (New York, 2000).
of honor, private emotions and intentions were simply irrelevant in calculating social standing. Likewise, for devotees of respectability, purity of heart was a goal to be prayed and striven for, but only the outward evidence of praying and striving could be calculated with any sort of assurance. Under honor’s regime, a man was the sum of his social relations, no more or less. For advocates of respectability, though, this led inevitably to a hypocritical “flunkeyism.” Society became a system of “Toadyism organized:--base Man-and-Mammon worship, instituted by command of law.” Respectable folk, rather, scrutinized outward demeanor to glimpse signs of the inner man. In this view, men and women were stubbornly individual, defined by self-actuated conduct and discrete temperament. Identities were irremediably singular. 51

Under each system, the hallmarks of personal worth were publicly paraded and not easily disguised. Qualities respectability venerated clashed directly with those honor’s code upheld. Piety, thrift, diligence, candor, propriety, temperance, and like virtues were not fit topics of discussion among men of honor. Indeed, a too-close inquiry could be positively dangerous. For respectable men, these were clues, foundations of character which a man might strive to cultivate or ignore at his peril. They were peculiarly reflexive, not relational qualities by which he would be measured and held responsible.

The achievement of the honorable man was always gauged with an eye toward what had been: reputation flowed from the past, real or imagined, to the present, and was fixed by an imprecise equation of the two. But that was the attitude of the snob, respectable men held, one “who meanly admires mean things,” transferring merit from a dubious source to an undeserving object. In the culture of respectability, all attention was directed toward the future. “You must

scorn delights,” William Gilmore Simms warned southern youth, “you must live laborious days. You are not to think of pleasure, or wealth, or even fame, except as the humblest incidents and tributaries in the prosecution of duty. This duty is life, and life is self-development.”

What a man was today offered the surest sign of what he might become tomorrow. It was this individual journey of self-development and its final destination which counted. Not that a man might not suddenly change course: the whole evangelical and reform movement of the age was based on just such an allowance. But there were definite paths to be trod with progressive steps of reward or punishment. Though all began innocent in the cradle, some rose up to a home in heaven, others slid down to a place in hell. It was all a matter of will.

Honorable men never went as far as this, but their mindset blended agency and determinism too, in a far more pessimistic way. So conservatives like Isaac Hayne hoped that Charleston might gladly turn back to “the noble, the elevated, the disinterested, the pure, the gentle.” The tide was against it, he knew.

No, the spirit of the age is material, sensual, “of the earth, earthy”—producing, and produced by, a spirit of trade, traffic, and thrift—characterized by an eagerness for gain—unparalleled in the history of the world—unless, perhaps, that Antediluvian race were our equals, whom a just God in his anger swept from the face of the earth. “Mammon…” is alike the idol of the age, and of our country. Avarice is the all absorbing passion, stimulating and concentrating the mighty energies of a great people on the single purpose of accumulation—maddening the brain—scorching, searing, drying up at their sources, the fountains of genius, and of all generous and gentle emotions.

For men like Hayne and Grayson, who saw their honorable world suddenly go mad for “acquiring wealth” (conveniently forgetting their own rawboned ancestry), there was little

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52 Thackeray, Book of Snobs, 12; Simms, Self-Development, esp. 42.
alternative except simultaneously to exaggerate and ignore the threat. How could they confront its claims head-on?

Across the Victorian era, a flood of books, articles, lectures, and sermons cascaded down on Anglo-Americans, declaring the necessity and particulars of being respectable. Anyone might put on a show of one or another of the manly virtues, but few were fooled. “No man can be properly called virtuous who is not habitually so,” the Presbyterian divine James Thornwell explained. The respectable man proved integrity of character in the most theatrical sense: the personological aspects of the role he performed hung together seamlessly. Considered as a map or stage, his position in the terrain of virtue and vice was plotted precisely. Nothing could be more discomfiting to honor’s champions.

Fear of subversion in all forms—snobbery, hypocrisy, denial of merit—drove respectability forward, and with it the ideal of the self-made man. In contrast to the man of action honor paraded, self-made men stood out as bearers of character, not doers of deeds. They were, by no accident, remarkably staid and retiring fellows. Passivity gave the purest proof of self-control. But, as literary historian Nina Auerbach explains, as Victorians sought to realize their “best selves,” their efforts often trailed away into performance, trapping the self behind a mask. “To do, is to act,” she quotes Melville; “so all doers are actors.”

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53 Isaac W. Hayne, Anniversary Address on the Formation of Individual Character, and the Causes which Influence It; Delivered before the Erosophic Society of the University of Alabama; December 12, 1840 (Columbia, 1841), 6-7.

54 “Novels,” undated manuscript, James Henley Thornwell Papers, SCL. Cf. Stephen Mihm, A Nation of Counterfeiter: Capitalism, Con Men, and the Making of the United States (Cambridge, 2007). This prescriptive literature had a greater influence on Charlestonians than historians have recognized. Among the most influential works, see E. P. Rogers, Earnest Words to Young Men, in a Series of Discourses (Charleston, 1851); Dickson, Essays on Life, Sleep, Pain, Etc.; Nehemiah Adams, Man’s Place in the Universe: A Sermon Delivered at the Installation of Rev. Thomas Osborne Rice as Pastor of the Independent or Congregational (Circular) Church, Charleston, S. C., April 1, 1860 (Charleston, 1860).

The fear that equation aroused struck to the core of honor’s ethos, especially in Charleston. Theatricality was the stock-in-trade of the swindler, the false-hearted harlot, the counterfeit gentleman. Who was safe when fakery invaded the public realm, the “calculating selfishness of the demagogue,” and the “charlatancy of political empirics” masquerading as statesmanship? The awful realization that ordinary men and women might slide into the same devices—or worse, that they enacted multiple selves in the course of everyday life—was too troubling to contemplate for long. But how to escape from behind the mask? “It is scarcely possible to be ourselves without acting ourselves,” Auerbach admits, “but to be sincere we must not act.”

Or, more precisely, Victorians dared not be seen as acting. Either the observer’s gaze had to be outrun—by fragmenting the world into various “spheres,” for example—or the division between actor and audience broken down. In nineteenth-century theatre, this imperative drew patrons to melodrama, a mode of performance rooted in a “complex but infallibly readable system of coded gestures.” As in the grammar of cultural analysis Martin Meisel calls “realization,” the meaning of action here was revealed by connecting clues. The first step in this comforting decoding was the delimitation of a performance space—a market, a political rally, a parlor, a parade—and the common affirmation that within this liminal sphere actors were not merely acting. In Victorian society, as stages of action multiplied, the willing suspension of

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disbelief became a precondition, yielded uneasy and sometimes faithlessly, of daily life under respectability’s regime.58

Central to the power of this ideology was the way it discounted the fitness and permanence of honor’s elite. High birth or property offered no advantage in the quest for respectability, advice manuals intoned: “the man of iron will may safely pursue his way to success and competence.” “We may still keep alive the artificial distinctions of birth and ancestry,” Columbia lawyer David McCord allowed,

we may still interdict from our fashionable circles whoever comes not wearing cloth-of-gold; we may still establish our Almacks, and our select assemblies; we may still throw around society ever so many barricades… to prevent the approach of the man of ignoble parentage and humble condition; but let us give to that man of humble condition the opportunity to cultivate his mind, and to improve…the gift of his Creator within him; and he will soon turn into withering contempt and ridicule our secret and select assemblies; he will soon and easily level… our threatening barricades [and] march directly and boldly into the very citadel of society, and share its pleasures, its counsels and its honors, in common with the proudest and most wealthy in the land.

“Riches and rank have no necessary connexion with genuine gentlemanly qualities,” British exhorter Samuel Smiles agreed. “The poor man may be a true gentleman—in spirit and in daily life. He may be honest, truthful, upright, polite, temperate, courageous, self-respecting, self-helping—that is, be a true gentleman.” By that standard, the closed circle of elite clubs like Charleston’s St. Cecilia Society was as likely to be ill-bred as over-bred. Respectability announced a superior pedigree.59

Men performed respectability in melodramatic style: through one’s features, clothing, manners, and gait, through one’s household, possessions, and associates, through geographic


situation, a careful balance between self-assertion and self-control. Shiny sleeves, reddened eyes, a “choleric” temper, forward manners, an impulsive streak: each offered warnings that a man fell short in one way or another. Yet it was dangerous to judge too hastily. A fellow might be down at the heels, but with diligence, honesty, good companions, and patience he would surely rise. The furniture dealer E. R. Cowperthwait had only a small capital, credit reporters noted in 1848, yet he was “hon[est], indus[trious] & saving,” well on the road to becoming a “Snug man” with a “fair bus[iness].” “When you see a young man diligent in his calling, industrious in all his habits, and… devoting himself to his business,” E. P. Rogers explained, “you at once have confidence in his character.” The French summed it up in the phrase comme il faut: a respectable man did respectable things in respectable places among respectable people. The link with—and threat to—honor’s shape-shifting credo became explicit in that term.60

There were any number of ways for honorable or respectable men to show worth, but the conflict between these perspectives and its social implications are best understood by considering the central tendency of each. The man of honor did his duty. The respectable man met his obligations. How vast the gulf between these imperatives: duty was an amorphous quality, socially defined, obligation a precise quantity, contractually delimited, calculated finally in dollars and cents. The honorable man gained reputation. The respectable man earned credit. “[T]he whole composition of our society is arithmetical,” one contemporary noted, “each gentleman ranking according to the numerical index of his property.”61 That new math filled honor’s votaries with horror.62


61 Stow Persons, The Decline of American Gentility (New York, 1973), 20. On credit-worthiness as the core value of respectability, see (Philadelphia) Mechanics’ Free Press, October 2, 1830; Boston Investigator, December 18,
The honorable man—worth a lick—might not yet be worth a loan. Among respectable men, Isaac Hayne warned, “MONEY, with its attendant rank and influence, is… openly proclaimed to be all in all, and VIRTUE ridiculed as the dream of the enthusiast, or the catch word of the knave.” Across the 1840s and ’50s, conservative Carolinians sneered at the emerging power of capital, damning its zero-sum ruthlessness and rejecting its sweeping, snooping redefinition of value. Though respectable folk ranked peers according to their desserts—for safety’s sake, if no other reason—the true apostles of this rising regime were the professional credit agencies and life insurance companies which sprang up in these years, transferring calculation of property values to the estimation of human worth. Its chief historians were the army of clerks, bookkeepers, and accountants who recorded the measure of respectability to be accorded each man, be they of the “deserving” poor, or a merchant “as sound as a dollar.” Respectability went hand-in-hand with possessive individualism and all the social alienation which came in its train. Zalmon “Wildman will never set an ocean on fire,” went one typical valuation, “but will always pay his debts promptly.” That made the hatter “good” in the most meaningful sense, and placed commercial King Street at the epicenter of social revaluation in Charleston. In America, Alexis de Tocqueville explained, “the first of all distinctions is

1839, February 14, 1844, October 22, 1845; South-Carolina Temperance Advocate, February 13, 1840; (Columbus) Daily Ohio Statesman, January 8, 1841, January 28, 1850; Pensacola Gazette, April 2, 1842; (Jonesborough, TN) Jonesborough Whig, April 20, 1842, January 11, 1843; Boston Courier, June 13, 1842; (Montpelier) Vermont Watchman and State Journal, June 4, 1846; (Salt Lake City) Deseret News, August 10, 1854; (Fayetteville, NC) Fayetteville Observer, July 15, 1858. Cf. Craig Muldrew, The Economy of Obligation: the Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England (New York, 1998); Bruce H. Mann, Republic of Debtors: Bankruptcy in the Age of American Independence (Cambridge, 2002); Wendy A. Woloson, In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence through the Great Depression (Chicago, 2010).

62 See, e.g., Robert F. W. Allston to Adele P. Allston, April 24, 1858, Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers, SCL.

63 Hayne, Anniversary Address, on the Formation of Individual Character, 12; William J. Grayson, The Hireling and the Slave, Chicora, and Other Poems (Charleston, 1856); Porcher, “The Conflict of Capital and Labour,” 289-298.
money.” No maxim better summed up the tenets of emerging bourgeois society, or measured the tide turning against honor’s code.\textsuperscript{64}

But how exactly was respectability to be articulated? There was a variety of sites for its demonstration: the workplace, the public quarters of the home, church, and elsewhere. In these settings, though, participants remained relatively passive--even anonymous--hoping to be observed in the exercise of manhood as if by chance. But when respectable men came together in clubs and voluntary associations, a liminal sphere of the sort Auerbach describes was created, reversing the dynamics of display entirely. Here individuals paraded their virtues among other worthies, declaring respectability in the same way others claimed honor. Personal identity crystallized and won affirmation. In a setting shaped by commerce and dominated by an ethos of honor which denied entry to most men except as snobs or lackeys, the appeal of such groups is unsurprising. By the 1850s, voluntary associations flourished everywhere in the Queen City.\textsuperscript{65}

The broad range of groups Charlestonians supported on the eve of disunion testifies eloquently to the city’s social fragmentation and the difficulty of achieving unity on any issue, much less secession. In the first week of March, the \textit{Courier} announced meetings and parades for more than forty clubs of divergent interests, as well as a ball sponsored by the Young Men’s Union. The New England Society, Charleston Quadrille Association, Catholic Institute, Société Française de Bienfaisance, Charleston Mechanics’ Society, Ciceronian Association, Marine Total Abstinence Society, Charleston Debating Club, Ladies’ Calhoun Monument Association, Hibernian Society, Burns Charitable Association, Mutual Benefit Loan Association, Charleston

\textsuperscript{64} R. G. Dun and Company, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, VI, 34, Baker, HU; Francis J. Grund, \textit{Aristocracy in America: From the Sketch-Book of a German Nobleman} (New York, 1959), 84.

Chess Club, and more held regular weekly or monthly gatherings. More secretive fraternal groups like the Freemasons, Odd Fellows, and Sons of Malta also met, along with the militant Charleston Typographical Union, plus a shadowy club which denoted itself by the emblem “S.—1819—C.” In the streets, the Charleston Riflemen, German Hussars, Irish Volunteers, and Charleston Light Dragoons paraded. At firehouses around the lower wards, the Eagle, Marion, Charleston, and Vigilant companies drilled that week, as did the embittered, embattled Axemen. Meetings went on at midday, late afternoon, and into the night in halls, taverns and coffeehouses, churches, rented rooms, hotels, and public spaces across the city.66

In the first half of 1860 alone, more than 170 voluntary associations met regularly in Charleston. Examination of membership lists shows that men frequently belonged to three, four, or more groups at once, as time and money permitted. In this manner, they linked themselves to each other, mosaic-fashion, shaping and partaking of a common culture, yet neither sharing in it fully nor sacrificing selfhood to it. When respected locals like J. W. L. Tylee or William Albergottie gave testimonials to the benefits of bunion medicine in the Courier, friends in their respective ethnic, religious and charitable associations, fire companies, and leisure clubs—as well as neighbors and co-workers—knew that the product must be good. So, too, when they declared their political sympathies on the eve of disunion as members of the Vigilant Rifles, they drew others along in just the same way. Each of these men interacted regularly with more than four hundred others on a voluntary basis, and their example was not unusual. The city itself revealed a fluid geography of association and division, streets gridding a common ground of combination and exclusion where men at any hour might encounter strangers and acquaintances dressed in military costume or club regalia, dashing to or from meetings with a fraternal greeting

66 Charleston Courier, March 1-7, 1860. See also the list of organizations, extensive but far from complete, in Buckingham, Slave States of America, 1: 80.
or a secret sign offered in passing. The fellow who did not belong to at least one or two clubs, displaying the symbols of particular kinship, seemed odd—and suspicious, too.\textsuperscript{67}

From Charleston’s earliest days, there had been private circles of gentlemen devoted to high times, like the “Free and Easy” or the “Ugly Club,” as well as groups like the exclusive St. Cecilia Society, attuned to higher aims.\textsuperscript{68} Antebellum associations differed from these in numbers, organizational structure, multiplicity of interests, and size of membership. Not only were there many more groups Charlestonians could join, both in total and on a per capita basis. The societies were usually much larger than colonial counterparts, often running to a hundred members or more. Partly, this reflected the growth of leisure in antebellum life in terms of time and social importance. The man with no time for fraternal intercourse, apart from the necessities of the pub and the brothel, marked himself as irredeemably proletarian. Deeply suspect, repulsively alien, he stood at best on the ragged fringes of honor or respectability.

Rather than drawing status and prestige from exclusivity, most groups adopted a new ethic of strength in numbers. In clubs like the Freundschaftbund, the Cadets of Temperance, or the Apprentices’ Library Society, as well as in mass organizations such as the Masons or the Knights Templar, all were welcome who met the broad (though not indiscriminate) standards for membership. Here size and inclusiveness became features of attraction, expanding membership profiles, though seldom sponsoring outright heterogeneity. So, too, groups attracted members because of fraternal ties maintained with other clubs, lodges, or companies within the city, or the regional and national networks of branches they affiliated with. When Edward Henry, a young,


\textsuperscript{68} Calhoun, ed., Witness to Sorrow, 59-60; Ugly Club Song, 1790, SCHS.
single clerk from the upcountry, joined the Hammond Lodge of the Independent Order of the Sons of Malta in 1859, he linked himself not only to brothers like Secretary Tom Albergottie, who clerked for the commission merchant T. H. Griffin down on Brown’s Wharf, and Alexander Duffus, a struggling young bookkeeper, but to more well-heeled members like the lawyers Tommy Simons and Ben Whaley, carriage manufacturer Moses Nathans, insurance executive Charles Barbot, and Broad Street tailor George Bowman, as well as scores of other men rich, powerful, and well-connected in the three other Charleston lodges which composed the Palmetto Encampment, and tens of thousands of other brethren across the republic. Such bonds yielded powerful feelings of satisfaction and belonging.

For the man who felt no attraction to the Sons of Malta, Charleston clubs offered a spectrum of fraternal opportunities. One was bound to suit. Military and civic groups, such as volunteer fire companies, protected life, property, and good order, promoting bonhomie all the while. Ethnic and religious associations sponsored group identity and assimilation, especially within the city’s German and Irish communities, and among free blacks. A host of benevolent

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and fraternal societies focused on everything from providing home loans, fire insurance, and
death benefits (such as the Society for the Relief of the Families of Deceased and Disabled
Indigent Members of the Medical Profession of the State of South Carolina) to doling out soup,
coal, and clothing. Slightly more ambitious groups like the Charleston Bible Society, Young
Men’s Christian Association, and Charleston Temperance Tract Society pitched moral reform
and uplift to the downtrodden. Enrichment of taste and diffusion of knowledge moved members
of clubs like the Cosmopolitan Art Association, Elliott Society of Natural History, and South
Carolina Historical Society. Others came together to enjoy sport and physical culture in the
Independent Turnverein, South Carolina Jockey Club, and the Charleston Tilting Club. Still
more devoted themselves to merriment and whimsy among the Luminaries or the Pickwick Club.
“We do not say who fell up, or who fell down a flight of stairs,” one club member wrote about a
memorable evening with his brethren, “but we do say, that one pair of shins, two knee pans, one
pair of striped unmentionables, one back-bone, seven stair-steps, and about nine feet of the
banister, were greatly damaged sometime and by something during that eventful night.” In this
case, it was the fraternity of the Charleston Typographical Society kicking up its heels at its
annual banquet. Not all club meetings were so boisterous, but all relied on fellow-feeling and
group identity to bolster membership. Some belonged, others did not—though most might—and
that joyous unity showed the true source of fraternal celebration.72

Nor were Charlestonians in search of fraternity limited to formalized relations, high-
toned or otherwise. The theater and the circus, saloons and bordellos, cockfights and gambling

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72 Constitution of the Charleston Mechanic Society, Instituted at Charleston, South-Carolina, 1794 (Charleston,
1858); William Way, comp., History of the New England Society of Charleston, South Carolina for One Hundred
Years, 1819-1919 (Charleston, 1920); Charles E. Chichester, “Historical Sketch of the Charleston Port Society,” in
Year Book—1884. City of Charleston, So. Ca. (Charleston, 1884): 313-334; Barbara L. Bellows, Benevolence
Among Slaveholders: Assisting the Poor in Charleston, 1670-1860 (Baton Rouge, 1993); Stephen, A Night in
Charleston (Charleston, 1853), 7.
dens all offered men the chance to enter casual and transgressive networks which functioned in
the same way traditional voluntary associations did. Such groups may have lacked elected
officers and written constitutions, but they had rules nonetheless, standards of membership and
mechanisms of policing, a refined argot of signs and symbols, and definite social purposes
besides. When John Barrillon’s friends introduced him to the pleasures of whoring in Charleston
in 1831, for example, the sprout exulted that he had joined “the Push Root Family,” and been
“regularly initiated” into its rites and mysteries “at the sign of the Pump,” under the direction of
the “elder Push Root.” This club had rules like any other. “I have thus far stuck to Carolina
‘dark’ or ‘night’,” Barrillon explained. “You know it is beneath the Dignity of any true
Carolinian to ‘run over’ a woman of his own color as long as he is a single man.” 

Between
these licit and illicit realms, too, men created evanescent tribes of limited stability and duration.
Parades and political rallies fit this category, as did street gangs, ships’ crews, workingmen’s
shops, and the city’s nascent sports teams. Individualism was a social strategy well-nigh
impossible to pursue on the streets of Charleston.

The purposes of these groups were both complex and diverse. In most cases, clubs and
lodges are best viewed as links, building bridges between family and community, generations
and classes. They did not collapse distinctions or eliminate conflicts. For those new to
Charleston’s bustle, club life suggested appropriate modes of personal deportment and social

73 John N. Barrillon to John J. Seibels, April 16, 1831, Seibels Family Papers, SCL.

74 On the tribalism of modern life, see Desmond Morris, The Human Zoo (New York, 1969), 11-40; Desmond
Morris and Peter Marsh, Tribes (Salt Lake City, 1988); Ray Oldenburg, The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee
Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community (New York, 1999).

75 On these issues generally, see Bryan D. Palmer, Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of
Transgression (New York, 2001), esp. 209-231, 277-301; Jon M. Kingsdale, “The ‘Poor Man’s Club’: Social
interaction. Many groups taught valuable bourgeois lessons on temperance, morality, punctuality, and order.\textsuperscript{76} In Charleston, these functions necessarily competed both with the feminized values of the domestic sphere, and the traditional ethos of honor. Clubs counterbalanced and drew men away from family influences and honor’s creed both.\textsuperscript{77} They sustained a regulated homosocial setting for the demonstration of respectability, emphasizing ascribed commonalities and integrating social factions. At the same time, voluntary associations provided “a new system for sorting people out and assigning status on the basis of achievement in the local community.” In contrast to honor’s frustrating ambiguities, clubs, teams, and associations gave men clear and constant measures of standing, titles and tokens of accomplishment, successful strategies and an open path for those wishing to rise up. No wonder they flourished.\textsuperscript{78}

Voluntary associations, then, not only provided a smoke-filled refuge for men fleeing the terrors of domesticity. In antebellum Charleston they also supplemented and threatened to supplant honor’s regime. Their influence was growing by 1860, especially among the middling classes, but was far from unchallenged. Nor did the growth of these groups yield social consensus. By that much-desired standard, clubs failed dismally. Political and cultural polyphony reigned on the eve of secession, dense, tangled, and troubling. On one issue alone all groups agreed: internal unity was essential. Difference meant danger. That was a lesson men understood well when they pinned on the blue cockade.\textsuperscript{79}


But the cult of honor, the drive for respectability, and the welter of voluntary associations they created were not the only mechanisms for establishing hierarchy or achieving social integration in antebellum Charleston. There was also shopping—which brings us back, at last, to King Street. A forum of self-definition, spectacle, and transgressive social interaction: that was what drew the crowds, what James Robertson and the Turnbull sisters inexplicably missed. The beauty of shopping was that it allowed individuals momentarily to discount other contesting aspects of allegiance, crossing a threshold from the Babel of the street to the common purpose of the store, where each was defined by the pursuit of property and the relation to capital. Here one’s gaze might linger and wander promiscuously in the realm of commodities, one’s body perform the roles of shopper, critic, social intimate, and purchaser. Here one might declare bourgeois class identity—real or fake—by looking, taking, paying, and mingling with those who did likewise. Stores like Browning’s, studios like Cook’s, shops like Steele’s became social rallying points, centers of temporary, abstract association, visual display, and hierarchical differentiation. Commodity consumption established a dynamic new foundation for respectable identity: summus grounded itself in a most conspicuous habemus.

The question was, when the stuff of identity was bought and sold, and the novelty of fashion strove to scrub away the patina of stability, who could say where such revolutionary changes might lead? Was there anything in Charleston society which would prove solid, true, and lasting? On the eve of secession, Carolinians came to fear the false and the feigned in their everyday lives, a threat at once subtler and more palpable than the abolitionist invaders local newspapers railed against. Yankee intruders might be scourged and banished. Working-class

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challenges might be deflected or faced down. But what of the respectable men of the marketplace, whose loyalties seemed inevitably pegged to price alone? How could slavery’s defenders hope to ferret out the counterfeit here, to defeat the subversive who lurked in their midst, at the commercial heart of King Street culture?
CHAPTER FIVE:
THE SEMBLANCE OF SAFETY

For travelers to Charleston on the eve of secession, only two elements undercut King Street’s buoyant materialism: the slaves and the police. They worried local whites, too. In late September, 1860, a “Citizen” strolling past the Citadel, short blocks from the city’s commercial core, was astonished to encounter “the most disorderly crowds of negros I have ever witnessed.” Shouts of “blasphemy, obscenity, and profanity” echoed from the mostly male knots of carousing blacks, who mixed “bravado of manners” with a “recklessness of consequences” the white man found frightening.1 Where were the police, he wondered?

Quite possibly, striving to corral similar mobs of slaves and free blacks who roistered near the Market and rambled through White Point Gardens each Sunday afternoon.2 In this instance, “Citizen” saw a single patrolman wade into the sea of “several hundreds,” “many of them more or less intoxicated, and their profanity outrageous in the extreme.” At his approach, the black “scamps” scattered to nearby “dens,” but civic order’s victory over servile “evil” was short-lived. On the very next day, “in this very spot,” another “innocent” white man—passing along the street just as “Citizen” had done—was found murdered.3

Further comment appeared unnecessary to both the Mercury and its correspondent, and no one was about to blow such distressing incidents of violence and insubordination into wild tales of impending revolt. All evidence pointed quite the other way. “One cannot walk a step”

1 Charleston Mercury, September 25, 1860.

2 In a typical incident a week earlier, Mayor Charles Macbeth dispatched a “posse of policemen” to scatter a large “gang of negros… gambling at the foot of Broad street,” one of whom drowned while attempting to escape by raft. Charleston Mercury, September 17, 1860.

3 Charleston Mercury, September 25, 1860.
in Charleston, one observer declared, “without setting his foot on a negro.”4 The irony was unintended but the point was true: black subjugation was the very foundation of white achievement here. Yet white Charleston anguished endlessly about the limits of its mastery over enslaved blacks and the all-too-free people of color who mingled in their midst. What was to be done and who would do it? Certainly not the police.

Blacks, slave and free, comprised nearly half the city’s population by 1860, and were essential to their overlords for economic production, domestic comfort, and social identity.5 “They belong to us. We also belong to them,” worried Rev. John Adger. “They are divided out among us and mingled up with us and we with them in a thousand ways.”6 Few within the master class and its dependent allies imagined that blacks would ever rise up against them, yet many mulled over disquieting questions about eroding hegemony. Not the least of these focused on the local police force, vital in maintaining social control, yet equally responsible for generating conflict and disorder. On the eve of Lincoln’s election, the semblance of safety whites strove to win seemed increasingly unattainable.

The sheer number and ubiquity of blacks in Charleston stunned visitors. “From the presence of two races,” Milton Mackie declared, “the streets… have a pepper-and-salt aspect.” It was an image many found repulsive. Even in a main thoroughfare like King Street, there were two or three “darkies” to every white man, another Briton noted; in the back streets, no white


6 John B. Adger, My Life and Times, 1810-1899 (Richmond, 1899), 167.
faces at all. Gender skewed this imbalanced geography of race further still: for every hundred female slaves in Charleston, there were only seventy-seven males; for every hundred free black women, just fifty-six free black men. Travelers amazed by the sea of “blackness” they found themselves bobbing along in left only indirect hints about this disparity and never speculated on its origins or impact. Nor did they note variations of skin color, though the 1860 census described three-fourths of all free people of color in Charleston as “mulatto.” It was the simple, relentless visibility of “the inevitable negro” which worried them.

To Alexander Mackay, there was nothing “so striking” as the “swarms of negroes” he encountered. “They are everywhere.” “[S]leek, dandified negroes… lounge in the streets,” visitors noted, “crowd the streets,” walked, drove, virtually controlled the streets. In the upper wards especially, locals complained, respectable whites were “constantly annoyed, especially on Sundays, with most unruly and profane mobs, setting all law at defiance, and, if dispersed from one vicinity, re-collecting, with increased numbers, at another.” The same scenes played out on the Battery and even at the font of fashion itself. “If you promenade King Street to get a view of the Charleston fair,” the Columbia Banner warned, “you are elbowed by these wretches

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7 J. Milton Mackie, *From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics* (New York, 1864), 101; Canada and the Crimea, or Sketches of a Soldier’s Life from the Journals and Correspondence of the Late Major Ranken, R. E., ed. W. Bayne Ranken (London, 1862), 109-110.


rustling in silks and satins; or what is worse, your wives and daughters encounter them in the stores and are exposed to their insolence.” Emulating—and challenging—their betters, slaves and free blacks paraded the commercial boulevard “decked out with peculiar gaiety” in “showy [dress]—hats and boots especially—and… jewellery—watch chains, rings, and shirt buttons… all displayed to full advantage.” James Robertson noted “the excessive politeness with which they take off their hats and salute each other in the street,” a “highly amusing, and sometimes very ludicrous” sight.\textsuperscript{11} For most observers, though, the humor in such rituals was lost. Any number of travelers called Charleston an “English” city, comparing King Street to High Street, but high-stepping blacks spoiled the illusion.\textsuperscript{12}

The playful subversion of white natives’ behaviors and outsiders’ perceptions was annoying. Charleston’s grand jury in 1859 grumbled that strutting servants no longer “know and understand their position,” though few could agree on how to rein them in.\textsuperscript{13} More disturbing was the sight of somber slaves who understood their situation too well. Bondmen labored with “sturdy hand and cheerful heart,” apologists insisted, “unassailed by care” and emancipated from “the perils of the poor.”\textsuperscript{14} But, again and again, to the consternation of their proslavery hosts, travelers described Charleston’s slaves and free blacks as anything but carefree. “The general appearance of the majority of the coloured people in the streets… denoted abject fear and


\textsuperscript{12} A Rugbaean, \textit{Transatlantic Rambles; or, a Record of Twelve Months’ Travel in the United States, Cuba, and the Brazils} (London, 1851), 56; John H. Vessey, \textit{Mr. Vessey of England. Being the Incidents and Reminiscences of Travel in a Twelve Weeks’ Tour through the United States and Canada in the Year 1859}, ed. Brian Waters (New York, 1956), 59-60; Cunynghame, \textit{A Glimpse at the Great Western Republic}, 263-264; Benjamin Bolles to Titus L. Bissell, Jr., November 9, 1820, Bissell Family Papers, SCL; Entry of October 19, 1832, Samuel Cram Jackson Diary, SCL.

\textsuperscript{13} Charleston Mercury, October 25, 1859.

\textsuperscript{14} William J. Grayson, \textit{The Hireling and the Slave, Chicora, and Other Poems} (Charleston, 1856), 31, 45, 50.
timidity,” one Englishman thought. “I confess I have never witnessed, in any population of the earth, less indication of laughter and content than on the countenances of the slaves met with at every hour of the day,” James Buckingham agreed. Their general expression was one “of great gravity and gloomy discontent.”

With good reason: the “daily, hourly, ceaseless torture endured by the heart that is constantly trampled under the foot of despotic power” wore steadily upon blacks, and became unendurable for a handful of Charleston slaveholders who abandoned southern despotism for northern abolitionism. Sarah and Angelina Grimké, William Henry Brisbane, and others fled north to aid the antislavery cause. Other wealthy Charlestonians migrated to Philadelphia, New York, or anywhere beyond the plantation regime, putting the peculiar institution out of mind, even as they lived like princes upon its profits. Still more walked the streets of slavery’s citadel, thoroughly enmeshed in the maintenance and promotion of bondage, yet silently nurturing the “desire to be delivered from it.”

For those at the bottom of Charleston’s economic ladder—especially the hundreds of Irish immigrants who flooded in annually, battling slaves and free blacks for the most marginal jobs—matters of emancipation or enslavement seemed altogether irrelevant. Survival demanded that blacks be driven down below the least of laboring whites or expelled altogether. But fewer than ten percent of hard-pressed newcomers lasted long in Charleston. Most worked, drank,


grumbled, and moved on within a year or so, defeated by the existing social order. Meanwhile, Charleston’s blacks toiled away, steadily besieged yet winning bitter, tiny gains.  

Victory’s face was twisted and grim. Slavery in Charleston was “garnished for refinement, and decked out for show,” locals understood, concealing the “servile dread” and resentment of its chief victims behind a mask of regulatory deceit. From 1814 onward, the city council required masters to keep their slaves “sufficiently clothed,” and not to “appear manacled” in public. Yet all blacks bore along a heavy chain of legal prohibitions as they moved through Charleston’s streets. Carefree? No “dancing or other merriment,” no “whooping or hallooing,” no “loud or offensive conversations” were permitted, under pain of the lash. No assembly of more than seven persons of color, bond or free, without the presence of a respectable white man, even to worship God. No congregation “for the purpose of mental instruction” after sunset or behind closed doors, supervised by whites or not. Blacks were forbidden to smoke in public, to carry canes, clubs, or walking sticks. Slaves were barred from working in any “mechanic or handicraft trade in a shop” or serving as clerks in stores. They could not “buy, sell, barter, trade, traffic or deal in any goods, wares, provisions, grain, or commodities of any kind whatsoever,” except on their master’s behalf. Free blacks (or slaves, with their owner’s permission) might hire themselves as porters or day laborers, but only at city-regulated stands at pre-set wages. There was no moment of public life not intensely regulated and narrowly


18 [Weld, ed.], American Slavery As It Is, 53; Benwell, An Englishman's Travels in America, 190.
constricted for Charleston’s blacks. White society was “their possessor” and they its possessed.19

Controlling black labor-power was crucial to the day-to-day functioning of Charleston and its hinterlands. Slaves and free people of color performed essential labor at dockside, at railroad terminals and warehouses, and hauling crops and goods to and from these sites. They toiled by the dozen in massive rice mills out on the Charleston Neck and at the dirtiest jobs in smaller factories and workshops scattered around the city. Thousands more labored under the lax and inconstant supervision of their owners and, by 1860, over five thousand black men and women purchased badges permitting them to hire their own time.20

Although slaves were blocked from employment as clerks and salesmen in shops, they played important roles in virtually every other sort of manufacture and exchange. Free black women clustered especially in the laundry and needle trades; slave women worked primarily as domestics. Slave men were found in occupations as diverse as construction, tailoring, butchery, printing, and firefighting. Their free black counterparts carved out niches as tailors, draymen, barbers, and tanners.21 Bowed down by civic ordinances and racial restrictions, blacks working

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under the badge system welcomed the chance to move about the city unhindered, choose their own boss, and pocket a share of the wages they earned. Mary, for one, did not mince words in quitting work for John Berkley Grimball’s elite household on the eve of secession: eight dollars per month was the going rate for nurses, she told the master, and he only offered six. Like waged working people everywhere, Charleston’s blacks paid close attention to shifts in the market price of their labor-power, and showed a strong will to earn a just price for their time. The fortunate extracted top dollar in hard cash; the rest redressed shortfalls through theft, backtalk, or a conservation of energy employers called laziness. “[A]in’t ‘shame’ fo’ mek money,” one ex-bondman remembered; “ain’t ‘shame’ fo’ wuk.” Many slaves were “proud” of the badges they wore, seeing them as a sign that they were trusted by the white community and practically “as good as free.”

Indeed, thousands of slaves lived or worked apart from their masters, and for many, bondage in day-to-day terms consisted of little more than the need to remit a part of their pay to the white man or woman who claimed them as chattel. In the years leading up to secession, however, police cracked down on slaves and free blacks who cut corners by working without badges. Disgruntled whites fumed that unsupervised blacks became idle, drunken, vicious—and essentially free. The badge system itself was to blame, in this view. “The evil is he buys control of his own time from his owner,” critics charged. Without the “discipline and surveillance” mastery mandated, bondpeople roamed the city “exercising all the privileges of free persons, making contracts, doing work, and in every way being and conducting themselves as if they were

not slaves.” By Lincoln’s election, though, abolishing badges would have wrecked Charleston’s economy. Instead, stricter enforcement of civic ordinances combined with a campaign to degrade or drive out free blacks.

The goal of restrictions, elite Carolinians declared, was simply to keep underlings in their proper place. “There is no possibility of the black and the white existing harmoniously together in social and political equality,” the Mercury explained. “Even the blacks and mulattos cannot do it.” Repression was just and benevolent, its effect salutary. “God is in this whole matter,” Rev. Thomas Smyth insisted. All men and women were fitted by Providence for particular duties and stations; those who strayed from this righteous orbit defied their Creator and the laws He established. “All men are not born equal,” Smyth insisted, “in bodily constitution, size, sex, or capacity; nor in mental faculties and endowments; nor in emotional susceptibilities; nor in moral tastes and judgments; nor in social position; nor in their relations to law and government.”

The “atheistic, revolutionary and anarchic” denial of natural law challenged heaven itself and caused all manner of trouble plaguing American society, from abolitionism to bloomers. For white Charlestonians, safety resided in the stern rejection of such “monstrous” higher law-ism, the confident embrace of conservative Christian order. That was the lesson Hattie Palmer affirmed as she copied the clear-sighted verse of Alexander Pope:

Order is Heaven’s first law; and this confess’d,
Some are and must be greater than the rest,
More rich, more wise, but who infers from hence
That such are happier, shocks all common sense.

“No society has ever yet existed,” explained James Hammond, “and… none ever will exist, without a natural variety of classes.” While social order crumbled in Europe and the North,

agreed Edmund Bellinger, the South’s sensible pursuit of hierarchy and interdependence yielded social tranquility and economic achievement. “RIGHT, JUSTICE, AND HUMANITY” were the fruit of regulated inequality—ample reason to stand firm in defense of slavery. “If we are true to ourselves,” urged Charleston merchant Peter Della Torre, “the noblest of destinies is ours.”

South Carolina legislators upheld that self-satisfied moral in 1820 when they prohibited slave manumissions without assent of the General Assembly. Four decades on, only two servants had been set free (for betraying a slave conspiracy), though politicians granted a sheaf of petitions from free blacks begging to return to bondage. The life of a free person of color “is more degrading, and involves more suffering in this State,” William Bass protested in 1859, “than that of a slave, who is under the care, protection and ownership of a kind and good master.” Better to toil as the servant of another than to be “preyed upon by every sharper,” he declared, to be “very poor, though an able-bodied man,” and “charged with every offense, guilty or not, committed in his neighborhood.” To Bass, freedom was “a thousand times harder” than slavery.

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26 Petition of William Bass, A Free Person of Color, Praying to Become a Slave (n. p., 1859). See also “Petition of Elizabeth Jane Bug, a free woman of color, praying to become the slave of Rev. Wm. P. Hill” (54-1859-001), “Petition of C. O. Lamotte praying that a certain Deed executed by Lizzie Jones, a free person of color, for the purpose of becoming the Slave of the said Lamotte may be confirmed” (55-1859-001), both in Petitions, Records of the General Assembly, SCDAH.
To slaveholders, such words were just praise and vindication. Liberty for even a handful of blacks was bound to spread “the poison of insubordination.” Already black laborers competed with white tradesmen. Black dandies crowded sidewalks and failed to doff their hats to whites. Tawny concubines rode in carriages and strolled the Battery with their paramours. Yellow babies appeared in a hundred households. Such behavior was both “corrupt and corrupting,” Governor Whitemarsh Seabrook declared in 1850, the inevitable fruit of free black “villainy.”

Doubly confounding was the sight of blacks and whites laboring alongside each other for wages on the waterfront and scattered in workshops around the city. Slowly but steadily, a free black property-holding elite was growing in Charleston at the same time a propertyless class of white proletarians swelled. With the emergence of a black slaveholding upper crust, numbering 137 masters by 1860, all the requisite materials for social catastrophe seemed ready to hand. Prompted by factory bosses like James Eason and Henry Peake, legislators on the eve of secession pushed for new laws to re-enslave free blacks or expel them from the state. To their sponsors, such measures seemed a sensible defense of the city’s marginal white mechanics. They filled Charleston blacks with dread.

Wealthy whites, too, feared and resented the dictation of their laboring brethren. “We should have but two classes, the Master and the slave,” angry solons warned on the eve of


secession; “no intermediate class can be other than immensely mischievous to our peculiar institution.” By 1860, though, it was too late for nervous squires to untangle all the knotted complexities of urban life they had allowed slaves and free blacks—and slaving whites—to create in their midst.

Non-whites were anything but a homogenous community dwelling in a segregated, well-policed neighborhood, and it was hardly in the economic or political interest of the ruling race to create such a ghetto. Perceptually, unfree and half-free men and women ranged from black to brown to “yellow” to white in skin tone; their speech patterns varied from the rough Gullah dialect of lowcountry plantation life to the soft British tones heard south of Broad. The clothes they wore reflected the variety of economic stations they occupied: the coarse, loose workingmen’s garb of dockworkers, porters, and mechanics, the cast-off finery of those aspiring to more respectable status, the broadcloth and lace of Charleston’s free black elite. Slaves and free blacks lived scattered among, within, and behind white dwellings all across the city, ranging from “dark retreat[s] of villainy” in the worst sections of the upper wards to neat, well-furnished homes south of Calhoun Street. Non-whites eagerly differentiated themselves from each other in terms of the churches they attended, the stores, groceries and grogshops they patronized, the social groups they joined.

Like the Irish before them, the cream of Charleston’s free black society created a web of exclusive clubs intended to shield them from the racist ascriptions whites tried to tar all non-


31 Powers, *Black Charlestonians*, 19-20, 23-25, 58; *Defence of the Shopkeepers of South-Carolina, and Particularly of the Grocers, Against the Late Law ‘For the Better Regulation of Slaves and Free Persons of Colour,’ in a Series of Letters, as Originally Published in the Charleston Mercury, with Additional Remarks* (Charleston, 1835).
whites with. Groups like the Friendly Moralist Society, the Brown Fellowship Society and others seemed as dedicated to demonstrating how far they stood from non-elite blacks—and how close to respectable whites—as they did to promoting ethics of brotherhood and community service. So, too, the free black men a little farther down the social scale who joined with the most trusted slaves for service in the city’s fire department were drawn together by a similar desire for distinction.

Throughout Charleston’s black society, Robert Smalls remembered, there was a corrosive sense of individualism and a desire to maintain the status quo by tearing each other down. “The City people look upon themselves as a little better” than country folk, he told the American Freedmen’s Inquiry Commission in 1863; they were generally “more intelligent.” Within Charleston itself, blacks were divided by an inability to trust each other, and a dislike of seeing “one get above the other.” Instead of uniting against the master class, Smalls complained, “[t]hey will leave nothing undone” to drag others down “to the same level with themselves, and will work mean, hard, and deceitfully to accomplish that purpose.”

Rather than a united enclave of black community struggling against the planters’ regime, areas like Clifford’s Alley—home to seventy-six slaves and one white in 1861—became notorious sites of violence, prostitution, and drink. Hundreds of other free blacks simply fled—many to the North, more than four hundred back to Africa as part of the colonization movement that swept Atlantic

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seaboard cities in the 1830s and '40s. Confronting such internal divisions, many slaves resigned themselves to a private refuge within the master’s domain, bedding down in the warmth of a kitchen or the funk of a carriage house behind the main dwelling. It was, at best, a world betwixt and between, a lonely purgatory fit for a people profoundly divided against itself.35

Most confounding to outsiders, most worrisome to local whites, was the sliver of black society which emerged as a sable master class. From the colonial era onward, a minority of Charleston free blacks had bought, sold, mortgaged, and speculated in slaves of their own. For some, purchasing wives, children, and kin, this represented one way of exerting patriarchal control over family members, and after the passage of South Carolina’s anti-manumission law in 1820, served as the only way to achieve de facto emancipation. For most black slaveholders, though, acquiring human chattel promoted economic interests and defined elite status. Like their white counterparts, they physically curbed and disciplined their “servants,” hunted them down when they ran away, and showed no more or less compunction about separating families on the auction block than the average slave trader.36

Such self-defining social choices often aimed to attract the patronage of well-to-do white neighbors, but also drew black masters into conflict with immigrants and poor native-born whites who feared such attempts at “passing.” Black slaveholders might be “natural allies” to, if not full partners in, the master class, but that was cold comfort for workingmen of lesser means who feared the consequence of class trumping race. Already by 1860 a few free blacks lived off the


labor of white men and women they hired for wages. What subversive and humiliating changes would another five or ten years bring?37

Although black and white working-class elbows rubbed in Charleston’s most notorious grogshops and “shooting galleries,” city newspapers were littered with accounts of other times and places where fists flew to maintain racial boundaries and keep down counterfeits who tried to “act white.”38 Mounting unemployment and an outbreak of yellow fever in 1858 that claimed more than six hundred lives—overwhelmingly immigrant workingmen and their families—redoubled racial animosity. By 1860, the random violence of tavern gripes seemed ever more likely to spill over into rioting or lynch law, posing a more proximate threat to slaves and free blacks than extremist plans of legal proscription and re-enslavement. Behind the calm resolutions and manly petitions of whites seeking to expunge cultural difference and social freedoms within the subaltern community stirred more potent hatreds of bloody-minded racists and downtrodden workers. When words faltered and laws stalled, hard-pressed, angry men were keen to strike.39

Most white Charlestonians feared such zeal. There were worrisome signs, too, of where paternalism’s logic finally led. At the State Wharf, opposite Tradd Street, the Delicia still rode at anchor in September 1860, a reeking ghost ship. Ten months earlier, the U. S. S. Constellation had captured the Spanish bark near the mouth of the Congo, loading slaves for the illegal transatlantic trade. Now its captives were freed and its crew released from prison—untried—but no one claimed the slaver itself. So she remained on the eve of Lincoln’s election,

37 Wikramanayake, A World in Shadow, 51-52, 76-77, 94-95; Johnson and Roark, Black Masters, 192; Powers, Black Charlestonians, 59.

38 Powers, Black Charlestonians, 24. See also Henry, Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina, 80, 82, 94; Koger, Black Slaveowners, 69-79, 164-167; Mayor’s Report on City Affairs. Submitted to Council, at a Meeting Held Tuesday, September 29th, 1857 (Charleston, 1857).

39 The best treatment of these developments is Roark and Johnson, Black Masters, 173-195.
a rotting monument to the Middle Passage. Before the *Delicia* had been the *Brothers* and militant Charles Lamar’s *Wanderer*. Before that, the *Echo*, captured north of Cuba with a cargo of three hundred wretched Africans. In each case, federal authorities sought to try the captains, crews, and owners of the seized vessels as pirates trading in human flesh. Each time, the defendants were hauled to court in Charleston, pitching the city into turmoil over the moral fitness of the slave trade.

Turmoil was just what slave trade advocates aimed at. Apart from functionaries who calculated their labor as wages or profit, most of these men hoped to stir support to repeal the constitutional amendment prohibiting their commerce or, failing that, to beat the drums for disunion. Since 1854, a small cadre led by Leonidas Spratt, editor of the *Charleston Standard*, had urged that the trade be reopened on ethical grounds alone. Their key argument was pure brinkmanship: if the slave trade was immoral and illegal, how could slavery be otherwise? Anything less than hearty agreement here signaled abolitionism, Spratt declared. Governor James H. Adams hammered that all-or-nothingism at the General Assembly in 1856, but

40 On the *Delicia*, see especially *Charleston Courier*, September 1, 1858, February 2, 7, October 20, 1860; *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, February 18, 1860.


moderates dodged his call for action, redoubling radicals’ alarm. As long as the issue remained abstract, Carolinians could avoid taking a stand, leaving fire-eaters to rage to their hearts’ content. But the piracy cases stripped away that luxury.

They stripped away the mask of unity, too, spotlighting the distress and volatility of white Charleston’s divided mind on questions of slavery and federal relations. When a grand jury refused to indict the Echo’s crew in November 1858, Spratt, serving as chief defense counsel, moved for their release. But he did not stop there. Citing the recent decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford as an example of a local court declaring a federal law unconstitutional, he urged Judge Andrew Magrath similarly to strike down the statutes prohibiting the slave trade. This would be “Higher Law with a vengeance,” protested state Attorney General Isaac Hayne, a short-sighted policy sure to boomerang on slaveholders. Cautious Magrath, however, ignored each counsel’s overwrought arguments, upholding the validity of the piracy statutes and retaining the prisoners in custody.

The longer slave traders languished in jail, the louder hard-liners like Spratt trumpeted their cause, and the more Charlestonians squirmed. A popular moderate local politician, Magrath tried to defuse the issue without giving victory to either side. In the case of the Brothers, a Charleston District grand jury in January 1859 refused to indict the crew, and Magrath released them. When the Echo’s hands came to judgment three months later, indictments were returned, but the sailors went free despite incriminating evidence. Finally, in

44 Message No. 1 of His Excellency Jas. H. Adams, Governor of South Carolina to the Senate and House of Representatives, at the Session of 1856, With Accompanying Documents (Columbia, 1856); Report of the Special Committee of the House of Representatives, of South Carolina, on so much of the Message of Gov. Jas H. Adams, as relates to Slavery and the Slave Trade (Columbia, 1857).

45 Charleston Courier, December 1-9, 1858; Isaac W. Hayne, Argument Before the United States Circuit Court… in the Motion to Discharge the Crew of the Echo, Delivered in Columbia, S. C., December, 1858 (Albany, 1859), 6. On Magrath, see R. G. Dun and Company, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, 1: 411, Baker, HU.
his April 1860 ruling on the *Wanderer* case, Magrath acquitted the ship’s captain, ruling that federal prohibition of the slave trade did not make that commerce piracy. The judge’s ruling proved classic Carolinian double-talk: the slave trade was illegal, but it was not piracy, he held, so slaves were not plunder.46

Not plunder? Had the international slave trade’s revival been a purely intellectual problem, Magrath’s ruling would have offered a clever solution. Instead, it proved a bitterly ironic footnote to a debate most Carolinians had conceded long since. Only the most conservative jurists—or the most heedless fire-eaters—spoke of slaves as property with any degree of seriousness. By the late 1850s, Charlestonians had almost entirely abandoned that defensive legal fiction in favor of the most strident paternalism. These chattels were all too human, masters understood. Unlike the “scientific” proslavery arguments of the Southwest which explained black recalcitrance in terms of ethnology and racial difference, Carolinians believed that better masters would make better slaves.47 But what a labor that was.

“I wish every vessel that would go to Africa to bring slaves here would sink before they reached her soil,” declared one Richland District mistress. Wealthy Keziah Brevard “would give up every c[en]t I own on earth if it would stop the slave trade,” not because she was a closet abolitionist, but that the “hard time” owners currently endured with their servants would surely be multiplied for future generations. One enslaved child told her that “I did not know how my negroes hated white folks & how they talked about me.” She did not quite know how to take the


lesson: who did? “It is hard to fathom a real rascal,” Brevard lamented: the “deceptions of servants” mingled with the careless management and money-hungry ways of the masters who surrounded her. “Oh God,” she told her diary, “we are poor, poor creatures,” white and black both.  

Reopening the slave trade could only multiply misery.

When the *Echo* docked in Charleston harbor, the sight of the “walking skeletons” crowded aboard chilled all but the hardest hearts. “I acknowledge most frankly to have been an advocate for the re-opening of the slave trade,” Daniel Hamilton admitted, “but a practical, fair evidence of its effects has cured me forever.” As federal marshal, he had been responsible for the Africans during their internment in the city. Thirty-five died in custody, despite his best efforts, seventy-one more perished on the voyage home. The slaver was “a curse in our history,” Fred Porcher declared. Some Charlestonians had called it kindness to enslave the blacks, but these miserable, sickly, jabbering things looked far beyond the power of paternalism to aid. “I wish that everyone in So[uth] Ca[rolina] who is in favor of reopening of the Slave-trade, could have seen what I have been compelled to witness for the three weeks of their stay at Fort Sumter,” Hamilton wrote. “It seems to me that I can never forget it.”

Hamilton’s set were too squeamish, Spratt protested. The trade in human chattel went on steadily in the heart of the Queen City, after all, just three blocks east of King Street. There was no central market for slaves in Charleston, as in other cities. Before 1830, blacks were

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48 Entries of February 15-16, 1860, March 27, 1859, October 27, 1859, April 4, 1861, Keziah Goodwyn Brevard Diary, SCL.


50 Committed radicals were undeterred by these scenes. See James H. Adams to James Chesnut, Jr., January 14, 1859, Chesnut-Miller-Manning Families Papers, SCHS.
commonly bid off before the county courthouse at the Four Corners; later, they were auctioned near wharfside at the foot of busy Broad. Such street scenes attracted rollicking crowds, blocked traffic, and drew critical comment from gawking visitors. In 1856, Charleston’s city council ended such spectacles, banishing slave auctions from public view even as advocates of reopening the transatlantic trade reached the zenith of their strength.51

By that stage, Charleston had become “the common place of meeting between the slave dealer from places north of us and the purchaser South West of us.” That commerce was a vital part of the local economy, benefiting lawyers, bankers, insurance agents, provisioners, and more. The slave trade provided an important tie, too, between Charleston and the surrounding rural economy, transferring crucial assets of human capital and embodied labor efficiently between the masters who set it in motion.52 Auctions served the needs of ambitious planters and farmers looking to expand production, settle the division of estates, and promote the cause of city and state—court and government obligations being among the most common precipitants of sale.

After 1856, brokers transacted most private sales and auctions out of a web of offices, courtyards, and private jails wrapping from the east end of Chalmers Street, a block south on State, around the corner onto Broad.53 A few others were sited on the Vendue Range, a bleak alley to the northeast, at water’s edge. Almost any day along these streets, black men, women, and children were put up for purchase. In the Courier of November 15, 1859, for example, Ziba


53 On local law regarding the selling of slaves, see H. Pinckney Walker, comp., Ordinances of the City of Charleston, from the 19th of August 1844, to the 14th of September 1854: and the Acts of the General Assembly Relating to the City of Charleston, and City Council of Charleston, During the Same Interval (Charleston, 1854), 71.
Oakes announced an estimable slave seamstress for sale, Capers and Heyward advertised nineteen plantation hands, Seth Spencer offered two house servants, and the Shingler brothers hawked a workforce totaling two hundred and thirty-five souls. Three days later, Capers and Heyward auctioned nine slaves, J. S. Riggs disposed of another, and Louis DeSaussure put seventeen bondmen on the block. The next day, Saturday, DeSaussure sold five hands, and between them R. M. Marshall, Porcher and Baya, William A. Gourdin, and Joseph W. Faber bid off fifty-four more. It was not a busy weekend. At least nine other slaves waited, locked in the cramped cells of Thomas Ryan’s “Nigger Jail” on Chalmers Street, and fourteen in A. J. Salinas’ baracoon. Two weeks later, over two hundred slaves would be auctioned at Alonzo White’s office alone. If it was a crime to buy and sell Africans, then how much greater was the sin of trading native-born slaves, one’s own “black family”? One overseer put the problem plain to his Charleston boss: “Captain, your people do not want to be sold.”

White masters seldom hesitated to palm off slaves they considered unruly, lazy, vicious, or over-the-hill. Yet few wanted to part with “their people.” Not only did such transactions signal a failure of personal mastery and a diminution of productive power. They also deprived the seller of a ready source of collateral, status, and self-esteem. Worse still, slave sales in the 1850s were alarming in political and social terms, since human chattel was not simply passing from hand to hand locally, demonstrating slavery’s economic vitality. On the contrary, over the course of the decade, Charleston’s slave population fell a shocking thirty percent, from 19,532 to 13,909. As a whole, Charleston District lost sixteen percent of its slave force, and neighboring Beaufort, Colleton, and Georgetown Districts showed growth averaging just seven-hundredths of

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a percent per year.\textsuperscript{55} Some of these disappearing slaves followed masters migrating to new lands outside the lowcountry. Overwhelmingly, however, stagnant and falling numbers indicated economic crisis in Charleston’s hinterland and growing fears for the local longevity of the domestic institution.\textsuperscript{56}

Many masters were selling slaves not because they saw blacks as human chattel to be bought and sold as prices dictated, but in spite of feelings and beliefs quite the contrary.\textsuperscript{57} For men like Fred Porcher, such decisions brought them face-to-face with the humiliating recognition that “I was a bad planter, a bad master, a bad manager”—“faithless” to manhood itself.\textsuperscript{58} And yet, across the 1850s, Carolina slaveholders great and small conducted transactions in human flesh which they often considered degrading and distasteful because they needed the money. No wonder the movement to reopen the transatlantic trade gained such force at precisely this moment in just this place.

The social consequences of such sales were troubling, too, on a human level. Examine the sketch Eyre Crowe made of the sale Alonzo White held on March 10, 1853, near Atlantic Wharf, at the corner of Broad and East Bay streets (Figure 5.1). Crowe drew “from life,” and despite its ghastly subject matter, he recalled decades later how the “picturesque elements” of the


FIGURE 5.1

SLAVE SALE, CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA,
FROM A SKETCH BY EYRE CROWE

open air sale dispelled “many of its dismal features.” Published in the *Illustrated London News* three years later, the artist showed a bearded gentleman (possibly White himself) at the center of the picture, right arm raised, calling bids on a black mother and child who stand off to his left. Collected around them is a boisterous pyramid of commerce. The foreground captures a gallery of top-hatted swells and self-important gentlemen, posed in various attitudes of distraction and haggling. At their feet to the left, a couple of black children play obliviously. To the right sits a young male slave, already purchased, equally indifferent to the bidding. Above and behind the auctioneer stands a small knot of blacks, stocking-capped or bareheaded, their faces inscrutable, waiting their turn on the block. The coarseness and vulgarity of the scene are palpable, yet this is no simple-minded abolitionist woodcut.

Focusing on the human beings at auction—ninety “fine strapping sons of toil,” by Crowe’s estimation—the artist omitted the “throngs of labour,” black and white, which clustered just beyond the edges of his illustration. This image offered “a picture painful it is true, but also quite curious,” not least because the slaves to be sold were essentially alien beings, cut off visually and socially from those around them. There is no scene of tearful parting rendered here, nor common cause between bondpeople at auction and blacks watching this awful ritual. Indeed, these slaves show no sign of concern about the fate before them.

Likewise, onlookers would have had little reason to display fellow-feeling. These were “hands” from a Combahee rice estate being sold, not Charleston natives. Though locals complained about interracial crowds blocking streets and behaving uproariously at public

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auctions, nothing here suggests sympathy between city slaves and those on the block. Why would there be?  

The difference between free blacks, half-liberated local “servants,” and slaves at auction was vast. Consider the figure on horseback Crowe depicts in the left foreground. He is the only mounted figure at the sale and the only black man in the crowd. He blends in among potential buyers by displaying signs of non-slave status: he not only rides, but carries a short whip in one hand, and an umbrella tucked under his other arm. He wears a battered hat pulled low and a short dress jacket, its buttons and sleeve detail suggesting a military origin. Instead of helping him go unnoticed, though, this eccentric combination of symbols distinguishes him as surely as the checked trousers of the fellow who dominates the center foreground. Both are consumers, their commodities announce, free-willed actors in the marketplace, sharing no kinship with the human chattel they bid upon. By his dress, appearance, placement, and material possessions, the mounted man melodramatically performs his social dissonance with the blacks at auction, his class allegiance with the whites who surround him.

Our view is limited here. We can only imagine movement and feeling, sound and smell. But partial though it is, we may be confident that the artist has rendered the scene faithfully, within the limits of his vision. This auction depicts neither the benign process pro-slavery theorists defended, nor the horrors of separation abolitionists decried. We see neither grinning Samboes, nor black faces twisted in suffering and defiance. The sickening enormity of selling human beings, so obvious to outsiders, seems lost on all parties in this case, as in others. “The auctioneer offers them like selling any other goods,” one Briton in Charleston noted with

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61On umbrellas as symbols of respectability in antebellum America, see Kenneth L. Ames, Death in the Dining Room, and Other Tales of Victorian Culture (Philadelphia, 1992), 22-23.
surprise. More than this, a Yankee workingman agreed, the slaves themselves “did not appear to mind it.” To be sure, grief and dread were part of many auction scenes, but from this drawing and these descriptions, we must conclude that such emotions were often stifled, internalized, or overlooked. It is, rather, the power of paternalism which resonates here, in all its awful achievement and political complexity.

To anyone strolling Charleston’s streets in 1860, paternalism’s potency and promise were palpable. It glinted from the badges slave workers wore, cast shadows on the crenellated “Sugar House” on Magazine Street where punishment was meted out to slaves, radiated from the auction block where coin and flesh traded hands. It echoed in the bells and drumbeats that confined blacks indoors after dark and called them forth at dawn. It showed itself, too, in the endless negotiation of boundaries—moral, political, temporal, and physical—between blacks and whites which went on over dress and deportment on the liminal ground where lives met. Though self-righteous masters enjoyed displaying what they considered open-handed generosity and mild fellow-feeling toward underlings, the “kindness” and “benevolence” at paternalism’s core meant something altogether different.

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63 James Redpath, The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States (University Park, PA, 1996), 59-60, 63-64.

It was the sense of order, security, proportion, and reciprocity paternalism promised to both masters and slaves which was its political sine qua non.\textsuperscript{65} Recognizing that many bondpeople in Charleston were “discontented” in 1860, historians and contemporaries have imagined the stirrings of a radical dream of freedom.\textsuperscript{66} Doubtless such desires motivated whites and blacks, rich and poor, men and women, then as they do now (though few would have considered a life of wage labor the acme of liberation). Yet we must not sentimentalize the meanings of black agency. However much working people have hoped for greater ease and opportunity in the form of practical freedoms (the abstraction of \textit{freedom} being rather too intangible and ill-defined to hold much practical attraction), quotidian improvements could only be won on a foundation of regulation, sequence, and stability. In Charleston, the black struggle against slavery went on within a larger, pervasive, intensely conflicted search for order.\textsuperscript{67}

Usually, too, that struggle was a lonely one, marginalized by white power and rejected by blacks who had been raised to view rebellious slaves as ungrateful servants threatening the common good. “The bad ones had to be punished,” Amos Gadsden remembered in the 1930s; “they got a few lashes on ‘um.” That the young slave felt no sympathy for “bad ones” who suffered beatings often much worse than “a few lashes” is unsurprising. His father served as coachman to the wealthy hardware merchant Titus Bissell, and Amos “grew up with the white children in the family”—indeed, he “was treated like a white person.” Unsurprisingly, Gadsden dismissed being “trained to step aside at all times for white people”: that willing step marked


\textsuperscript{66} See, e.g., Redpath, \textit{The Roving Editor}, 62.

him decisively as one of the good ones. Paternalism maintained these twisted categories for master and slave alike with regular demonstrations of kindness, devotion, and brute force disguised as justice. “There was no bad treatment of our people,” Gadsden recalled, struggling still within paternalism’s coils seven decades after emancipation. Those who saw more clearly and determined to resist the good slave’s fate were few, divided, and nearly powerless. Most bondpeople had the sense—or what seemed like sense—to bow their heads and be grateful for that most evil of things, a good master.68

It had not always been so. Throughout the eighteenth century, white Carolinians had understood chattel bondage as a “warfare state” existing between masters and slaves, which must ultimately resolve itself in the destruction of one side or the other. “Negroes are faithless,” Henry Laurens summed up, ready to rise up in violence at the first sign of white weakness.69 And why should they not? Their lot was one of unending labor in return for a pitiful subsistence under one of the most repressive regimes in the colonial Atlantic world. Down to the 1820s, reasonable, progressive men had called for the abolition of slavery for precisely this reason. As in Santo Domingo, Edwin Holland warned, “our Negroes are truly the Jacobins of the country… the anarchists and the domestic enemy.” There was no possibility of compromise so long as slavery existed, no safe refuge from this “common enemy of civilized society... who would, if they could, become the destroyers of our race.” The best that masters could do would be to keep these wolves at bay, even as they employed black labor to build cotton’s kingdom. Sooner or


later, the final conflict would have to come between southern “civilization” and the “animal” forces which had reared it up.\textsuperscript{70}

On the eve of Lincoln’s election, no one in Charleston talked that way. “No one,” Carolinians believed, “can entertain any serious doubts of the ability of the whites of the South to hold their slaves in subjection.”\textsuperscript{71} There had been not so much as a half-believable rumor of slave revolt in the city since the hanging of Denmark Vesey and thirty-four of his supposed followers in 1822. Even then, there was little proof that a conspiracy had existed at all.\textsuperscript{72} The tale that one captured insurgent told his master of his plan “to kill you, rip open your belly & throw your guts in your face” never proceeded past gossip—and the execution of said slave in like manner. So, too, the imagined schemes of unnamed black rebels to convert Charleston’s white womanhood into a vast “Haram” to satisfy their vengeful lust strayed a little too obviously into the realm of sexual fantasy to be taken very seriously. The initial “alarm” Charleston had felt subsided quickly, the hatter Edward Starr reported: regardless of whether the plot was fact or fancy, there had been a flurry of arrests, salutary hangings, “and the guard increased, so I think there is no danger to be apprehended from the Slaves.” Still, more than a century later, Israel Nesbitt recalled clearly the plotting his great-grandfather had told him of, the warnings Robert Nesbitt had given Vesey against his plan to “put de Negroes in de saddle,” and the great

\textsuperscript{70} David Kohn and Bess Glenn, eds., Internal Improvement in South Carolina, 1817-1828 (Washington, 1938), 207-213, 225; A South Carolinian [Edwin C. Holland], A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated Against the Southern & Western States, Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery Among Them… (Charleston, 1822), 86; Young, Domesticating Slavery, 57-160.

\textsuperscript{71} [William H. Drayton], The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists (Philadelphia, 1836), 298.

\textsuperscript{72} On the Vesey plot and the fears it released, see Lionel H. Kennedy and Thomas Parker, An Official Report of the Trials of Sundry Negroes, Charged with an Attempt to Raise an Insurrection in the State of South-Carolina: Preceded by an Introduction and Narrative; and in an Appendix, a Report of the Trials of Four White Persons, on Indictments for Attempting to Excite the Slaves to Insurrection (Charleston, 1822); The Trial Record of Denmark Vesey (Boston, 1970); [James Hamilton, Jr.] An Account of the Late Intended Insurrection Among a Portion of the Blacks of This City (Charleston, 1822); Achates [Thomas Pinckney], Reflections, Occasioned by the Late Disturbances in Charleston (Charleston, 1822).
“tumult” the hangings of “de Vesey crowd” caused. Had there been nothing at all to that fearful conspiracy?73

Two generations on, white Charleston remained unsure. Grumblers and foot-draggers abounded among the city’s slaves. Ne’er-do-wells and other-people’s-servants in need of a thrashing turned up on any shopping trip along King Street or visit to the Battery. But when rumors swirled in the winter of 1860 that Fred Porcher’s house servants intended to “knock him over the head” the first chance they got, the plotters—if such they were—were quietly dealt with. No chill of terror froze the city’s elite. No wave of reprisals was launched to quell the underclass. No impulse of guilt swept over gloomy masters. “I know I treat them far better than they treat me,” slaveowners asserted. Even the initial alarm John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry sparked passed off quickly, once whites learned that “no negroes took part in it.” Since the eighteenth century and perhaps longer still, though war, fire and epidemic had offered superb opportunities, Charleston’s slaves had never nearly risen up. There seemed no hint that they ever would—not without outside agitation or internal disunity.74

But there was the rub. Since the turn of the century, South Carolina slaveholders had moderated treatment of human chattel, hoping to win loyalty and affection. By the 1850s, this strategy seemed largely successful. But what faith could anyone place in appearances? All had


heard stories of the kindly master found with his throat cut, the gentle mistress poisoned by her own house servants. Though Keziah Brevard punished her cook for brewing salty coffee, she could not quite bring herself to tell her diary the nauseating worry she must have felt: perhaps the awful girl had used the coffeepot as chamber pot from pure spite.\textsuperscript{75} All knew that the commerce of State Street and Chalmers was unlikely to nurture warm feelings in slaves’ breasts toward owners who spoke of their “black families” and then traded them for cash. In truth, every black one passed in the streets, bond or free, was journeying to or from the auction block. Only the distance was in dispute. That fact undercut the best paternalist intentions, tainting pious hopes with cancerous doubt. On their own, slaveholders knew, blacks would never rise against bondage. But with abolitionists meddling everywhere, who could say the plotting had not already begun?\textsuperscript{76}

A semblance of safety required a show of force. Day and night, travelers reported, Charleston’s streets were patrolled by “innumerable marshaled men,” “a perfect gens d’armerie” of police organized for the purpose “of ‘keeping down the niggers’.” Across the antebellum era, any black could be stopped and questioned without cause, arrested if their papers were not in order. Once the bells of St. Michael’s tolled in the evening—nine o’clock in winter, ten in summer—the city “suddenly assume[d] the appearance of a great military garrison, and all the principal streets bec[a]me forthwith alive with patrolling parties of twenties and thirties, headed by fife and drum, conveying the idea of a general siege.” Moonless nights, dark alleys, and dim side streets shaped a superb terrain for transgression for some blacks, but midnight ramblers too

\textsuperscript{75} Entry of December 29, 1860, March 28, 1861, Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard Diary, SCL.

\textsuperscript{76} Laurence M. Keitt to James H. Hammond, September 10, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC; John H. Merchant, Jr., “Laurence M. Keitt, South Carolina Fire-Eater” (Ph. D. diss., University of Virginia, 1976), 302-304.
often paid a stiff price. Any black found on the streets got rough justice, a night in jail, a fine or flogging come morning. At the first knell, most went “scampering and running” for safety.\footnote{Benwell, \textit{An Englishman’s Travels in America}, 190; Buckingham, \textit{Slave States of America}, 2: 62; F[rancis] C. Adams, \textit{Manuel Pereira; Or, the Sovereign Rule of South Carolina. With Views of Southern Laws, Life, and Hospitality} (Washington, 1853), 30; Cunynghame, \textit{A Glimpse of the Great Western Republic}, 264; “Charleston at Drum-Beat,” \textit{Southern Rose-Bud}, 3 (1835): 141; William Kingsford, \textit{Impressions of the West and the South during a Six Week’s Holiday} (Toronto, 1858), 77.}

By mid-century, though, that cat-and-mouse game had been drastically transformed. Now a professional police force numbering more than 150 constables had supplanted roaming watch parties, and wayward slaves no longer focused their attention.\footnote{Charleston reorganized its police force several times before 1860. See Eckhard, comp., \textit{Digest of the Ordinances of the City Council of Charleston}, 88-102; Walker, comp., \textit{Ordinances of the City of Charleston, from the 19th of August 1844, to the 14th of September 1854}, 21-23, 65-66.} To an alarming degree, the disorder of the docks and petty crime of the Neck district seemed to be spreading throughout the city. In June 1860 alone—a quiet month—the captain of police reported seven hundred and six arrests. Over four hundred of those detained were whites accused of everything from trespassing to indecent exposure. Most were minor offenders, charged with violations of city ordinances, evading local taxes, or public drunkenness. Still, a sizeable minority were accused of more serious breaches: assaulting a police officer, “Negro stealing,” selling liquor to slaves, arson (see tables 5.1-5.2). A “great many desperate men,” rumor said, “some of them seafaring men” had congregated in Charleston to survive by the “main chance” of crime.\footnote{\textit{Charleston Mercury}, July 19, 1860.}

Newspapers reported alarming instances of thievery and violence in the streets, but residents were more likely to be disturbed by the identity of outlaws than the crimes they committed. Everyone knew that unsupervised slaves could not be trusted, and that men without ties to the community were “suspicious characters” by nature. Poverty untempered by elite benevolence might also lead to petty vice, but so long as the demography and geography of
TABLE 5.1
ARRESTS, CHARLESTON, JUNE-DECEMBER 1860
WHITE OFFENDERS

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<th>Oct</th>
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<td>1/0</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>4/0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>1/0</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
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<td>1/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disturbing the Peace</td>
<td>9/3</td>
<td>16/9</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>21/2</td>
<td>24/3</td>
<td>15/2</td>
<td>22/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improper Driving</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>7/0</td>
<td>3/0</td>
<td>1/0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>60/7</td>
<td>55/3</td>
<td>65/10</td>
<td>66/7</td>
<td>88/9</td>
<td>88/9</td>
<td>97/12</td>
</tr>
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<td>14/4</td>
<td>38/17</td>
<td>22/15</td>
<td>31/11</td>
<td>32/9</td>
<td>39/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
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<td>4/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>1/0</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
<td>3/0</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>15/0</td>
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<td>75/4</td>
<td>31/2</td>
<td>26/1</td>
<td>30/2</td>
<td>25/1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x/y:  
x = male offenders
y = female offenders

Source: Charleston Courier, July 19, August 30, September 27, October 25, December 11, 25, 1860, February 14, 1861.
TABLE 5.2
ARRESTS, CHARLESTON, JUNE-DECEMBER 1860
NON-WHITE OFFENDERS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>June</th>
<th>July</th>
<th>Aug</th>
<th>Sept</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
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<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disturbing the Peace</td>
<td>10/3</td>
<td>7/5</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>6/4</td>
<td>11/2</td>
<td>2/3</td>
<td>13/9</td>
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<td>FPC in State Illegally</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improper Driving</td>
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<td>4/0</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
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<td>19/2</td>
<td>24/1</td>
<td>27/1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intox /Disturbing Peace</td>
<td>18/11</td>
<td>1/2</td>
<td>15/11</td>
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<td>13/0</td>
<td>10/0</td>
<td>12/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larceny</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
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<td>3/0</td>
<td>6/0</td>
<td>8/1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loitering in Grogshops</td>
<td>3/0</td>
<td>11/0</td>
<td>4/0</td>
<td>5/0</td>
<td>6/0</td>
<td>18/0</td>
<td>20/0</td>
</tr>
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<td>Murder</td>
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<td>1/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>1/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nonpayment of Taxes</td>
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<td>4/1</td>
<td>10/3</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
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<td>Runaways</td>
<td>16/4</td>
<td>17/4</td>
<td>9/3</td>
<td>9/1</td>
<td>7/5</td>
<td>8/4</td>
<td>4/5</td>
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<td>Slaves w/o pass</td>
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<td>12/4</td>
<td>19/5</td>
<td>20/5</td>
<td>16/1</td>
<td>10/4</td>
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<td>Sleeping out w/o ticket</td>
<td>11/2</td>
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<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>12/7</td>
<td>10/6</td>
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<tr>
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<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
<td>0/0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trespassing</td>
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<td>5/0</td>
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<td>6/1</td>
<td>6/1</td>
<td>1/1</td>
<td>6/1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unpaid Capitation Tax</td>
<td>9/16</td>
<td>6/14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Violation/City Ordinances</td>
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<td>13/3</td>
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<td>5/1</td>
<td>3/0</td>
<td>7/1</td>
<td>4/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working w/o Badge</td>
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<td>9/31</td>
<td>39/54</td>
<td>0/2</td>
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<td>2/2</td>
<td>1/0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

x/y:  
x = male offenders
y = female offenders

Source: Charleston Courier, July 19, August 30, September 27, October 25, December 11, 25, 1860, February 14, 1861.
Urban life supported an ethic of personalism, patronage, and face-to-face interaction, cases of renegades plundering the property of fellow citizens had been rare. By the eve of secession, those days were long past. Now, “[s]trange faces meet our eyes at every turn,” the Courier complained. Worse, bewilderment and suspicion had vaulted from the street to the courtroom itself: in March 1857, Charleston police arrested 511 whites and blacks, who paid the Mayor’s Court $462.50 in fines. That same month, the City Guard saw their wages docked $490 as payment for various fines and misdeeds. Even telling cops from robbers was a matter of conjecture.80

Increasingly, crime-solvers seemed as troublesome as the law-breakers they pursued. Charges of being “in liquor,” “disorderly conduct,” and “neglect of duty” litter police records. Irish-born patrolmen—a majority of Mayor “Paddy” Miles’ recruits—seemed especially prone to falter. On March 11, 1856, Private Gallagher paid five dollars for coming to the guard house “intoxicated and unfit for duty,” Private Normile was discharged for “choking & Kicking Sarah Wagner in Elliott Street” while drunk, Private Mitchel was dismissed for being “Drunk on post,” and Private Molony paid a dollar for “Striving to Conceal” Mitchel’s misconduct. It was a quiet Monday night in the lower wards.81 Equally bad were constables too assiduous in their duties, breaking up innocuous serenades and pestering lamplighters, challenging respectable citizens and mistaking proper women for streetwalkers. Worst perhaps was Private Quin, who sought out free blacks carrying canes or asserting status in other ways.82 Those arrests provoked outcry,


81 Entries for January 3, 9, February 25, March 11, 1856, Charleston Police Department, Morning Reports, CLS.

82 Entries for February 25, March 4, 5, 10, 1856, Charleston Police Department, Morning Reports, CLS.
rebuke, and apologies, putting other officers on notice that racist shenanigans would be punished. Yet there can be little doubt that some police took pleasure in roughing up slaves or sending black curfew violators running.

Paradoxically, too, while crime became more common, detecting criminals seemed more difficult than ever. Wrongdoers learned to mask their appearance, blending skillfully into the community they preyed upon. Only the eye alert and trained to distinguish telltale signs could ferret out professional criminals. A decade after its formation in 1845, Mayor Miles had enlarged and revamped the city’s police force, creating a crack squad of undercover detectives. Led by Chief John Harleston, a recent West Point graduate, these sleuths used the latest technology to nab offenders, linking daguerreotype records from previous arrests to faces in the street.83 A generation earlier, when an item had been stolen or a crime committed, a bell-ringer would pass along, drawing a crowd and explaining what the matter was. Locals then took the lead in solving the mystery. In areas where crime grew rampant and the community hardened to vice—like the notorious French and Good-Bye Alleys, the haunts of prostitutes, drunken sailors, and thieves—city fathers simply shut streets off to traffic altogether. By 1850, though, that broad tradition of civic responsibility had eroded beyond repair.84

Increasingly, crime came to be seen as a danger for local government, not the community, to define, and for professional police to control. Private citizens were too busy,

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divided, self-absorbed to deal with day-to-day problems of public order. Taxpayers groaned at the cost of funding Miles’ 265 “Bulldogs”—more than $140,000 per year in 1856—but most chalked it up to the price of progress.\footnote{Mayor’s Report on City Affairs... September 29th, 1857.}

Across the 1850s, soaring arrest statistics hardly dampened criminal activity, yet daily life went on “quietly enough,” one factor explained: “now and then a Fire, or a murder, but these things are getting rather common, and don’t shock us, as they would once.”\footnote{Alfred F. Ravenel to Cleland K. Huger, June 13, 1849, Cleland Kinloch Huger Papers, SCL. For a good example of this changed atmosphere, see Trial of John A. Reickles Before the Hon. D. L. Wardlaw for the Homicide of Henry Linstedt, in the City of Charleston: Tried the 3rd and 4th of June 1858, Taken in Phonography by J. Woodruff, Reporter... (Charleston, 1858).} More than this, conditions of modern life had broken down the old opposition between communal law and outlaw. The complex, fractured identities of Charlestonians made local agreement about what constituted crime and how best to punish it ever more difficult. When two dozen slaves broke out of the workhouse in June, 1849, for example, the city’s finest spent more time and effort battling rioting whites, who tried to burn down black churches in retaliation, than in rounding up escapees. Their emphasis was appropriate, from the new perspective. For conservatives like James L. Petigru, the problem was one of class, not race. It was rampaging propertyless whites, not truant black property, who threatened social order here.\footnote{Arthur F. Ravenel to Cleland K. Huger, June 13, 1849, Cleland Kinloch Huger Papers, SCL; Isaac S. K. Bennett to John C. Faber, July 20, 1849, John Christopher Faber Papers, SCL; Paul Trapier to John L. Manning, November 15, 1849, John L. Manning Papers, SCHS; Robert F. Durden, “The Establishment of Calvary Protestant Episcopal Church for Negroes in Charleston,” South Carolina Historical Magazine, 55 (1964): 69-72; Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, the Union Man of South Carolina, ed. James P. Carson (Washington, 1920), 280.} Suppose militia had been called out to quell the mob? The militia was the mob, or its relatives and fellow-workers, fully in sympathy. Charleston’s police might act like the most shiftless of proletarians, or crack heads like the rowdiest of ruffians, but they were waged workers nonetheless, and would get the job done.
Some tasks, though, plainly overmatched the police. No crime worried whites more than arson. Across the 1850s, when a workshop or mill or factory went up in flames (as they had a startling tendency to do) “incendiaries” were invariably suspected. Where some might have seen a series of unlucky conflagrations, Charleston’s elite discovered ethnic conflict, perfidious crime, perhaps class struggle itself.88

For men of property, that was the deepest fear, far more probable than fantasies of slave revolt. Unruly Chartists and the scenes of workers’ revolt 1848 had unleashed across Europe filled Carolinians with foreboding. Then, just weeks before the workhouse uproar, New York’s Astor Place riots pitched the metropolis into three days of confused class warfare.89 For elite Charlestonians the lesson was clear: the narrow basis of social order had to be anchored in respect for private property and the state which defended it, not vain hopes of community or consensus across class lines. To promenade King Street in 1860 was to imbibe that political meaning in commodified form, a dogma fetishized and elevated to the central meaning of the common good. Things—and ruthless ones—were firmly in the saddle.90

And so Charlestonians triangulated yet again, mixing up fears of the professional criminal lurking in the community’s midst with suspicion of footloose wage workers and the dread of abolitionism, the greatest threat to property southerners faced. John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry brought matters to a head. That fiasco only confirmed what slaveholders already

88 Isaac S. K. Bennett to John C. Faber, May 29, 1850, John Christopher Faber Papers, SCL; Isaac S. K. Bennett to John C. Faber, June 5, 1850, John Christopher Faber Papers, DU; Charleston Mercury, July 7, 1852; Charles W. Heyward to Louis Manigault, September 3, 1855, Louis Manigault Papers, DU; Alexander H. Pegues to James H. Thornwell, September 25, 1855, James Henley Thornwell Papers, SCL.


knew: when crisis came, truculent slaves could be cowed and tampering Yankees sent packing—or have their necks cracked. But it also gave vent to deeper fears of internal division and betrayal.

Newspapers told how Brown had been caught with maps of the South in his hands, scored with telltale “x”s. Did those signs show where antislavery zealots would strike next? Where they had already infiltrated? Where they lay in wait—disguised—for the secret signal to devastate homes with fire and sword? Imagination ran riot. Daguerreotypes might single out career criminals. Police might lock them up. But how to deal with—to discover—benighted southerners willing to betray their own people? Who were those “prowlers, loafers, and rowdies,” those two-faced “suspicious character[s],” and what did they truly aim at?91 Six months earlier, Charleston militiamen and “a strong body of police” had ringed a burglar’s execution, fearing he would “be rescued by the mob.” The crowd at his hanging proved “very dense, all sorts, black & white, old & young, male & female, mixed up in dire confusion.” Who the prisoner’s accomplices might be, none could rightly tell. How could Charlestonians bring unity and order—a semblance of safety—out of that chaos?92

In 1860, the answer was the blue cockade. It rallied the heterogeneous, frightened community, proffering a new basis for social and political identity, promising a paramilitary police to root out criminals and traitors and keep external threats at bay. Pinning on the radical

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91 Charleston Mercury, July 28, November 29, December 24, 1859, Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, April 19, 1860. As this range of dates suggests, John Brown’s raid did not unleash a “crisis of fear” in South Carolina—it was one moment in a much broader process. Cf. Steven A. Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (New York, 1970).

92 Percy Nagel to “Mother,” March 26, 1859, Percy Nagel Papers, SCL. As early as 1850, the lowcountry planter-politician William Colcock had “no doubt in the world” that abolitionists had “a regularly organized agency” in his neighborhood. A decade later, that paranoia toward one’s neighbors had become widespread. William F. Colcock to Mary W. H. Colcock, June 11, 1850, TU.
badge was a small act of boundary definition and tribal will seen up and down King Street in the fall of 1860. What began in consumption would end in revolution.
On the warm, bright morning of April 24, 1860, it seemed as if all of Charleston was streaming up Meeting Street toward the South Carolina Institute Hall, fearful of arriving late. The national convention of the Democratic Party had gathered in its sweltering auditorium to select a candidate for the presidency, and the city swarmed with visitors from across the Union. It was “an invasion of… locusts,” one resident complained: strangers infesting hotels and bar rooms, crowding King Street shops, declaring their views in a buzz of forceful accents, careless drawls, nasal twangs. Southern rights advocates headquartered north of the Market at the cushy Charleston Hotel, hurrahing favorite sons far into the night. Northern and Western delegates, mostly supporting front-runner Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois, overran the Mills House and bedded down in the Hibernian Hall. Here was a drama of “immense excitement,” thought Alabama’s “Horse Shoe Ned.” As to how it would all turn out, “nobody knows anything.”

Regardless, these pests would pay, and that mattered most at street level. Residents regarded grave and giddy outsiders as a source of major profit and minor annoyance, just as conventioneers are still seen. They could not imagine that the choices men made here would see their kin standing shoulder to shoulder along the Battery one year on, cheering husbands, brothers, friends, lovers, and sons shelling the as-yet-unfinished Federal fort at harbor’s mouth in the name of an as-yet-unborn Confederacy. Those who would become Vigilant Rifles come November nearly all threaded their way on this day through the self-important crowd, hurrying

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1 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, March 24, 1860. On the convention, see William F. Colcock to Emmeline S. Colcock, April 1860, Colcock Family Papers, TU; Murat Halstead, Caucuses of 1860. A History of the National Political Conventions of the Current Political Campaign: Being a Complete Record of the Business of All the Conventions; with Sketches of Distinguished Men in Attendance upon Them, and Descriptions of the Most Characteristic Scenes and Memorable Events (Columbus, 1860), 1-96, esp. 6-7; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, April 26, 1860.
on to unexciting jobs within earshot of the political proceedings. Neither could they know that, a few days hence, expatriate William Lowndes Yancey would denounce the convention and lead Alabama’s men from the hall to wild applause. More than a few must have joined the shouting, stamping, clapping throng that night, whether from conviction, admiration for a winning performance, or a simple desire to fit in. Nor could they expect that Carolina’s delegation would be the last to secede, virtually jeered out of the meeting by their own neighbors. For Tom Simons, Sam Tupper, and other Charleston stalwarts, their supporters and foes, that shameful test of allegiances still lay a few days off.²

Striding along now with the sweaty host of delegates, reporters, curiosity-seekers, and prowling ne’er-do-wells was Robert S. Parker, a well-known and respectable figure who lived just south of Steele’s Hat Hall. Like all members of the press, Parker paused before entering the convention to sign in at the temporarily converted offices of William S. Dodge’s Machinery Depot, declaring himself a resident of Charleston and editor of the “Bunkum Flag Pole.” By circumstance or design, that deceit went unchallenged.³

There was no such newspaper, of course, and Captain Parker’s muscular, tanned figure comported poorly with popular notions of an ink-stained wretch. But Parker was adept at performing alternate identities. Since 1857 he had served as High Priest to the local chapter of the Royal Arch Masons, and trading hats from sailor to editor was not nearly so strange. Both were costumes for his role as detective and protector. As assistant harbormaster he was charged with recording and scrutinizing the identities of all who entered the port, rooting out smuggling,


³ Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, May 12, 1860.
maintaining quarantines for disease, rounding up visitors of suspicious character or dubious principles.  

We cannot know why Parker came to the Democratic Convention—though locals feared that crooked fellows and covert abolitionism had arrived in the Queen City on the tide of presidential politics—nor why he masqueraded so transparently as chief of a bogus paper. This was the sort of spy work the South Carolina Association had run before Charleston’s police formed a detective squad in 1856.  

As Parker mingled with delegates and scribes, other editors, like the Courier’s Bill Carlisle, must have spotted the con, though they said nothing that the record shows. They were in on the trick, one way or the other. Perhaps Bill Dodge winked when Parker declared himself a newsman. Whether he thought the captain was acting, as he often did, to ferret out those who threatened the city’s social order—again—we cannot say.

What this moment makes clear could be recognized only months later, at the instant of secession itself: that for many Charlestonians, disunion’s accomplishment meant a performance of self-declaration, a casting off of other identities, resolution of conflicting allegiances. In the wake of Lincoln’s win, it seemed, “every third man” walking Charleston’s streets announced radical determination with his hat, and the blue cockade it displayed. Yet many wondered privately what such displays truly meant. How many zealots for separatism were simply talking through their hats?

Those doubts seemed blissfully banished on the morning after church bells tolled the news of independence. A new band of “Palmetto Minute Men, of the city of Charleston,”

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4 Charleston Mercury, December 11, 1856, December 9, 1857, December 15, 1858, November 15, 1860.


6 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 17, 1860.
stepped forward that day, led by none other than R. S. Parker. Second-in-command was W. B. Carlisle, voice of the merchant community through his seat at the conservative *Courier*. William F. Dodge, now selling pistols to would-be revolutionaries from his Machinery Depot, supplied the Minute Men as secretary.⁷

Whatever collusion had existed among this trio eight months earlier, however it shaped the choices of the three hundred men they drew after them to join Charleston’s Minute Men is lost to history. Indeed, the Palmetto Minute Men themselves disappear from the record after this momentarily momentous big reveal.⁸ They enacted a serenade to the governor at the Mills House that evening, received a delegation of Savannah’s “Sons of the South” a few days later, but never offered their services for defense of the Independent Republic, never formed ranks in battle. From all indications, they never even drilled in public.

Surprising as it may seem that the state’s leading newspaper gave no sign of their activity after December 25—since its editor served as vice-president—we may ask what sort of group these Minute Men were, what they imagined they were about, how they differed from other cadres, and why a gun-toting company of self-conceived patriots was commanded by a “president” and his club-like retinue instead of a captain heading a military chain of command. Whatever they aimed at, these radicals seemed radically different from those who called themselves Vigilant Rifles. All that linked them was the rose.

The blue cockade became the “distinguishing mark” of Minute Men across South Carolina, instantly recognizable, although it soon developed a broader currency among

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⁸ *Charleston Mercury*, December 21, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, December 22, 1860; *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, December 25, 1860. In early January, “a strong detachment” of “the Minute Men” was sent to strengthen local defenses, but—if this report concerns the Palmetto Minute Men—nothing more was heard of them. *Charleston Mercury*, January 14, 1861.
disunionist sympathizers. At first, its usage confused observers. When the Edgefield lawyer George Tillman warned James Hammond on October 9 about the emergence of Minute Men in his area, he stressed that they were “a secret, armed opposition,” which had already conducted “Several Secret Meetings… of the Sensational Kind.” Yet radicals could be readily spotted by the cockades they wore. Indeed, he saw “a number of such sensational indiscretions upon hats & coats while I write.” The rose meant revolution--or so it seemed.9

Like the rest of antebellum America, South Carolina had seen its share of clandestine fraternal orders and “dark lantern” societies in the 1850s—American Republicans, Odd Fellows, Know Nothings, Sons of Malta, and more—each with cryptic signs and passwords, mysterious rituals and private purposes.10 Benevolent or political, altruistic or xenophobic, these groups functioned primarily as conduits of social capital, configuring men within networks of social and economic opportunity, conferring status, and aiding their rise within society on this basis. Minute Men shared little with such clubs, not least their boldly declarative symbol. They were, initially, a selective band, though hardly secretive in their activities.

In Charleston, Minute Men simply appeared in mid-October, 1860, unheralded but unmistakable. There had been no calls for assembly in local papers, no plans or preliminary statements circulating in public form. The Mercury published no accounts of Charleston Minute Men’s meetings, nor even hinted at the group’s membership. There was little need: anyone walking the streets could see who was radical and who was not. When Grace Elmore spied men with “blue rosettes on their black felt hats” on the train to Columbia in late October, she

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surmised that they were going “to some jolly club.” It was a good guess for one just returned to her native state. Elmore could see well enough that there was nothing secretive about these fellows.11

Minute Men aimed to make their presence felt. When the Edgefield Rifles held a militia drill on November 7, the Edgefield Minute Men showed up on the same muster ground, showing off their uniforms, marching, and boasting their principles. When a mass meeting assembled at Limestone Springs on November 22, the Limestone Southern Rights Guard, a Minute Men unit, paraded before the community and kept secessionist spirits high. Two days later, Spartanburg’s Minute Men led a torchlight procession to the site where delegates to the state convention considering disunion were to be nominated.12 On each occasion, moderates had the sense to give their radical neighbors a wide berth.

The symbols Minute Men brandished and sheer strength of numbers commanded attention and warned off opposition. By mid-October, the group was “already complete and powerful” across the midlands, and taking shape rapidly in other areas, “embracing the flower of the youth, and led on by the most influential citizens.” Parades of five, six, even eight hundred marchers impressed observers, boosted enrolment, cowed dissent. On October 29, Richland’s Cedar Creek Rifle Company “resolved themselves unanimously into a company of Minute Men” and mounted the blue cockade. By November 6, Minute Men corps had organized in Laurens, Lancaster, and Union Districts. A company from Newberry mustered the next day, and a week later, units were “being raised in all parts” of Anderson’s upcountry. At month’s end, Hamburg’s band was planning a “grand torchlight procession” in tandem with Georgia radicals,

11 (Boston) The Liberator, November 9, 1860; Baltimore American, November 20, 1860; Entry of October 18, 1860, Grace Brown Elmore Reminiscences, SCL.

12 Edgefield Advertiser, November 7, 1860; Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, November 22, 25, 1860.
Branchville paraded two hundred Minute Men with torches and fireworks, and Rock Hill’s burgeoning group called for a “grand rally” of units from across the state during Columbia’s fair week.\(^\text{13}\)

Lowcountry radicals claimed that Minute Men had risen in response to moderate John Townsend’s electrifying speech, *The South Alone Should Govern the South, and African Slavery Should be Controlled by Those Only Who are Friendly to It*, delivered on Edisto Island at summer’s end. But locals had treated that address for what it was—an intemperate rant by a hard-pressed moderate—and the parishes were notoriously slow to embrace the cockade.\(^\text{14}\) Far from spontaneous, the group had been born in Columbia in late September. Its constitution specified that “on all occasions of a public demonstration,” Minute Men would wear “a red scarf over the right shoulder confined under the left arm, upon which shall be inscribed in conspicuous black letters M. M., and a black glazed cap, with the same letters in red upon the front.” They would carry “a flambeau, lantern, or other demonstrative implement” when on parade. Further, each member was instructed “habitually” to wear “upon the left side of his hat a blue cockade.”\(^\text{15}\) The politics of personal identity had never been advertised so conspicuously in the Palmetto State.

Cast across South Carolina, the Richland District charter inspired Minute Men groups from Charleston to Greenville. In many cases, chapters adopted its principles without alteration,

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\(^\text{13}\) *Charleston Mercury*, October 15, 25, November 6, 8, 15, December 1, 10, 1860; *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 17, 20, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, November 30, 1860; (Jackson) *Weekly Mississippian*, November 14, 1860; *New York Herald*, November 9, 1860.

\(^\text{14}\) *Charleston Mercury*, October 24, 1860; [John Townsend], *The South Alone Should Govern the South, and African Slavery Should be Controlled by Those Only Who are Friendly to It* (Charleston, 1860); *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 13, 1860. The first company seems to have been raised in St. Peter’s Parish on October 27, but the movement was slow to catch fire. *Charleston Courier*, October 30, 1860.

except for the elaborate rule on dress. By late October, the provision for sashes and glazed caps, torches and red lettering was widely discarded. Abbeville’s contingent, made up of “the best material,” went in for red frocks and dark pants, but usually cadres paraded in everyday clothes, everywhere preferring hats to caps. Like the Laurens District Minute Men, most affirmed that “Each member, upon all occasions of a public demonstration, shall wear upon the left side of his hat a blue cockade—and at such other times as he may desire,” and asked no more. This became common practice across the state. It was warning enough to turncoats and doubters.16

The symbol took several styles, but most featured “a blue rosette” of varying sizes, “with a military button in the centre.” Alternatives appeared of scarlet ribbon, plain steel buttons or woven palmetto leaves, adorned with various slogans. Mechanics mounted “plain strips of brown paper, bearing such mottoes as ‘Resistance,’ ‘Remember Harper’s Ferry,’ etc.” Men of all stripes, save the enslaved and socially proscribed, wore cockades both for political and personal reasons. Like other symbols, the rose declared its wearer’s loyalties and associations—and offered a chance for seemingly selfless self-display, too.17

Minute Men wore the cockade as a sign of kinship with the Nullifiers of 1832, who had sworn resistance to federal tyranny. Those men had borrowed the style and custom of their hat badges from British oppositionist tradition. Jacobites, Wilkesites, and Gordon rioters had all championed the blue cockade. The symbol worked well, drawing widespread attention to the Minute Men and their cause.18 State newspapers picked up word of the group by early October,
and soon the whole nation had heard some version of its plans. Northerners generally reacted with disdain, failing to comprehend the dangerous micropolitics of the movement’s emblem. In Wisconsin, the cockade became a symbol of “the madness and wickedness” of disunion. Its sudden spread, jeered one Ohio newspaper, only showed that Carolinians had “got the blues” about Lincoln’s victory. The rose was “somewhat eccentric… but quite harmless,” the abolitionist *Liberator* allowed. For thirty years, South Carolina had “been dissatisfied, supercilious, domineering, impudent, and abusive, carrying her point by bullyragging,” failing except to bring “dishonor upon the good name of the… country.” The radical sign signified nothing: cockades were a self-delusive fad and all talk of disunion mere bluster. Such sentiments were too confident by half and, disastrously, only half right.¹⁹

The rapid spread of cockades across the region surprised southerners, who imagined that it demonstrated “the general feeling of unanimity which prevails” against Republican rule. “Every hat has a cockade,” wondered one visitor to Charleston, “and all minds are resolved to fight.” Yet some heads were hotter than others. Men adopted the symbol for an all-too-broad range of reasons.²⁰

Radicals and conservatives agreed: wearing the cockade meant belonging to the Minute Men, and that meant support for unilateral disunion. Political slowcoaches like Senator James Chesnut specifically linked rejection of “sole secession” with opposition to “the institution of

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¹⁹ *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, November 15, 1860; (Ripley, Ohio) *Ripley Bee*, November 1, 1860; (Boston) *The Liberator*, November 30, December 14, 1860.

²⁰ *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 15, 1860; *New York Herald*, November 6, 1860.
badges to be generally & constantly worn.”

But most Carolinians stood somewhere between secession and submission, triangulating the political calculus imperfectly. And, on its face, the equation of an innocuous badge with an uncompromising political choice was not so obvious. Or it could be made to seem so. That was both the strength of the Minute Men movement and its great weakness: no one could quite agree on what the cockade meant, or what its display might entail.

That ambiguity was hardly accidental. The leadership of Columbia’s parent group included some of the state’s most heedless secessionists, men who had languished across the 1850s precisely because of their fire-eating ways. General John Jones, ex-commander of the state militia, presided, ex-governor James Adams chaired the Committee of Correspondence, and Maxcy Gregg, militant professor of political economy at South Carolina College, prodded the executive committee. They typified the most radical fringe of South Carolina’s state rights movement—marginalized, embittered, and, in Adams’ case, dying miserably of rectal cancer.

But now they walked a new path, masking aims and emotions, as “wire-pullers” must, in pursuit of revolutionary unity. In the crisis of 1850-51, secession had capsized, to radicals’ humiliation, because “medium men” could not be dragged to the point of action. Moderates had feared that disunionists could contrive that “every Neutral counts as a Secessionist,” but that formula had failed. At the decisive moment, uncommitted men had simply shrugged, and

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21 James Chesnut, Jr. to John Waties, October 12, 1860, Waties-Parker Families Papers, SCL.

22 E. J. Arthur to Langdon Cheves, Jr., October 8, 1860, Langdon Cheves Papers, SCHS; James H. Brooks to Benjamin F. Perry, January 27, 1860, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH. For good examples of the “bitter sarcasm and irony” which typified this group’s views, see Charleston Courier, December 7, 1860; [Maxcy Gregg, ed.], An Appeal to the State Rights Party of South Carolina: In Several Letters on the Present Condition of Public Affairs (Columbia, 1858).
separatism evaporated. In the wake of Lincoln’s election, Minute Men decreed, there could be no neutrals at all. The “chief difficulty” of achieving disunion, one cadre declared, arose from southerners’ “hesitation… to assemble a body of men who might transcend their authority, and regard themselves as empowered” as revolutionaries “to make changes” which might be followed, “more or less certainly, with trouble and confusion.” Minute Men’s purpose, then, was provocative, not programmatic, aiming to avoid divisive wrangling over policy, in favor of a single, manly determination: southerners must act to defend themselves, and that action must begin with pinning on the blue cockade. Who could quarrel with that simple, wordless, decisive gesture?

On October 7, a committee of the Richland District chapter sent copies of its constitution to like-minded leaders across the state. Before November, variant charters showed up in newspaper columns and broadside sheets, posted in public places and passed from hand to hand. By the time George Tillman sounded the anti-secessionist alarm, there were, by his count, four hundred Minute Men signed up in Edgefield District alone. That number ballooned as Lincoln’s election neared and the consequences of Republican victory sank in. Perhaps as many as fifteen thousand Carolinians took the Minute Men’s pledge before secession. An equal number or more simply pinned on the blue badge as a symbol of personal identity. By year’s end, allied

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26 This guess is based on accounts of cockades and Minute Men in Richland, Abbeville, Charleston, and Edgefield Districts making up a good quarter of the total. In the lower Pee Dee region and across the coastal parishes organization and enrolment limped along badly.
or copycat organizations had sprung up in Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, and further afield. At a mock jousting tournament in far-off Arkansas, the “Knight of the Blue Cockade” contended with the “Knight of Carolina” and other valiants in defense of southern chivalry. Blue cockades sprouted “everywhere.”

By that time the disunionist emblem’s meaning was shifting and fading almost beyond recognition. Decoding its significance became increasingly problematic. Uncertainty encouraged unity, but also fostered suspicion. Originally, Minute Men had pledged “to sustain Southern constitutional equality in the Union, or, failing in that, to establish our independence out of it.” Northern newspapers usually described the movement as defensive, an off-set to the bowler-hatted “Wide-Awakes” who catalyzed the Republican cause at the North. The Liberator believed that Minute Men intended to “march directly out of the Union,” no matter how Lincoln comported himself, though the New York Herald thought such stories simply “manufactured for effect.”

That confusion was understandable. While Orangeburg’s Minute Men shouted for immediate “Separate State Action,” “Sky Blue” described the group as only an “honor guard,” pending Republican aggression. Until Lincoln struck at the South directly, he held, Minute Men should “delay wearing” the blue cockade altogether. That anonymous suggestion appeared

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28 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 1860; (Boston) The Liberator, November 9, 16, 1860; New York Herald, November 8, 20, 1860; (Fayetteville, N.C.), Fayetteville Observer, October 22, 1860; Scott Nelson and Carol Sheriff, A People at War: Civilians and Soldiers in America’s Civil War (New York, 2007), 42-44.
alongside a polarizing shift within the company itself. Formed on October 6 by twenty-seven well-heeled young village residents, the group pledged its “sacred honor” to defend “Southern Constitutional equality in the Union,” or “establish our independence” out of it. Over the next three weeks, their ranks swelled to 116 members. But on October 27, just before marching out on a torchlight parade through the streets, the leadership suddenly changed the terms of membership. Henceforth, all would be “subject to strict Military discipline,” and “trained in preparation for actual service.” Now, all recruits would need to swear “to support the State of South Carolina in seceding from the Federal Union, in the event of the election of Abraham Lincoln or any other Black Republican to the Presidency of these United States, whether other Southern States secede with her or not.”

Over the next month, new enlistments plummeted to just thirty men, many of these purely “honorary” members. New fines for “disrespect to Officer[s],” disobedience, talking, “partaking,” or smoking in ranks appeared, along with a committee to punish absenteeism. Finally, the group sought to impose order by requiring members to wear uniforms—of southern manufacture, naturally. Though recruits would be responsible only for the cost of sewing, how to fund the “cheap, neat, and serviceable” materials proved a head-scratcher. The central committee in Columbia refused to pony up the thousand dollars needed, and a local subscription drive flopped. Even the company flag, promised by the “young ladies of… the village” on October 27 remained unfinished after seven weeks. At the end of November, uniforms became “optional.” Two weeks later, the company essentially split into two factions: honorary members with no rights of command or voting in meetings, but no obligations of attendance or military duty, and a uniformed minority ready “to go into actual service.” Even among the radicals,

29 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, October 27, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 29, 1860; Constitution, Entry of October 27, 1860; Minutes of the Orangeburg Minute Men, Records of the Confederate Historian, SCDAH.
“several” became “defaulters” once the state seceded.\textsuperscript{30} In Orangeburg, Minute Men came to look more like Wait-A-Minute Men.

Elsewhere, many volunteers, like the “several hundreds” who signed up at Kingstree on November 6, declared simply for the “protection of Southern Rights,” a goal both vague and all-encompassing. Conversely, Charleston’s Union Light Infantry adopted the blue cockade as “a symbol of our unflagging devotion” to the state, without linking their company formally to the Minute Men. Was that more or less radical than the Aiken Minute Men’s promise to “sustain by all means in our power whatever position the State of South Carolina shall assume” in convention, preserving “good order” in the meantime? Like these stalwarts, many Minute Men vowed to undertake “the enforcement of our Police Laws, and the detention and punishment of Abolition emissaries and incendiaries, and other offenders against the peace of the community.” Yet there were slave patrols, police, and vigilance societies already operating to handle such tasks. In mid-November, the Summerville Minute Men determined to “vindicate the rights and honor of South Carolina, and hold itself ready for any emergency.”\textsuperscript{31} What task could be more distant, unending, or abstract?

How such readiness—which all groups accented—might be achieved was desperately uncertain. Some agreed to “arm, equip, and drill,” while others conducted themselves more like a social club. Organized to “protect ourselves from aggression from the North or insurrection at home,” Abbeville’s Long Cane Minute Men behaved like most independent militia companies, concerned primarily with questions of membership, the conduct of business meetings, and so on.

\textsuperscript{30} Entries of October 27, November 2, 9, 13, 16, 23, 30, December 14, 21, 1860, Minutes of the Orangeburg Minute Men, Records of the Confederate Historian, SCDAH.

\textsuperscript{31} Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, October 27, November 17, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 18, November 8, 20, 1860.
Just how they meant to accomplish the task of protection went unexplained. But the same might be said for South Carolina’s Minute Men as a whole. Since the enemy they opposed stood hundreds of miles away, and their stance was uniformly defensive, there was little left for recruits to do beyond displaying the signs of resolution and drawing others to their ranks. Was their action, then, anything more than acting, and to what practical purpose?

It was all quite ambiguous, but ambiguity was the trump card of the cockade movement. “[Y]ou speak of the ‘Minute Men,’” Robert F. W. Allston wrote his son on November 8. “These are volunteers all over the State who profess to be ready at any moment to obey the Governor’s orders, should their services be needed.” That identity fractured rapidly, but multiplicity of forms and pledges made enrolment soar. Across South Carolina in October and November, Minute Men mustered and drilled openly, bearing “a Colt’s Revolver, a Rifle, or some other approved fire-arm,” as their constitution required, or more commonly marching empty-handed. Some companies paraded in civilian dress; others adopted gaudy uniforms and hats embossed with the letters “M. M.” The coonskin-capped “Marion Men of Combahee,” sixty-three strong, patrolled St. Bartholomew’s Parish, a “Mounted Guard” of Minute Men rode across Kershaw District, and Wade Hampton’s Richland Light Dragoons transformed themselves into the Richland Mounted Minute Men. The only thing which seemed to link such disparate bands was a determination to define the blue cockade to their own liking. In Charleston, independent paramilitary companies paraded on Citadel Green alongside less well-heeled Minute Men, united only by the blue rose. Outward uniformity vanished as autumn waned, yet blue cockades multiplied, growing as “plentiful as blackberries.”

32 (Jackson) Weekly Mississippian, November 7, 1860; Constitution and By-Laws of the Long Cane Minute Men, SCL.
Increasingly in these weeks, the rose became as much a symbol of abstract political opinion and social commerce as of meaningful military preparation. Vanguard cadres spent more time bickering with each other or perusing rivals’ radical credentials suspiciously than doing anything practical to ward off the Yankees. According to James Jones himself, “the obligations of a member were general, & not special.” “[T]ottering” old men wore the cockade to lend moral support. Youngsters sported it for fashion. More than a few pinned on the rose to ward off suspicion—or to mask their true feelings. That is one way of explaining why notorious conservatives like Hampton, John Preston, and James L. Orr embraced the badge. Citizens debating questions of banking, free trade, and manufactures in local newspapers adopted “Blue Cockade,” “Minute Man,” and similar aliases to gain public support. General A. J. Gonzales of Berkeley District used Minute Men ties to promote Maynard’s Military Rifle to budding revolutionists. “South” considered how well the hats of his “old-tried friend, HENRY ASH” of King Street would look, topped by the radical rose. It was all a bit tawdry, though seemingly demonstrative of how “the mighty heart of the city [beat] in unison with the movement.” Though men might disagree over disunion’s merits, none dared advocate internal disunity, by word or deed. Mounting the cockade offered allegiance to that higher cause.34

Even women used cockades to perform politically. At public meetings, private gatherings, and chance encounters, “the fair ones” pounced on wavering men, proffering wine and rosettes that were not easily refused. They promised to “secede” from any who bowed to Lincoln’s election, declaring that it was the “Palmetto cockade” which “makes our hearts

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33 The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston, ed. J. Harold Easterby (Chicago, 1945), 169; Constitution of Minute Men for the Defence of Southern Rights; Charleston Courier, November 2, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 17, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 19, 1860; Towles, ed., A World Turned Upside Down, 273.

34 The Diary of Edmund Ruffin, 1: 486; Charleston Courier, November 23, December 8, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 8, 20, 27, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 5, 10, 1860.
flutter.” In Columbia, Charleston, and at upcountry resorts, bands of ardent “Minute Girls” sprang up, adorned with blue ribbons.³⁵ Slaves, too, pleaded to wear the rose.³⁶ Within weeks, the Minute Men had been transformed from a self-selecting politico-military cadre to a highly visible mass organization conferring social status.

More than any other factor, it was public display of the blue cockade which destroyed opposition to disunion in South Carolina. The felt need for social unanimity was just that strong. When “a spirited daughter of Beaufort” requested of one valiant his hat—returning it “with the addition of a blue cockade”—what was left for him to do, except promise to “defend it to the last pulsation of our heart”?³⁷ When a doubting man found himself suddenly presented with the rose, produced swiftly from a “fair one’s” reticule, with the request that he protect it—her—with his life, how could he refuse? Could any man of honor, any self-respecting man, deny this emblem on those terms? When marchers sang, “We’ll trust to the boys with the blue cockade,” who dared dissent?³⁸ That was the problem which confronted James L. Orr, John D. Ashmore, and countless other moderates who found themselves serenaded by Minute Men. Summoned out onto a hotel balcony “after repeated calls,” what politician would risk his career—and perhaps much more—by refusing the honor he had been accorded?³⁹ And once words of thanks and obligation had passed his lips, accepting the symbol of the suitable sentiments he had expressed and pinning it on his hat was merely proud evidence of submission—to duty’s call and the will

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³⁷ *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 15, 1860.

³⁸ *Charleston Courier*, December 27, 1860.

³⁹ For examples of such serenades as political muggings, see *Charleston Mercury*, October 13, November 7, 17, December 10, 11, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, December 3, 7, 1860; *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 8, 15, December 25, 1860; (Columbia) *Daily South Carolinian*, November 14, December 13, 1860.
of the people, of course. By Christmas, when the Republic of South Carolina was just five days old, virtually everyone claimed to have been an active and longtime supporter of disunion. Radicalism had become de rigeur.

What it meant to be a Minute Man under such conditions was and is quite unclear.40 "No man feels he is a man unless his hat is turned up at the side with a blue rosette," Grace Elmore told her diary. "The very boys show a deep gravity and a sense of what the blue rose means." As she understood, it was, first and last, a declaration of manhood, a tribal marking. The boast took the form of a public promise of military service, a pledge not to yield to the foes of their native state. Yet the promise remained tacit and hazy, the conditions of service variable and uncertain. Mounting the rose, the DeKalb Rifle Guards vowed to defend their state "to the bitter end," pledging their aid to the governor "in case they are needed." Hopefully other bitter-enders would repel the foe before that call went forth. James J. Palmer likewise vowed to wear his rosette "until Carolina be free, or I be in my grave," yet he feared that "the cockade movement" was only a "temporary" fad, rapidly going "out of fashion."41

But not in the fashion-mad Queen City. Charleston men needed to renounce private concerns and personal motives, declared "Blue Cockade," presenting a "united and undivided front" to their foes. That proved devilishly difficult. Weeks of discussions passed before a vote could be taken and a unit formed. At the inaugural session on October 17, three hundred joined the Palmetto Minute Men. That number swelled quickly, though scores slid off into other groups, more active or less. "Every man able to bear a musket has joined a military company & is daily drilled," Edward Wells recorded at the beginning of December. "The merchants & their

40 Louisianans decorated a bust of Calhoun with the blue cockade; in Nashville someone pinned the rose on the tail of a pig. (Cleveland, Ohio) Daily Cleveland Herald, December 13, 22, 27, 1860.

clerks, the lawyers, the mechanics & all classes of business men, after working all day for money to support their families, drill nearly half the night… to be able to defend them.”

But what did such militancy mean? All that was demanded to wear the blue cockade was the price of a badge and a trip to Charlton Bird’s store. That was all three reporters from the New York Tribune required. Disguised with cockades, they ventured everywhere in Charleston in the weeks before disunion, transmitting their views back to Yankee readers via an elaborate code. Their names, lodging places, and appearance were completely mysterious. All anyone knew was that these “spies” posed as commercial men of some sort, and that they wore the badge of action. If counterfeit gentlemen posed a social danger, sham secessionists seemed doubly alarming.

How could radicals know whether the man who stood beside them was true or not? Political status here depended upon nothing more reliable than market choice. No tests were administered before the cockade was pinned on, no oaths sworn. Once personal manhood had been affirmed by adopting a common symbol, it was possible for patriots to disagree about the details of disunion, crucial though they were. It was impossible for any to question the commitment of the man behind the badge without questioning his honor—and reaping the reward that breach must bring. Nor was it certain that the pledge to take up arms in defense of South Carolina seemed very real to most volunteers. Almost every white male of adult age was already a soldier of sorts, though that service had long mocked the arts of war.

Since 1721, South Carolina had been defended by a citizen soldiery which never quite found its stride. Like most state militias, it was ill-disciplined, poorly armed and uniformed like

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43 Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, November 1, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 7, 1860; New York Tribune, November-December 1860.
scarecrows, subject to rampant absenteeism and endlessly changing regulations. A minority of groups, including the state’s cavalry and artillery, were well-to-do volunteer units, supplying their own uniforms and weaponry. The draftable leftovers within a community were herded into line companies of thirty to sixty-five men, dressed in everyday clothes and bearing whatever arms they could bring from home. As warriors, these troops were capable of keeping the unarmed slaves of the neighborhood in subjection, but not much more.

The common line militiaman could not feel much like a warrior. The martial culture of the Old South and the Romantic spirit glorified combat and sacrifice, but that was a long way off for Saturday soldiers. Consider the experience of one Newberry District farmer called to muster. Six times a year, he slung his musket and provisions over his shoulder and trekked sixteen miles to the parade ground, sleeping in the woods along the way. Upon arrival, unkempt and bone-weary, he was tramped around a dusty field in formation by the local squires, fortified


46 *Pierce M. Butler to Robert W. Barnwell, June 6, 1837, Robert Woodward Barnwell Papers, SCL; John P. Richardson to Armistead Burt, June 8, 1841, Armistead Burt Papers, DU; Charleston Mercury*, December 7, 1859.


with their liquor, and treated to their political views. Come autumn, political candidates would rub elbows briefly with the men. It was common for units to endorse a favorite son, marching to the polls *en masse* in support. Usually, though, things were far more dull for the line militiaman—marching and drill “armed with every weapon from a flintlock to a stick,” orders, more marching.  

Observers found these evolutions awkward, amateurish, even playful. “At a review near Charleston,” Peter Neilson recorded, “I have observed a whole company form themselves into a semi-circle to avoid standing over the shoes in water. Their commander either could not, or did not require them to form into a regular line.” Doing one’s duty was one thing, getting wet feet quite another. Eventually, David Doar remembered, “someone would cry out, ‘We have had enough, boys, let us take a drink, have a horse race, or go to dinner’… and ranks would be broken forthwith.” Once the command to dismiss was given at last, militiamen put their leaders to shame for manly drinking, fighting, and swagger, but often they had gotten a head start, tippling along the journey to muster and tipping the jug before the call to fall in came.  

How else to stand the stupid speeches of their supposed betters in the summer sun?  

Volunteer companies prided themselves on being above such bumpkins, but the difference was more of style than substance. Charleston in 1860 boasted ten companies of riflemen, three of light infantry, two troops of cavalry, and four batteries of artillery maintained

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50 Peter Neilson, *Recollections of a Six Years' Residence in the United States of America, Interspersed with Original Anecdotes, Illustrating the Manners of the Inhabitants of the Great Western Republic* (Glasgow, 1830), 320; David D. Wallace, *The History of South Carolina*, 4 vols. (New York, 1934), 3: 148-149; Entry of July 22, 1854, James Foster Sloan Diaries, SCL; Anna Reid to William M. Reid, July 9, 1860, William Moultrie Reid Papers, SCL; Entry of August 15, 1860, Lemuel Reid Diary, SCL.
by volunteer enlistments. Self-governed, funded by members’ fees, and meeting on an irregular basis, these groups often spent as many hours recruiting members and conducting unit business as they did in military training. Just as line militiamen voted for officers who promised the easiest musters, volunteers were drawn to units with the least drill, the best fellowship, and the most dashing uniforms at the lowest cost. The Palmetto Guard advertised the camaraderie, feasting, and female attention their unit enjoyed on an excursion to Columbia. The Zouave Cadets hawked stylish dress and gymnasium facilities. The charade of drill, whether with old muskets, pikes, and umbrellas, or with the best of arms, was a tiresome exercise for citizen soldiers. Few figured they would ever be called upon to do any real killing or dying. Their labor meant something quite different to them.\(^{51}\)

In elite companies like the Lafayette Artillery, the Palmetto Riflemen, or the German Fusiliers, monthly meetings were primarily an opportunity for conviviality and self-promotion.\(^{52}\) The example of the Charleston Light Dragoons is typical. Formed “for the protection and service of the City,” from the beginning the Dragoons were as much concerned with internal disorder as external threats. In May 1835, postmaster Alfred Huger discovered that abolitionists were shipping sacks of antislavery pamphlets south to his office for distribution across the state. More worrisome was the local response. Before Huger’s superiors could say what he should do with the mail, vigilantes had broken into the post office under cover of night, carried the offensive tracts to the Four Corners, and treated the city to a grand bonfire. For locals, this incident became a crisis of law and order, precipitating mass meetings and the creation of a

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\(^{52}\) *Rules of the Palmetto Riflemen* (Charleston, 1859); Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Citizens*, 213-254.
Committee of Twenty-One respected citizens to restore “public safety.” Amid this typically Carolinian overreaction, the Dragoons came together.

Like most volunteer units, on paper the horsemen made an impressive spectacle. Once they had settled on a name, the committee which drafted the Dragoons’ constitution planned their uniform in vivid detail: bottle-green jackets with red cashmere trim and white shoulder-knots, green pantaloons (white in summer) with red stripe, black leather helmets trimmed with brass and a white horse-hair tail, a cockade on the right side. Depending on the company he joined, a Charleston volunteer in 1850 shelled out ten to fifty dollars on such uniforms alone. Those of lesser means went for the infantry. The wealthy plunked down for cavalry attire. Spurred and mounted, armed with pistol and saber, they made a colorful and imposing sight. But all volunteers could take pride in their military costume and the elite associations it bespoke.

Apart from matters of dress, volunteers’ constitutions focused on details of organization, leaving questions of ideology unanswered. Like most, the Dragoons’ charter was a hybrid, meshing military, fraternal, and political structures. The company commander held drills at his discretion and presided over their conduct, as any military officer would. At monthly unit meetings, though, his authority shifted to that of chairman, acting “with due decorum, to judge impartially, to enforce the rules of debate, and strictly to confine the members to the questions under discussion.” His vote was only one of many. Nor was the process of joining the organization remarkably military. Would-be Dragoons were required to submit a formal application, undergo examination of “character and habits” by the Committee on Letters, and

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54 Constitution, Charleston Light Dragoons Records, SCL.
obtain the votes of three-quarters of the membership. If successful, the recruit would provide his own uniform, horse, tack, and arms, and pay a four-dollar membership fee and monthly levies to boot. He was joining an exclusive club as much as a fighting unit.\textsuperscript{55}

Like any lodge, the Dragoons were drawn from a relatively narrow circle of men, sharing similarities of age, ethnicity, class, status, and outlook. Most Charleston volunteers were like that: the Meagher Guards were “composed almost entirely of adopted [Irish] citizens,” the Scottish Guard was teetotal (though not all were Scots), the Washington Light Infantry and the Dragoons were chiefly planters’ sons and well-heeled merchants. It was a tradition of long standing. The cavalry company Peter Neilson saw in the 1820s, bedecked with “large white Leghorn straw hats adorned with an immense plume of black ostrich feathers… flourishing their sabers, like so many Quixotes,” was a “completely aristocratic” unit, barring commercial types, immigrants, and other riff-raff. Three decades later, boundaries were more porous, but still in place. Volunteers chose units more to celebrate common identity than to render military service.\textsuperscript{56}

Celebrate they did, practicing their elbow bend as often as most drills. Minutes of the Dragoons’ meetings list numerous fines imposed on riders who lost their swords or were thrown by their mounts, as well as one unfortunate who managed to shoot himself before the assembled company. As with penalties imposed for “matrimony” and “birth of a boy Dragoon,” however, these failings were usually paid off with punch, cake and baskets of champagne. At many meetings, members never came near a horse or weapon, passing a few convivial resolutions


\textsuperscript{56} Printed letter for Meagher Guard, December 26, 1860, McCrady Family Papers, SCL; Scottish Guard Muster List, 1850, Scottish Guard Records, SCHR; Neilson, \textit{Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States of America}, 321; Emerson, \textit{Sons of Privilege}, 7-15.
instead, agreeing “to participate in a punch treat,” and spending the evening “in social converse, enlivened at intervals by song, sentiment and innocent mirthfulness.” At Fourth of July parades and annual reviews, volunteers showed a sterner, but equally ludicrous side, as leaders trumpeted toothless secessionism and brayed the glories of battle and death. Most days, though, the fuss and feathers stayed home, and volunteer companies became glorified drinking clubs.57

That attitude, coupled with simple haplessness, made militiamen the butt of satire across antebellum America. The farce of “The Militia Company Drill” Augustus B. Longstreet published in 1835 as typical of rural Georgia musters could have described any Carolina line company just as well: “1 captain [appropriately named Clodpole], 1 lieutenant; ensign, none; fifers, none; privates, present, 24; ditto, absent, 40; guns, 14; gunlocks, 12; ramrods, 10; rifle pouches, 3; bayonets, none; belts, none; spare flints, none; cartridges, none; horsewhips, walking canes, and umbrellas, 10.” Longstreet’s portrait of “utter and inextricable confusion” passed up and down the Atlantic coast for decades, and still kept its sting in South Carolina on the eve of civil war. Everyone knew of little men who dressed up in old epaulettes and styled themselves leaders, of clumsy, drunken farmers parading with cornstalks as the “people in arms.” Children parodied them in play and mock processions held them up to ridicule. The ludicrous behavior of citizen soldiers was a staple of the Charleston stage throughout the period. Burlesques like “The Irish Recruit,” “Militia Training,” or “The Poor Soldier” packed in the locals year after year, while comedies like “The Corporal’s Wedding” portrayed military service as little more than rakish carousing.58

57 Minutes of November 12, 1849, September 13, 1852, March 6, 1854, July 2, 1855, May 5, October 6, 1856, and “List of Difficulties,” Charleston Light Dragoon Records, SCL; Charleston Mercury, April 16, 1857. For a more traditional view, see Edward L. Wells, A Sketch of the Charleston Light Dragoons, From the Earliest Formation of the Corps (Charleston, 1888).

58 A Native Georgian [Augustus B. Longstreet], Georgia Scenes, Character, Incidents, &c., in the First Half-Century of the Republic (Augusta, 1835), 131; Phil Gilder, “A South Carolina Training,” Spirit of the Times, 10
Such jibes needled only sensitive souls. Most militiamen laughed along with their critics. But problems of class distinction within the militia system were harder to dismiss. In both volunteer and line companies, recruits found opportunities to advance their social and business prospects by proving themselves worthy of patronage. The difference was, volunteers rose up by appealing to a circle of peers; men of the line had to curry favor with their betters. When the poor man missed drill, he found himself fined and threatened by the sheriff if he could not pay. The rich man took his ease in a volunteer “meeting,” hired a substitute, or absented himself at his pleasure and paid the cost without a care.\(^{59}\) By the 1850s, South Carolina communities had begun to see in beat musters not evidence of masculine fellow-feeling or racial republicanism but social inequality and the potential for dangerous conflict. In larger counties, one sheriff told the governor, militia duty “operates with great severity on the inhabitants” of lesser means.

\[\text{It is a disgrace to the State. I am an advocate for all men to do their duty, but it is hard to require a poor man to walk 30 and 40 miles to muster twice a year, and for a default to drag him to Jail like a Rogue or Thief, and incarcerate him in Jail one day for each dollar he owes, so it don’t exceed ten. Several have this year sworn out of Jail [\textit{i.e.}, been freed by declaring bankruptcy] under fines of two and three dollars and from that up to 20. Is not this too humiliating? Is it not enough to chill the Patriotism of the Poor by thus degrading them?}\]\(^{60}\)

In Charleston, Russell’s Magazine warned, the militia system “is almost defunct, and in the country its yoke is borne with infinite restlessness.” To Colleton District’s grand jury, and many others, musters were “of no public utility; a great burthen and loss of time to the laboring men of the Community, and a fruitful source of dissipation among the rising Generation.” True enough,


\(^{59}\) On absenteeism, see Records for 1836-1842, Edgefield District Militia Record, SHC; \textit{State v. Wakely} (1820), 2 Nott and McCord, 412; \textit{State v. Stevens} (1822), 2 McCord, 32. Frequently, officers were as unhappy about attending musters as their men were. Gabriel Manigault to Louis Manigault, December 11, 1860, Louis Manigault Papers, DU.

\(^{60}\) Harvey Skinner to John L. Manning, November 28, 1849, John L. Manning Papers, SCHS.
but militia life was also a safety valve for social tensions and a mechanism of planter hegemony.\footnote{61}{Pettigrew}, “Militia System of South Carolina,” 531; Colleton District Grand Jury Presentment, 1852, Records of the General Assembly, SCDAH; Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, August 29, 1860; Flynn, Militia in Antebellum South Carolina Society, 21.  

Reform proved impossible.\footnote{62}{Lawmakers’ vacillations may be traced in Macon v. Cook (1820), 2 Nott and McCord, 379; State v. Cole, et al. (1822), 2 McCord, 117; Cross v. Gabeau (1829), 1 Bailey, 211; Law v. Nettles (1831), 2 Bailey, 447; Ex parte Biggers (1840), 1 McMullin, 69; Carn v. Mikel (1852), 5 Richardson, 247; Edward J. McCrady, Jr., The Necessity of Militia Reform Considered (Charleston, 1856); Minutes of the Military Commission at the Meeting in Greenville, S. C., Aug. 4, 1859 (Charleston, 1859); [Arthur] M. Manigault, Lewis M. Hatch, and Jonathan J. Lucas, A Plan to Improve the Present Militia System of South Carolina, Submitted at the Session of 1859 by a Portion of the Military Commission, Appointed by the Legislature of 1858 (Charleston, 1858); Minority Report of the Commission appointed under the Resolution of the Legislature, to examine the Militia System of the State and Report Amendments thereon (Columbia, 1859); [Lewis M. Hatch], The Necessity for Improved Military Defences Considered (Charleston, 1859).} From the late 1830s onward, Carolinians struggled “to inspire a proper military spirit among our citizens” through court rulings and legislation. Those measures fizzled. “Large expenses have been incurred by successive Legislatures,” critics charged, “and arduous duties have been imposed on our Citizens,” without any improvement. Soldiers still shirked their duty. Officers still acted high-handedly. Judges had trouble telling patrollers preserving the peace from rioters bent on wrecking it. Above all, lawmakers lacked the courage to make more than cosmetic changes. As a military force, citizen soldiers were “a very uncertain dependence.”\footnote{63}{[Pettigrew], “Militia System of South Carolina,” 537; Pierce M. Butler to Robert W. Barnwell, June 6, 1837, Robert Woodward Barnwell Papers, SCL; Abbeville Independent Press, June 24, 1854. The political nature of militia service is best discussed in State v. Hunt (1834), 2 Hill, 1.} But by 1860, the militia served as a superb mechanism for mobilizing the population politically and socially. No tinkering could be allowed to impair that function.

Martial shortcomings encouraged paramilitary activity at the local level when fears of insurrection or subversion mounted. Besides requiring military training, South Carolina’s militia act ordered beat companies to conduct regular patrols to maintain slave discipline. But that
service was supplied on an *ad hoc* basis, and often amounted to a party on horseback, raising hell and harassing wayward slaves. When anything like a real uprising threatened, slaveholders showed little faith in the peasantry to regulate their property. After Harper’s Ferry, for example, vigilance societies cropped up all over the state, organized by the gentry and comprising an alliance of planters, storekeepers, and rural hangers-on. Likewise, groups like the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association were got up by the chivalry and its henchmen to spike illegal commerce between slaves and whites. They armed themselves like a slave patrol, and sometimes used those arms against both whites and blacks.

In organizational terms, Minute Men were at least one step beyond such watchdogs. They looked back on a heritage which included Charleston’s Sons of Liberty, drawn from the artisans of the Queen City, and the Minute Men of Nullification days, when Governor Robert Hayne had urged the “elite of the whole State” to volunteer to defend Charleston against invasion at a moment’s notice. In the political crisis of 1850-52, various Committees of Safety and Correspondence, Southern Rights Associations, and similar groups had sprung up at the district and community level, though few came to training with arms. The Minute Men of 1860

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65 *Columbia Banner*, December 7, 1859; *Private Journal of Henry William Ravenel*, 4; *Lancaster Ledger*, January 11, 1860; Manning *Clarendon Banner*, September 11, 1860; *Edgefield Advertiser*, September 19, October 19, 24, 1860; Spartanburg *Carolina Spartan*, November 22, December 13, 1860, January 3, February 7, 21, 1861; Branchville Vigilant Association Book, SCL; Untitled volume [Bethesda Vigilant Association Constitution], 1860, Bratton Family Papers, SCL; *Preamble and Resolutions of the Savannah River Anti-Slave Traffick Association* (n. p., 1859); *Charleston Standard*, March 10, 1858, clipping in James Ervin Byrd Notebook and Scrapbook, SCL. Vigilance committees could also serve narrowly political objects. See, e. g., the Committee of Vigilance and Public Safety orchestrated by Charleston’s Broad Street Clique to promote the annexation of Texas. Franklin H. Elmore, Henry Gourdin, James Gadsden, Peter D. De La Torre, Circular, “To the Citizens of Charleston,” May 20, 1844, Charleston Papers, SCL.


67 “Circular from the Central Committee to Presidents of Southern Rights Associations in So. Carolina,” May 26, 1861, Committee of Safety and Correspondence of Richland District Papers, SCL; “Richland Southern Rights
formed alongside existing militia units, hard on the heels of vigilance groups organized to counteract the fears John Brown had conjured up. In response to his raid, legislators appropriated $100,000 for the defense of South Carolina, but withheld authority for its expenditure until the eve of Lincoln’s election. On November 16, 1860, when Governor Gist called for troops to defend the state against Yankee aggression, many of the units that volunteered were Minute Men. Since, in districts like Spartanburg, Minute Men groups sprouted alongside companies of Unionist militia, radical volunteers’ political legitimation doubtless helped secure the “unanimity of feeling” separatists were forever calling for.

After secession triumphed on December 20, state-cum-national militia coexisted with slave patrols and vigilance organizations, free-ranging Minute Men, independent volunteer military organizations, and those mustered in under the November call, the “Provisional Army of South Carolina.” It was a politico-military dog’s breakfast, where a man might elect to serve simultaneously in a militia company, a slave patrol, a vigilance society, and a Minute Man Association” (broadside), September 5, 1851, Richland Southern Rights Association Papers, SCL; Thomas B. Fraser to John Rhame, October 22, 1850, Association of Claremont Election District for the Defense of Southern Rights Papers, SCL.

68 The formation of Minute Men groups is described in Edgefield Advertiser, October 24, 31, 1860; Spartanburg Carolina Spartan, November 22, December 6, 1860; Private Journal of Henry William Ravenel, 31.

69 On December 17, the legislature rubber-stamped Gist’s call, requiring each militia infantry battalion to provide one company, fully armed, to serve for twelve months. Each militia infantry brigade was to provide two rifle companies for the same term. Unless the state achieved its quota in thirty days, a draft would be imposed. After January 1, 1861, when Governor Frank Pickens authorized creation of regiments of six-months’ volunteers, the terms and form of service were further complicated. Acts of the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina, Passed in November and December, 1860, and January, 1861 (Columbia, 1861), 848-854.

70 Little is known about Unionist militia, but see Entry of January 5, 1861, David Golightly Harris Farm Journals, SHC.

71 In 1833, the state Court of Appeals ruled that service in a volunteer company outside one’s regimental boundaries did not abrogate the requirement of service to the regiment. State v. Bates (1833), 1 Hill, 48. Four years later, the court held that beat company captains could refuse permission for militiamen to transfer to volunteer companies within their regiment if their home unit would fall below forty men. State v. Hopkins (1837), Dudley, 101. That precedent, however, seems not to have come into play in 1860.
group—and many did just that.\textsuperscript{72} With the Confederacy’s birth in February 1861, still another level of organization and command was added, as many, but not all Provisional Army units transferred to the new national army. After April, units shuffled, disbanded, and reconfigured to create still more types of military service and more complex orders of battle: State Troops, Railroad Troops, Home Guards, Alarm Men, and more. In terms of organization and discipline, by April 1861, South Carolina’s military had become a confusing tangle of crossbreeding groups and allegiances.\textsuperscript{73}

From top to bottom, would-be soldiers gravitated to the unit and level of command which suited them best. Although there was strong community and peer pressure, militiamen were under no obligation to form or join Minute Men bands, nor were members of these groups required to sign up as members of the Provisional or Confederate armies, even if a majority of their number agreed to offer their services to the governor or president. The Greenwood Minute Men became Company F of the Second Regiment, South Carolina Infantry, seeing service with the Army of Northern Virginia, but some members chose not to muster in. At Lancaster Courthouse, Dixon Barnes rallied eighty locals into a company which volunteered on November 20. As a unit, however, they would never see active service, splitting up among the 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 9\textsuperscript{th}, and 12\textsuperscript{th} Regiments of South Carolina Infantry, and the 4\textsuperscript{th} Cavalry. More than a quarter chose to

\textsuperscript{72} Spartanburg \textit{Carolina Spartan}, November 1, 1860; Warren R. Davis to William Stokes, December 10, 1860, William Stokes Papers, SCL. On overlapping memberships, consider one recruit’s memoir of the formation of Charleston’s Marion Rifles: “The Company originated in the ‘Old Marion Fire Engine Company’ and… in many cases membership continued in both companies. The men were chiefly young, and belonged to the mechanic and laboring classes.” Undated entry, John Henry Steinmeyer Diary, SCL; \textit{Charleston Tri-Weekly News}, January 4, 1861.

Likewise, only a tiny fraction of Abbeville’s Minute Men Regiment, 656 strong, ever stood together on the battlefield. Initially Governor Gist accepted their services as a single unit. A month later, when his brother, Inspector General State Rights Gist explained that he had not been authorized to commission any group over company size, the regiment voted to disband forthwith, leaving each company “to act as they think best.” Fewer than one hundred men signed up as Company B of the First Regiment, South Carolina Rifles, the rest thinking it best to let others fill their places.75

Their choice was not unusual. The Black Oak Minute Men formed on November 14, but “from various reasons after a few meetings fell through by its own weight.” Just north of Charleston, four volunteer companies of the 18th Regiment pledged themselves to the governor in the fall of 1860. But these were merely “pretending to offer their services,” the planter David Gavin charged. “[W]hen the call was made” in the wake of disunion, “none of them came” forward, “and a new battalion had to be formed.” It seemed “a little strange” to Gavin that men “who pretended to be ready and anxious for service” lagged behind when duty called, but he ought not to have been surprised. “As the certainty of war becomes more certain,” one upcountry farmer noted at the start of 1861, “the fiery ardor of the fighting men seems to cool off rapidly. And the blue cockade has almost entirely disappeared.”76

Other groups added caveats to their constitutions and offers of service, refusing to go beyond the bounds of the state, or even their district, or disbanding unless enlistments reached a

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74 S. C. Gilbert to A. M. Manigault, n. d., Box 381 (South Carolina), Series 18: Muster and Pay Rolls, 1861-65, Records Relating to Military Personnel, General Records of the Government of the Confederate States of America [hereafter cited as Ser. 18], RG 109, NA.; Dixon Barnes to William H. Gist, November 20, 1860, Box 427 (South Carolina), Ser. 18, RG 109, NA.

75 Charleston Mercury, January 22, 1861; W. W. Perryman to William H. Gist, November 26, 1860, Box 427 (South Carolina), Ser. 18, RG 109, NA.

76 Entries of November 14, 1860, January 2, 29, 1861, Thomas Porcher Ravenel Diary, SCHS; Entries of January 13-14, 1861, David Gavin Diary, SHC; Entry of January 5, 1861, David Golightly Harris Farm Journals, SHC.
minimum number. The St. Helena Island Mounted Rifle Corps refused to take up positions on nearby Ladies Island. The 3rd Regiment of state cavalry militia offered Governor Gist their services two weeks before his call for troops, but only on the condition that “in case South Carolina submits to Black Republican Rule we will immediately, upon the inauguration of a Black Republican as President disband… considering that the State will have no further need of our services.” So, too, the Brooks Guards, though they volunteered early on, according to one disgusted ex-Confederate, were “never in active service and [I] do not believe they ever fired a gun. [I]t was what was then termed the Home Guards… and in fact the best part of them never did a days Service nearly all of them being employed during the whole war on Railroads.”

Other Minute Men bands were eager to serve. The flowery petitions of most volunteer commanders, like that of Colonel J. L. Johnson of the 10th South Carolina Cavalry, begged Governor Gist for “a place in the picture.” Forty Summerville Minute Men vowed “to the last, [to] vindicate the rights and honor of South Carolina,” holding themselves “ready for any emergency.” But just what that meant precisely remained obscure. There was nothing necessarily radical about belonging to a vigilance or Minute Men group, or even in forming an independent military company. At Lancaster, in late November, one Minute Men faction notified the public that they “utterly repudiate[d]” two “resolutions of construction” some wayward brethren had passed, preferring to “adhere only to the original constitution”—however unclear—“without any explanations except from the ‘Parent Club’ of Columbia.” Two days later, the heretical splinter declared the formation of the “Independent Minute Men of

77 William O. P. Fripp, et al., to William C. Heyward, n. d., Box 427 (South Carolina), Ser. 18, RG 109, NA; G. Wayne King, Rise Up So Early: A History of Florence County, South Carolina (Spartanburg, 1981), 45. In Fairfield District, one fellow offered to raise a company of mounted men so long as it “shall be independent of all other military organizations.” The Assembly declined his offer. W. W. Herbert to Messrs. Woodward, Boyleston and McCants, December 3, 1860, McCants Family Papers, SCL.
Waxhaws,” pledging to “maintain our constitutional rights either in or out of the Union.”

Between in and out, though, was a world of difference. Where one militant found clarity in such cautions, another feared a loophole for defeatists. Unsurprisingly, the statewide rally of Minute Men radicals called for never took place.

Likewise, after four meetings, when the Saluda Minute Men Association of Edgefield District finally enrolled enough members to fill a company and elect officers (dropping initiation fees from one dollar to twenty-five cents along the way), the group’s unity of purpose dissolved. Their captain’s first command called for volunteers to form a new military company offering its services to the governor. But only thirty-three of seventy-four Minute Men stepped forward in response. Just why that step seemed necessary to some, and what sort of play-substitute the others thought their marching and drilling aimed at—if not enlistment—remains unclear. Here as elsewhere, it seems, many signed up to “make… a pretty show” and gain status within their local community, not to live and die for Dixie, or even to promote disunion. “I am Just as great a soldier as anybody now,” Charles Rogers exclaimed on joining the Charleston Riflemen in February 1861, and his boast was true. By that time, South Carolina’s revolution was nearly two months old, yet not a shot had been fired. The boy had certainly not missed his moment of glory.

Even then, many Carolinians still believed that no shots would be fired, and this calculation doubtless bore upon the decision of men like Rogers to enlist. “The South knows perfectly well that nobody is going to attack her,” the New York Tribune declared, “and that she

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78 J. L. Johnson to William H. Gist, December 10, 1860, Ser. 18, RG 109, NA; Charleston Mercury, November 20, 1860; Lancaster Ledger, November 28, 30, 1860. See also “Constitution of the Orangeburgh ‘Minute Men,’ Minutes of the Orangeburg Minute Men, Records of the Confederate Historian, SCDAH.

is going to attack nobody.” Before December 20, too, the idea of secession seemed far-fetched to some, and many held that disunion would be used only to show Northerners how serious Southerners were about defending their institutions. Bloodless sectional reconciliation would preface necessary political adjustment.⁸⁰

Given the fluid situation between September, 1860 and April, 1861, it is difficult to reconstruct just what military service meant to those who enlisted in these months. Only nine weeks after Fort Sumter, for example, Charles Rogers left military service without firing a shot. His four-month term of service with the Riflemen had expired, and he had done duty enough to show how “great a soldier” he was. No one then could imagine that signing up with a volunteer company or Minute Men band would lead to killing Yankees at the Bloody Angle, or staring into the cannon’s mouth on Cemetery Ridge.⁸¹ Different groups of men mobilized in different types of units in different localities for different and often surprising reasons. Men chose their hats with a chess-like intricacy of motives in which political purposes such as defending community, slavery, or state rights receded—and sometimes disappeared from view altogether. War in these calculations seldom seemed real.

That is what makes the choices of the Vigilant Rifles so interesting. On November 20, the Mercury reported that the company, an “effective and well organized corps—composed of over one hundred men,” had offered its services to the governor, begging to “lead the first ‘forlorn hope’ of Carolina troops.” For weeks past, the newspaper had advertised the group’s regular meetings and now pronounced them “under a rigid system of drill.” The Courier noted


⁸¹ General Samuel McGowan was long remembered for telling the Abbeville Minute Men that they could “whip the Yankees with pop guns.” Dock Owen, Campfire Stories and Reminiscences (Greenwood, SC, n. d.), 6.
that the King Street tailor Charles F. Jackson was furnishing uniforms for the soldiers: “A single-breasted jacket and pants of dark gray, to be trimmed with scarlet, and with Palmetto buttons, a light French fatigue cap of blue, with the initials ‘V. R.’ in gold embossed.” Even unarmed as they currently were, the Vigilants must have offered an impressive sight as they paraded Charleston’s streets, ready to ward off the foe. They were Minute Men, among the earliest of independent units to form or offer their services to the state. Their actions had a tangible effect on the fortunes of disunion. They were revolutionaries in the truest sense.82

But who were the Vigilant Rifles? What drew them together? What did they aim at? Like most other disunionist military groups, they generated less than abundant evidence. A constitution, scattered correspondence, muster lists which the Mercury and the Courier published, and little more survive, apart from personal and statistical information about individual members. However imperfectly, these traces permit us to see who the men in the French fatigue caps were, and who they imagined themselves to be. Perceiving them clearly, however, making sense of their identities and choices requires placing them in the context of secessionist Charleston. That means recovering the peculiar meanings in this special place and time of politics, chess, and hats.

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82 Charleston Mercury, November 17, 20, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 20, 1860.
A lot of grassroots history is like the trace of the ancient plough. It might seem gone for good with the men who ploughed the field many centuries ago. But every aerial-photographer knows that, in a certain light, and seen at a certain angle, the shadows of long-forgotten ridge and furrow can still be seen.

Nevertheless, mere ingenuity doesn’t take us far enough. What we need, both to make sense of what the inarticulate thought, and to verify or falsify our hypotheses about it, is a coherent picture. What we must normally do is to put together a wide variety of often fragmentary information: and to do that we must, if you’ll excuse the phrase, construct the jig-saw puzzle ourselves, i.e., work out how such information ought to fit together.

Eric J. Hobsbawm,
“History from Below—Some Reflections”

From the ancient Greeks to the Founding Fathers and beyond, politics meant something defective and distasteful, the undermining of social harmony by civil strife. “Any city, however small, is in fact divided into two,” Plato held; “one the city of the poor; the other of the rich,” perpetually “at war with one another.” Class divisions were fundamental, but petty conflicts of clique and personality multiplied discord. In each case, it was division within their own ranks—“contradictions among the people,” Mao so delicately called them—which men feared most. So it was in Charleston on the eve of disunion. Here men spoke of conservative principle and common purpose. Against the Black Republican menace, James D. B. DeBow declared, “[t]he entire people, with one voice, rich and poor, merchant, mechanic and laborer, stand nobly together.” But that was wishful thinking. Firmness and loyalty were not easily conjured,

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especially in a city so flawed and fractured. For De Bow as for the Great Helmsman, the truth or error of his analysis rested entirely on how one drew the line between “the people” and their foes. Not nearly every enemy stood beyond Charleston’s borders. The “tug of war” came first from the contest of internal factions.³ Men strove to displace conflict as recreation yet still split over questions of manhood itself. And beyond all loomed deeper, more intractable divisions of economy and social class, summed up, unsurprisingly, in the hats men wore. The Vigilant Rifles arose from an internecine struggle of play, theater, commerce, and subversion.

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On the evening of November 23, 1860, the Young Men’s Secession Association held a “Grand Torchlight Procession,” winding from Charleston’s upper wards through the heart of the city. It was a bold celebration of disunion, thrilling the citizenry. Coming to see that demonstration as contemporaries did, and discerning why they saw it thus takes us far toward recovering what politics meant in the Queen City on the eve of secession, and how that meaning was expressed. It also describes what Charlestonians believed was at stake in the autumn of 1860, and why some came to see the militant separatism of the Vigilant Rifles as the most attractive form of political activity.

The parade “was a beautiful sight,” bookkeeper Sam Roberts declared. The evening was deliciously warm, and at the appointed hour cheering crowds lined the streets to echo their support for the marchers.

First went 5 or 6 Boys and Men bearing lightwood torches, these had lanterns; some were painted red some blue and others white. Rockets and fireworks of every description were let off along the Road. Banners and Flags were carried along with them. Several Transparencies were also carried, one was a picture of a Man with a Sword, Running on, and the motto was; “We must be brief when Traitors brave the field”…. And there was another Banner having a picture of a Shroud with this inscription

Here lies the Union
Born 4\textsuperscript{th} July 1776 Died 7\textsuperscript{th} Nov. 1860

A “full blaze of rockets [and] roman candles” heralded the procession as it set off from Citadel Green, “attended by the excellent music of the Charleston Brass Band.”

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1 Charleston Mercury, November 24, 1860.

2 Samuel C. Roberts to Isabella A. Woodruff, November 23, 1860, Isabella Ann Roberts Woodruff Papers, Dalton, DU; Charleston Mercury, November 24, 1860.
Roberts mapped the marchers’ movements: “from Citadel Green to King, from King to Wentworth, from Wentworth to Meeting from Meeting, to Bro[a]d, from Bro[a]d to East Bay to Queen up Queen to King up King to Mary through Mary to Meeting and thence to Citadel Square and dismissed.” He charted the politics of the procession less carefully. Leading the way, he noted, was “a huge transparency” presented to the Young Men’s Secession Association by the daguerreotypists Osborne and Durbec. “In God we trust,” it announced—a passive sentiment none could well dispute—“our hearts and arms are strong.” Next came the Brass Band’s decidedly more action-oriented banner, demanding that strong arms smash conspicuously unspecified foes: “Strike for your altars and your fires, God and your native land.” Further along loomed the YMSA standard, inscribed with the club’s founding date—1860—and the attractively vague sentiment, “Away with Compromise.” There were many other flags and symbols, the *Mercury* reported, “excellently got up,” though it declined description. Whatever dissonant notes of politics and procedure paraders sounded, the march was “generally acknowledged to have been a very creditable and successful affair.”

Badges and banners, processions and public meetings, serenades, blaring bands, fireworks: the disunionist campaign in Charleston seems almost wholly composed of such signs and social dramas. The torchlight march was just one of dozens of minor incidents which comprised the city’s secession movement. However momentarily exciting, it was the third parade to thump down Meeting Street that week alone. On its surface, the procession meant little and accomplished nothing. It promoted no political candidate. It aimed at no practical action, unless advocacy of disunion by some undisclosed process at some undetermined date could be

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called practical. It whipped up emotions, yet focused them on only the broadest and most abstract of principles. Its illuminated slogans clashed; its rousing music, echoing cheers, and whizzing, crackling fireworks drowned verbal messages in discord. Just what was “successful” about this procession?⁴

Charleston’s streets and wharves, public halls and parade grounds saw similar scenes enacted daily in the weeks leading up to disunion. All manner of separatist groups—incorporated, ephemeral, clandestine, transitory—swarmed over the city, proclaiming particular ideas, promoting peculiar interests.⁵ There was little coordination of action, no unity of purpose or leadership. No single march or speech or flag-raising turned the tide for secession. The process was limited, gradual, cumulative. As with the YMSA, too, there was seldom any obvious end in view beyond the performance of play and ritual and the public display of symbols.

Yet the scripts and totems at the heart of these acts were chosen carefully. They were central to the political character of each proceeding, and held deep meaning. A symbol, cultural theorist Northrop Frye reminds us, “does not stand for a ‘thing,’ or for an idea; it is a focus of relationships.”

When such symbols are simple visible or audible stimuli, like a flag or a slogan, they possess a tremendous condensing power. Their focusing of relationships can act as a burning glass, kindling a flame of response from the heat of a myriad of social concerns that they draw together into a single impact. At the same time they are displacements of those concerns: they are not the concerns themselves, with all our conflicting and critical feelings about them…. Such symbols may be essential to social unity, especially in a crisis where their function is to stop debate and initiate action.


⁵ On the complex politics of the street, see especially George Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution (Oxford, 1959); Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley, 1997).
Decoding the politics of secession in Charleston, then, means considering incidents such as the YMSA march as clues, discrete moments which hint at underlying dynamics driving the wider process of disunion. Taken together, they tell a surprising story. In the wake of Lincoln’s election, the most secret meanings of Charleston politics were paraded in the city’s most public places. The problem is to read those signs aright, interpret cultural symbols and social dramas as Sam Roberts and the *Mercury* did—and, again, more critically than they did.\(^6\)

In this task, our best guide is Walter Steele. His odd advertisement described politics in language Charlestonians understood easily: as play, theater, intrigue, commerce. He made no mention of statesmanship, or constitutional principle, or high-flown sentiment. If those qualities truly mattered, they mattered elsewhere. As Steele told it, politics was a trial of allegiances, defining relations and boundaries. It strove toward the real and the realizable, but also advanced a grander vision of social harmony. His melodramatic pitch focused on the impending presidential contest, yet offered no hint of a broad national or sectional view, no north or south. In impetus and impact, he and his readers recognized, all politics are local—and infinitely complex.\(^7\)

Politics was a game like chess, Steele argued. The play of each revealed a struggle for power, a substitute for open violence conducted under abstract rules. Each rooted conflict artificially in a foundation of consensus, a set of customs, transforming opposition into a limited,


rational contest of will, skill, and calculation which bonded players by the very act of pitting them against each other and ranking them as winner or loser. Steele called this testing of hierarchy “the legitimate game.”

The current struggle was more bitter by far. Instead of seeking common ground with opponents, he complained, “each party” pursuing the presidency “appears to be laboring for itself.” Self-interest defeated the common good, as it had in April, when southerners split the Democratic Party, instead of backing Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas and his popular sovereignty platform. The end of such disunity, Steele hinted, could only be wider conflict and political chaos.\(^8\) Perhaps the chessboard itself would be overthrown and the play turn to blows.\(^9\)

Such fears were by no means farfetched. Three decades on, radicals and conservatives still cast back to Nullification days when “mobs and fights” broke out “almost every night in the streets,” and from “the lowest Blackguard or Meanest Bully” on up, men went armed “with pistols, Dirks, and loaded Clubs.” More minor local conflicts had erupted in violence a dozen times since then. Who could imagine that the break-up of the Union could be debated without broken skulls, rampaging mobs, or worse? “[T]he Devil is unchained at last,” one moderate howled: the perils to come seemed clear.\(^{10}\)

The theatrical nature of antebellum politics redoubled that danger. In any election in Charleston, scripted ritual lent a sense of order and continuity to a moment of uncertainty and transition. First, in state and civic campaigns, election notices appeared in local papers,

\(^8\) At the local level, fear of faction was endemic on the eve of Lincoln’s election, and helps explain why Southerners showed little interest in waiting for an “overt act” of malice before opposing the new president. For an egregious example in Charleston, see Isaac W. Hayne, *The Mercury’s Course, and the Right of Free Discussion* (Charleston, 1857).

\(^9\) On politics as chess, see *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, May 29, 1860; *Charleston Mercury*, January 23, 1861.

\(^{10}\) Timothy W. Johnson to William L. Storrs, August 8, 1832, Timothy W. Johnson Papers, SCL; Charles L. Pettigrew to Jane C. N. Pettigrew, November 18, 1860, Jane C. N. Pettigrew to Charles L. Pettigrew, n. d. [November 10, 1860?], both in Pettigrew Family Papers, SHC.
designating managers for each ward, specifying polling places, and detailing the rules of the contest. Then, again through hoardings and newspapers, various factions of anonymous voters proposed slates of candidates for office. Unless he publicly declined the honor, each nominee was considered willing to run, both independently and in concert with the other names on a ticket. Since the parish of St. Phillip and St. Michael (comprising Charleston’s eight wards) sent twenty representatives to the General Assembly session of 1860, that logic led to a wild proliferation of tickets, some changing day by day, as supporters of weaker candidates tried to team with more popular figures. Newspaper ads trumpeted the virtues of their favorites, and pictorial symbols reinforced the message.11 Nor were expressions of public feeling confined to the printed page. Activists organized parades, demonstrations, and serenades to rally support. Businesses and neighborhoods hung banners as tokens of allegiance. Partisans passed out handbills and ribbons in the street. All of these actions were unmistakably declarative, linking politics with personalism. The demonstrative, public vibrancy of the process reminded the community, swept up and momentarily divided by the drama, that it was a community after all. Electioneering both consumed and reproduced social capital.12

The theater of politics went still further than this. The men Carolinians selected as leaders represented their constituents in the truest sense. Thus, when Robert Barnwell Rhett concluded in 1852 that Carolina voters’ views on federal affairs no longer meshed with his own hotheaded plans, he resigned his seat in the federal Senate. No one would have expected less

11 Charleston Mercury, October 31, 1855, September 24, 1856, September 22, 1858, September 28, December 6, 1860; Charleston Courier, October 26, 1853, March 5, 1859. For coverage of a fairly quiet legislative election campaign, see Charleston Mercury, September 28-October 13, 1858; Charleston Courier, September 28-October 13, 1858.

from a Charleston man. For not only were politicians required to mirror local opinion. They had
to embody the highest values of southern manhood and portray them in the public forum: a tall
order. For giants like Calhoun, perhaps, the performance of duty came as second nature. But the
age of giants was long past by 1860.13

On the eve of secession, Carolinians had come to accept a striking level of disjuncture
between appearance and reality in the character of politicians and their performance in office.
Charleston in particular presented a bizarre and confusing Noh drama of hidden movers and
motives.14 Yet it was just this counterfeit role-playing Walter Steele’s ad denounced. While
Lincoln, Douglas, Bell, and Breckenridge mouthed their lines, he warned, “the real players are
the ‘wirepullers’,” directing the conduct of campaigns, and shaping protagonists’ fortunes. Now,
as Steele saw it, the citizenry had been reduced to pawns or shoved offstage altogether. As
presidential balloting neared, Charlestonians could do little except watch and wait. No wonder
the hatter spoke of politics as a “head and tail game” of desperate uncertainty and dire
consequences.

It was the character of play itself, what Steele called a “double centre counter gambit,”
that seemed especially unnerving. All was duplicity, intrigue, dishonesty, betrayal. In chess, a
gambit (from the Spanish gambeta, a tripping) is a trap laid to snare a shortsighted opponent,
offering what appears material gain at what proves grievous cost. A counter-gambit turns the
tables once more. In this case, with feigned innocence the baited player accepts his rival’s ploy

13 Alfred P. Aldrich to James H. Hammond, May 3, 1852, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC; William C. Davis,
the duty of representation did not mean a duty to accept instruction from constituents. See John Townsend, Reply of
Mr. Townsend, in Defense of his Public Conduct, Against Certain Charges Made Against Him (Charleston, 1858),
11-21; Kenneth S. Greenberg, Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery (Baltimore, 1985),
65-84.

14 Cf. Steven T. Brown, Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh (Stanford, 2001); Ferdinand Mount,
The Theatre of Politics (London, 1972), esp. 3-17.
to lure the schemer into a more devious scheme of his own. Such deep tactics nurture an appreciation of irony and a more probing sense of vision. In a moment, fortunes reverse and apparent triumph becomes sad folly. A man “may smile, and smile, and be a villain,” warned Shakespeare’s prince—and Machiavelli’s, too. That was the very art of politics: “O, ‘tis most sweet, / When in one line two crafts directly meet.” But that warfare was also politics’ deepest peril. For who could see so clear to penetrate all the layers of artifice, trace all crossing of purposes, find safety’s true path? Such men were few, their wisdom seldom heeded.\(^\text{15}\)

Politics instead became a matter of commerce, and men like Steele were not above using it to sell their wares. Even critics could not avoid reckoning it a business, poor though it often seemed. The marketplace was a sphere of consensus, at least, a threshold where men of opposite aims clasped hands over a mutual bargain. So well-wishers promoted candidates, lauded the merits of their man like any product, and pressed voters for support with all the “soft sawder” of flattery any Sam Slick could muster—and money and liquor besides. There was illusion, coercion, and chicanery at the core here, but so there was at the heart of any trade.\(^\text{16}\)

Play, theater, intrigue, commerce: in its discussion of politics, Steele’s ad pointed to all of these connections, in just this sequence. The themes and fears it articulated struck a chord in the hearts of Charlestonians, propelling sentiment toward secession. Though Steele’s text stressed national politics, the danger and duplicity he saw were “double-centered.” The same strife of faction and clash of interests twisted politics at the local level. The same drive toward


\(^{16}\) John B. O’Neall to Armistead Burt, February 25, 1856, Armistead Burt Papers, DU; Jean-Christophe Agnew, “The Threshold of Exchange: Speculations on the Market,” Radical History Review, 21 (1979): 99-118; Thomas C. Haliburton, The Clockmaker: or, the Sayings and Doings of Samuel Slick of Slickville (Toronto, 1958), 8. For examples of corruption and vote-buying beyond Charleston, see Tom to Soph, October 17, 1854, Anonymous Papers, SCL; Benjamin H. Nelson to John L. Manning, November 1, 1858, Chesnut Family Papers, SHSW.
unity and consensus in Charleston everywhere concealed deeper divisions of caste and class. The same specter of violence and betrayal suddenly erupting hung over the city as memory and threat.  

By itself, Steele’s squib offers only the barest direction to the shapes and meanings of Charleston politics in 1860. We have already imposed much upon it from external information, and conjecture, too. Yet, limited though it is, this fragment may serve as a Rosetta stone of sorts, instructing us where to look and how in decoding the conduct of civic life. Its clues impel us to discover new patterns and dynamics in the campaign for disunion.

Steele’s ad points toward the power of what we might call the South Carolina jeremiad, the moral, social, and political ethic which shaped white attitudes in 1860. Underlying his discussion of politics was a dread of internal division, subversion, and the rise of self-interested factions. In his last public speech in Charleston in 1847, John C. Calhoun articulated this fear with special clarity, calling for a unified Southern Party to oppose northern abolitionists.

Henceforward, let all party distinction among us cease, so long as this aggression on our rights and honor shall continue, on the part of the non-slaveholding States…. As they make the destruction of our domestic institution the paramount question, so let us make, on our part, its safety the paramount question; let us regard every man as of our party, who stands up in its defense; and every one as against us, who does not, until aggression ceases. It is thus, and thus only, that we can defend our rights, maintain our honor, ensure our safety, and command respect.

The benefits of this course would soon come clear, Calhoun promised. “If we should prove true to ourselves and our peculiar institution, we shall be great and prosperous, let what will occur.”

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The alternative imperiled the South and the Union alike. “Delay, indecision, and want of union among ourselves,” Calhoun warned, “would in all probability, in the end, prove fatal to both.”

As this prophecy made clear, the South Carolina jeremiad identified the gravest threat to southern civilization as internal, not external. The party spirit and spoilsmanship that pluralism engendered would do more to abolish slavery than all the Frederick Douglasses and John Browns the North could muster. To be secure in his property and place in society required each Carolinian to stand with his neighbors “as A BAND OF BROTHERS,” putting aside differences and keeping a close eye on his neighbors’ loyalty in the bargain. Sincerity, fidelity, and the skill to see through the traitor’s disguise were crucial here. The “noblest of destinies” hinged on southerners’ determination to be “true to ourselves,” politicians warned. But what that requirement meant, what duties it entailed, remained quite uncertain.

Calhoun’s 1847 speech promoted solidarity as a strategy both nationalist and sectionalist, preserving the Union and saving the South. Over the next decade, South Carolina politicians adapted his exhortation to further conflicting goals. When the dream of a Southern Party capsized after 1850, upcountry Congressman James L. Orr argued that southerners could shape national destiny by seizing control of the Democratic Party. His National Democrats warned that secessionists only injured the South’s cause. Instead of raising impossible demands, they should hew to the party line and hush up.

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20 Charleston Mercury, August 10, 1835; Peter Della Torre, Is Southern Civilization Worth Preserving? (Charleston, 1851); W. S. Lyles to James Chesnut, Jr., July 1, 1851, Chesnut-Miller-Manning Papers, SCHS.
To “State Rights” extremists, however, Orr’s bloc had everything backwards. *Their* leader was “the most pernicious enemy” of slaveholding society, *his* policy “portentous of all evil.” In Washington, one Carolina stalwart after another had abandoned principle in hope of high office and a share of the “loaves and fishes.” All too soon Yankee “demons on one side, and false friends on the other” would thrust aside these inconstant sentries to ravish the South. After one term of Republican rule, Governor James Adams predicted, self-interest and factionalism would be so rampant in South Carolina that

we will find in our midst an organized *Freesoil Party*, backed and upheld by the overshadowing power and patronage of the Federal Government…. Abolition presses, under the false pretence of giving the new Administration a fair showing, will spring up among us. The Post Office will be in the hands of the enemy. Its mission will become one of poison—poison to be infused into our system through a thousand secret channels. Our enemy knows too well his game for an open assault. Sapping and mining will be the process of our ruin.

To avert this fate, State-Righters had to rally on principle, not party. “Do your duty,” ordered Maxcy Gregg, “and leave the consequences to God.” Duty, of course, would be defined by the fire-eaters: immediate secession, reopening the slave trade, and God knew what else. Dissent from this world-saving course was tantamount to treason.22

Between these warring camps, moderates tried to straddle a broad middle ground. To Senator James Hammond, the “minor distinctions” of party seemed “factitious and factious, gotten up by cunning men for selfish purposes, to which the true patriot and honest man should be slow to lend himself.” He would champion neither National Democrats’ manipulation nor State-Righters’ brinkmanship. “[T]he Constitution, strictly construed and faithfully carried out” was the flag he followed. “I will make my fight,” Hammond declared, “by the side

22 [Maxcy Gregg, ed.], *An Appeal to the State Rights Party of South Carolina: In Several Letters on the Present Condition of Public Affairs* (Columbia, 1858), vii, ix, 2, 8, 10, 35, 36. See also Whitemarsh B. Seabrook to Andrew P. Butler, May 12, 1851, Whitemarsh B. Seabrook Papers, LC; Robert F. W. Allston to A. Whyte, June 22, 1860, Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers, SCL.
of any man, whether from the North, South, East or West who will do the same.” That was a
credo bland enough to unite both Orrites and secessionists, moderates hoped, but as Hammond’s
warlike language suggested, here too promises were coupled with threats. Those who would
abandon sectarian principles were patriots. Those who would not were traitors to be
vanquished.23

By 1860, then, Carolinians across the political spectrum shared a dynamic set of political
premises subject to broad and clashing interpretation. Southern safety required internal unity, all
agreed. Those who betrayed that unity, said the jeremiad, whether from self-seeking or
shortsightedness, were turncoats to be hunted, exposed, and destroyed. In this view, politics was
the constant testing and scrutinizing of loyalties, a deathless demand for internal cohesion,
unending war against dissenters. “While Mr. Calhoun lived,” one old-timer recalled,

the only lesson either taught or comprehended, from the parish school to the
senate chamber, was to obey orders! We did this implicitly and kept up the
appearance of a solid column! We were drilled in the lock-step, but the
instruction was merely mechanical… [though] the tramp was loud and strong, and
every man supposed himself a soldier. Well, our great chief, for he was
essentially great, is among the dead, and he has left no one to administer upon his
political estate. The better part of society acquired the habit of following, and lost
the habit of thinking.24

As Alfred Huger noted, after Calhoun’s passing, Carolinians could never agree on what the basis
of solidarity should be, and so were never able to achieve anything like internal unity, however
abstract and transitory. Subversion threatened on all sides, yet vigilance never crossed over to
the safety of single-mindedness.

The power of the jeremiad in antebellum South Carolina derived in part from its

23 James H. Hammond, Speech of Hon. James H. Hammond, Delivered at Barnwell C. H., October 29th, 1858
(Charleston, 1858), esp. 27.

24 Alfred Huger to William P. Miles, June 1, 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, SHC. Cf., Paul Quattlebaum to
Armistead Burt, February 14, 1848, Armistead Burt Papers, DU.
intersection with the melodramatic cast of Victorian life. Melodrama was a form of theater, the dominant form of the age. But it was also a perspective on the world which Charlestonians found natural and satisfying. It spoke to their concerns about the instability of emerging bourgeois culture and the deceptions of market society. It nourished suspicions that danger lurked all around and within their world, coupled with hopes that uprightness would ultimately prevail.25

So long as the scale of urban life had remained small and relatively bounded, so long as family, class, occupation, and age had anchored men and ranged them hierarchically, the task of discerning identity had been comparatively easy. An apprentice tailor looked and behaved differently than a journeyman printer, and each of these seemed nothing like a master carpenter. Perspective’s triangulating techniques came to the fore here, and only the uninitiated could confuse a tradesman with a lawyer or shopkeeper, a factor with a planter come to visit the big city. Deducing the characters of these fellows was hardly more difficult: what men were like depended largely upon who they were. Nobility and villainy had been terms of estate long before they became descriptions of temperament. To say that profession did not match behavior was the essence of calling a man a liar.

By the early nineteenth century, all that had changed. Strange faces came and went along Broad Street and up and down King, parading the manners of Boston, the fashion of Gotham, the brogue of the Auld Sod. The breakdown of the apprentice system, the growth of the tramping trades, and the influx of new machines and foreign capital transformed economic opportunity in Charleston, dissolving long-standing measurements of social hierarchy. As ranks coalesced into classes, signs of social identity grew more amorphous. Prodded by the democratic ethos of the

age and the power of capital to vault men into wholly new positions, the range of social appearance and behavior narrowed. In manners, dress and speech, deviation from the mean came to be seen as a personal failing and a social threat. Under these conditions, where men increasingly looked alike, acted alike, talked alike, it became ever more difficult to decode character. Personal identity disappeared behind the mask of social identity. Action became frighteningly inscrutable.  

Melodrama offered a way out, a new method of reading the world. In the theater and on the street, it focused less on action than situation, less on movement than perception. It promised men and women that, however much others might seek to alter appearances, the truth of nature would shine forth. However much men strove to shape their destinies, the hand of fate was upon them, rewarding merit and punishing wrong. The key was to recognize details of appearance and behavior as clues to immanent character and social fortune.

These subtle signs came clear through contrasts between characters, actions, extremes. Melodrama paired “youth and age, sympathy and selfishness, the masculine and the feminine, the serious and the frivolous, the sublime and the ridiculous,” George Bernard Shaw explained. “The whole character” of a melodrama “must be allegorical,” he declared, “idealistic, full of generalizations and moral lessons. It must represent conduct as producing swiftly and certainly the results which in actual life it produces on the race in the course of many centuries.” There was no room for ambiguity here. Right and wrong were clearly defined, certain of exposure to public view, and unavoidable in their consequences. Melodrama’s attraction turned on this


belief in poetic justice, assuring audiences that goodness would gain its reward, pompousness be deflated, rashness come to ruin. Above all, villainy would be put down in the nick of time, whether by retributive Providence or some heroic agent. This was a theater of sight and insight, a school in the divination of concealed identities and the revelation of hidden crimes.28

At the heart of most plots lay the triangulating power of wakefulness. Audiences watched protagonists piece together details of appearance, speech, and action to gain a deeper understanding of their situation over the course of several scenes, and act upon it. Action revealed clues cumulatively in the broadest visual fashion, unmistakable to all who gazed upon the stage, verbalized in unshaded, emotional terms. The characters took longer to catch on to half-hidden meanings, of course, and therein lay the suspense, adventure, pathos, and fun of the play.

Melodramatic theater taught lessons Charlestonians could apply in the course of everyday life, too, reading the identity of those around them and disclosing their own natures by degrees. This was less a form of acting than of acting out, “the use of the body… to represent meanings that might otherwise be unavailable to representation because they are somehow under the bar of repression.” Melodrama broke through that barrier with broad gestures and bombast, driving from surfaces to essences. The drama was frequently little more than a string of emotional set-pieces or tableaux vivantes, three-dimensional daguerreotypes stitched together with scant concern for plausibility. A theater of white hats and black hats disclosed a world of white hearts and black hearts, resolving the conflict between them with warming predictability.29

Just as the premises and methods of Victorian melodrama bolstered the perspective of the South Carolina jeremiad, the culture of honor and its safeguard, the *code duello*, intersected with its tenets in important ways.\(^{30}\) Paradoxically, the jeremiad also drew strength from the sorrows and contradictions honor’s defense gave rise to. Outsiders often pictured dueling as senseless violence, a ritual of cool murder to satisfy hot passions. But this missed its meanings and purposes entirely. In theory, dueling offered a mechanism of social rapprochement, preventing interpersonal disharmony from degenerating into broad and bitter conflict. It aimed to heal breaches in the circle of gentlemen, not widen them, to restrain violence, not promote it.\(^{31}\) Like the jeremiad, like melodrama, honor’s code strove to achieve internal unity and root out dissent.

By the early 1830’s, recognized experts had come to regulate duels in the state’s older areas. In Charleston, dueling schools initiated novices on the finer points of the affair of honor. In 1838, prompted by a rash of unnecessary deaths, former governor John Lyde Wilson

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presented his *Code of Honor*.\textsuperscript{32} It quickly became the regional guide to dueling.\textsuperscript{33} While defending the duel “unhesitatingly” as the “right and proper” means of upholding the name of an “oppressed and deeply wronged individual,” Wilson warned that too many men traded shots for too little reason. If gentlemen would only learn “immutable integrity and uniform urbanity of manners,” he promised, the affair of honor would soon die out. Meanwhile, he addressed his primer to the fellow who “finds himself avoided in society, his friends shunning his approach, his substance wasting, his wife and children in want around him, and traces all his misfortune and misery to the slanderous tongue of the calumniator, who, by secret whisper or artful innuendo, have sapped and undermined his reputation.” Dueling provided a public ritual of mutual affirmation—part play, part theater—to heal those wounds. It had nothing essentially to do with killing other men.\textsuperscript{34}

Dueling was a social response to an internally generated political crisis: that was the central assumption of Wilson’s pamphlet. Outsiders posed no threat to the integrity of honor’s circle. They could be thrashed or dismissed with impunity, but gentlemen in conflict had to be reconciled somehow. The community of honor was threatened when disputes raised doubts about any of its members. If the fraternity of worthy gentlemen had misjudged one of its number, who could say there were no other unworthies among them? That question could only spread uncertainty and shame throughout the group, sapping the order and hierarchy honor


\textsuperscript{33}A later guide is A Southron, *The Code of Honor, or the Thirty-Nine Articles* (Baltimore, 1847). Rooting honor in emotion, not appearances, it gained no influence in South Carolina. Wilson’s code served in the 1850s as the last word for Charlestonians on how gentlemen should resolve disputes. *Terms of a Hostile Meeting between Davison Legare, Esq., and John Dunovant, Esq., with correspondence between Thomas M. Stuart and Arthur M. Manigault, 23 August 1853* [Charleston, 1853].

\textsuperscript{34}Stowe, *Intimacy and Power in the Old South*, 15-23.
imposed. In such situations, two options remained. Either the circle of gentlemen would have to ignore or accept the slight as given, adjusting social rankings to raise or lower the perpetrator, or honor would have to be proven afresh, perhaps satisfied through blood itself.\textsuperscript{35}

At the outset of any dispute, few Charlestonians expected that they would be compelled to resolve matters over the barrel of a gun out on Sullivan’s Island or up on the Washington Race Course. Few ever did. The gravity of most duels lay in the knowledge that far more than individual names or lives were at stake in the event. Family status and social order hung in the balance. It was crucial, then, that participants conducted themselves with care and precision in moving toward the resolution of conflict, violent or otherwise. The cause of most disputes was miscommunication, Wilson held. Adversaries’ chief duty was not to seek revenge, but to “search diligently into the origin of the misunderstanding, for gentlemen seldom insult each other, unless they labor under some misapprehension or mistake.”\textsuperscript{36}

Most of Wilson’s \textit{Code} had nothing to do with the conduct of gallants trading pistol shots. It focused instead on gentlemen exchanging polite letters. Frank prose and manly restraint were more important to success, it counseled, than a good aim. Honor’s satisfaction did not mean manhood’s violent assertion, overwhelming the foe and re-establishing precedence. On the contrary: the \textit{Code} urged patient retreat, silence, and passivity as the course of duty. “[S]peak to no one,” Wilson told aggrieved gentlemen, but “see your friend who is to act for you.” “[C]ool and collected,” the plaintiff’s second took “custody of [his] honor,” using “every effort to soothe and tranquilize” the principal. Together, they composed a note to the imagined assailant, “truly and fairly” setting forth their complaint “in the language of a gentleman” and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Anton Chekhov, \textit{The Duel, and Other Stories} (London, 1984), 17-119.
\item Wilson, \textit{The Code of Honor}, 5, 13. Cf., William F. DeSaussure to John M. DeSaussure, January 31, 1829, William Ford DeSaussure Papers, SCL.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
seeking explanation. Clerk and courier both, the second delivered the demand, so long as the recipient considered the writers honorable men and their message not abusive. After an interval, the second accepted from the adversary’s second a written reply, provided that it, too, was framed appropriately. There was any number of reasons a man might decline to receive a note, any number of ways a second could wind up in some scrape of his own. The key to avoiding these troubles was circumspection and cautious restraint.  

At this stage, then, the affair of honor became a melodrama of social reconstruction, a practical playing out of the South Carolina jeremiad on the dangerous ground of disputed masculine identity. One exchange of papers settled most quarrels, but it was not unusual for seconds to troop back and forth four or five times with notes of shaded meaning. If words could be made to attain a precision agreeable to both sides, order was restored. If not, gentlemen would need to assert their privilege, giving “satisfaction” of manly integrity by an exchange of gunfire.  

Yet even on the dueling ground, the Code’s aim was to rein in disruptive violence. On the fateful day, principals were required to continue “wholly passive” agents of communal honor, “respectful in meeting.” Their seconds were still working behind the scene to resolve matters, often in concert with a “Board of Honor” of impartial gentlemen. If such measures failed, all that was required of the duelists was to raise their weapons at the given signal and fire. If either was “touched” by his opponent’s ball, the duel was at an end. If not, seconds conferred while combatants stood by dumbly. Where the grievance was serious, the challenger’s second  


was required to insist that the “contest” continue unless reparations were forthcoming. In this manner the ruthless ritual went on “until one or the other of the principals is hit,” or exposed as a coward.

Theoretically, this *dictum* demanded bloodshed. Practically, the *Code* curbed violence. That was why dueling survived in South Carolina long after it had disappeared elsewhere. Most disputes between gentlemen were made up without resort to pistols. Of those paladins who required “a hostile meeting,” nearly all had had enough after one shot. Far more ink than blood was spilled to adjust manly differences, just as Wilson intended. The duel served to bond, not divide southern gentlemen.39

There was good reason especially for the convergent power of the jeremiad, melodrama, and the *code duello* in antebellum Charleston. The dangers of disunity were printed on every page of the city’s past. During the Stamp Act crisis, Chris Gadsden’s Liberty Boys had terrorized locals and roamed the streets as a mob, dressed as sailors and mechanics in blackface. Revolutionary War saw Tory and Patriot neighbors slaughter each other in skirmishes and atrocities throughout the parishes and beyond. In the early national period, the specter of gun-toting upcountry farmers--led by Calhoun’s father Patrick--marching on Charleston to demand greater rights pushed lowcountry squires toward political reform. They made peace with the frontier by conceding a percentage of power, but distrust and disdain endured on both sides of the fall line.40


Though the spread of slavery and planter culture after 1800 did much to bond the state’s sub-regions, that only made divisions more complex and disunity more worrisome, as the Nullification controversy proved. In the crisis of 1832-33, Unionists squared off against Nullifiers across the state over the federal right to impose a protective tariff. In Charleston, armed mobs numbering in the hundreds fought pitched battles up and down King Street, Minute Men drilled, and Federals trained the guns of Fort Moultrie on the Battery itself. Three decades later, the fears and hatreds of that time still lingered.41

Between 1835 and 1850, John C. Calhoun strove mightily to forge a common front in South Carolina against what he called federal aggression. His strength in Washington “depend[ed] on unity at home,” he told James Hammond. To that end, he dragooned support ruthlessly, rewarding compliance and punishing discord. The resentments that strategy fostered were never nearly overcome in Calhoun’s lifetime. With his death they flared into bitter divisions. Essayists celebrated the absence of political parties in the state, but that oddity derived from the constant warring and realignment of factions, not their transcendence. Instead of standing shoulder-to-shoulder against the menace of abolition, as Calhoun had hoped, in the crisis of 1850-52 Carolinians split ranks once more, driving to the brink of disunion, then pulling back ignominiously.42 Compounding the failure of resistance in 1832, that unmanly collapse

clearly in William G. Simms, South-Carolina in the Revolutionary War: Being a Reply to Certain Misrepresentations and Mistakes of Recent Writers (Charleston, 1853).


bred shame, suspicion, and deep hatreds between Carolinians as never before. Filtered through the logic of the jeremiad, dissent came to seem the deadliest betrayal.

In Charleston in 1860, the memory of these incidents was fresh and powerful. Their lesson was summed up by the melodramatic example of one man who spoke too freely and paid with his life for that misstep. At the hour of secession, the poet Paul Hamilton Hayne thought wistfully, the ghost of Will Taber still lingered in “Lord John” Russell’s bookstore on King Street, a popular radical crossroads. Doubtless it lived on in the offices of the disunionist Mercury, over on Broad, where Taber had made his name as editor across four troubled years, and perhaps still wafted through the barrooms and smoky coffeehouses he had haunted during his brief, rowdy life. Inside the fancy bordellos of the town, too, it must have seemed that the spirit of so notorious a “low-reckless debaucher” had never departed. Yet in 1860 the body of William Robinson Taber, Jr. was undeniably moldering in an unmarked grave in St. Philip’s Episcopal Churchyard, a small, round hole in its skull. Indeed, as elite Charleston understood, Taber had died not once, but twice in “lamentable” fashion. First he had been hanged—in effigy—denounced and driven into exile for his opinions in the winter of 1853. Then young Ed Magrath put a bullet in his brain three years later in a scandalous duel up at the Washington Race Course. Within months, Taber’s name was taboo, though his memory lived on, the political meaning of his sacrifice central to the choices Charlestonians made after Lincoln’s election. No

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one better symbolized both the need to uphold the tenets of the South Carolina jeremiad and the dangers inherent in that discipleship.

Taber’s early life offered abundant clues of trouble to come. Certainly he did not take after his father, the Rhode Island bookkeeper who made patient accumulation and self-control his watchwords. Coming south in the 1820s, the elder Taber labored shrewdly to build a place at the heart of cotton’s kingdom. By 1825, the thirty-three year old Yankee had married Emma Smith, sister to the rising sectionalist politician Robert Barnwell Smith, and stayed close to his in-laws near Beaufort for several years thereafter. Not until a decade later did he show up in a Charleston city directory as an accountant, residing on the elegant corner of Smith and Montague in the heart of old Harleston village. Six years on, in the depths of the 1837-43 depression, Taber removed to the city’s rough but rising upper wards, where he lived for the next two decades.

That little information tells much about the man’s ambitious character and ambiguous status. The Radcliffeborough address he purchased was hardly choice real estate—free African Americans and slaves living apart from their masters dominated the marshy neighborhood—yet

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45 This discussion of Taber’s family history is constructed from a variety of genealogical and contemporary reference works including James Smith, The Charleston Directory, and Register, for 1835-6 (Charleston, 1835); D[aniel] J. Dowling, Dowling’s Charleston Directory, and Annual Register for 1837 and 1838 (Charleston, 1837); Thomas C. Fay, Charleston Directory, and Strangers’ Guide, For 1840 and 1841 (Charleston, 1840); John H. Honour, Jr., A Directory of the City of Charleston and Neck for 1849 (Charleston, 1849); Morris Goldsmith, comp., Directory and Strangers’ Guide for the City of Charleston, and Its Vicinity (Charleston, 1851); James H. Baggett, comp., Directory of the City of Charleston for the Year 1852 (Charleston, 1851); David M. Gazlay, comp., The Charleston City and General Business Directory for 1855, vol. 1 (Charleston, 1855); Leonard Mears and James Turnbull, comps., The Charleston Directory (Charleston, 1859); W. Eugene Ferslew, Directory of the City of Charleston..., 1860 (Savannah, 1860); Jonathan H. Poston, The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City’s Architecture (Charleston, 1997), 531-532, 562-567, 617-618, 628-629, 633.

46 In 1837, Smith and his siblings adopted the surname Rhett, honoring collateral ancestors and advancing their own social interests. Davis, Rhett, 99-100.
Taber had done well to win stable work and landed property at all. The threadbare Smiths could not lend aid, and doubtless counted on Taber to make his way when they agreed to the marriage bargain. What the northern bean-counter lacked in honor and prestige, he made up for in habits of industry and personal rectitude—traits stiff-necked Barney Rhett would come to champion. Taber was an admirably respectable fellow. That he and his irascible brother-in-law managed to weather political storms without falling out likewise suggests a clear-sighted stoicism and the sense to keep his mouth shut. In New England, Tabers took leading roles in advancing the cause of abolition, but not in Charleston. Work and family, not politics, framed this little man’s life, and on that terrain he labored earnestly. By the late 1840s, Taber had gained the rank of assistant teller at the Bank of the State of South Carolina and reared up a tidy family of four boys and three girls. It was not very much, but the plucky immigrant had built a life and reputation stable, snug, and secure.

Taber’s namesake was meant to carry the family’s fortunes dutifully upward. Born at Beaufort on July 18, 1828, Will Taber, Jr. gained entrance to South Carolina College in 1846.

47 Frederick A. Ford, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1861* (Charleston, 1861), 16, 19, 72.

48 Nullification has been underappreciated as a divisive internal conflict, sundering households, neighbors, and friends. See Rebecca M. Rutledge to Edward M. Rutledge, September 6, 1832, Rutledge Family Papers, SCL; *The Papers of William Gilmore Simms*, ed. Mary C. S. Oliphant, *et al.*, 6 vols. (Columbia, 1950-82), 1: 50, 54; G. Sparks to Elihu P. Smith, October 16, 1832, Elihu Penquite Smith Papers, SCL; Robert Witherspoon to Thomas M. Witherspoon, December 1, 1832, Witherspoon Family Papers, SCL.

49 (Boston) *The Liberator*, January 16, May 14, 1836.

50 Like many elite women, Emma Smith’s adult life was consumed with the travails of pregnancy and child-rearing. She married a month after her twenty-second birthday and became pregnant two months later. Emma gave birth to five children over the next eighty-two months, four of whom lived past early childhood. She bore her eighth child in February 1847, aged forty-three years and three months.

51 Between 1830 and 1859, Taber’s name appears in city newspapers in connection with no political party, public rally, or voluntary association. In 1860, he paid eighty-eight dollars in taxes on real estate valued at $3500, three slaves (one of whom ran away in October), one horse, and a carriage. *List of the Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860* (Charleston, 1861), 275; *Charleston Mercury* November 3, 1860.
Though his younger brothers trudged their father’s path into local clerkships and a modest medical practice, Will won the rags-to-riches chance Carolina leaders like George McDuffie, Kit Memminger, and James Hammond had seized before him, soaring among the sons of power and privilege. Junior’s status as gentleman-in-the-making depended on maternal bloodlines and paternal calculation both, but the son little appreciated their hard-won social victory. Student life in Columbia was notorious—and attractive—for its lazy elitism, vulgarity and simple chaos. Taber leaped in. Soon he was gone to the dogs.52

Hobnobbing beat book-cracking, certainly, but Taber’s choice reflected a broader, more troubling social ambivalence. “Competition with other men” for dominance, historian John Mayfield argues, shaped manhood across the Old South, near-constant conflict finding expression in “class, race, sex, violence, risk taking, or some other outlet.”53 Deep play betrayed a masculinity unstable and jerry-built—“confused, tentative, situational, self-fashioned, and always in search of the right pose or ‘presentment’.” No wonder men saw “crisis in the making at every turn”—or created one as need be.54

52 For Taber’s spotty academic record, see William R. Taber student file, University of South Carolina Archives. Along with 33 other classmates, Taber did manage to graduate—unlike the eighteen who quit, failed, or were expelled. Maximilian LaBorde, History of the South Carolina College, From Its Incorporation, Dec. 19, 1801, to Dec. 19, 1865, Including Sketches of Its Presidents and Professors. With an Appendix (Charleston, 1874), 264-269, 278, 543, 557-558. On recurrent problems at South Carolina College, see Milledge L. Bonham to Sophia Bonham, March 22, 1833, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL; Robert Anderson to William Harper, et al., December 1, 1834, Robert Anderson Papers, SCL; Charles W. Capers to the Committee Appointed by the Trustees of South Carolina College, November 28, 1834, Charles William Capers Papers, SCL; “A Song composed by B. Chalmers, and sung to the tune of dearest mary on the occasion of the Junior class rebellion of 1850 in the South Carolina College,” [1850], James Ronald Chalmers Papers, SCL.

53 John Mayfield, Counterfeit Gentlemen: Manhood and Humor in the Old South (Gainesville, 2009), xiv-xv. See also J. R. Kendrick, A Good Name. A Discourse, delivered in the First Baptist Church, Charleston, before the Graduating Class of the Medical College of South-Carolina, February 23d, 1851 (Charleston, 1851), 10-11.

54 Bruce, Violence and Culture in the Antebellum South, 88. Cf. [Augustin L. Taveau], The Vindication: A Satire, on ‘Charleston: A Poem’ (Charleston, 1848), 8.
Thus when Taber’s Rhett cousins escorted girls home from a party in the spring of 1848, they discovered a quartet of their friends in the street, a couple “tipsy,” another “so drunk he could not walk well,” each looking to raise a rumpus. “[O]ne bawled out I’ll be damed if I can’t flog any thing in white kid gloves” and promptly tore after the Rhett’s. Clubs were raised, oaths flung back and forth, and then abruptly, conflict ceased. “Dam my soul to hell,” declared one unsteady schoolboy, “why don’t you help the ladies out the carriage”? Even the slave at the buggy’s reins was drawn into a mock-serious exchange of gallant greetings: “God dam it Mr. Golden,” a second scion enthused, “how do you do?” Careening wildly from a shameless show of boozing, profanity, and threatened fisticuffs to an over-elaborate portrayal of politesse, the scene was doubly ridiculous—and memorably fun. Brawling and bowing both became the stuff of games, postures well worth rehearsal.

Throughout Charleston and far beyond, self-discipline warred with self-assertion, cool ritual against warm passions. Taber’s short life—indeed, the Old South’s remarkable veering into secession—proved the futility of moderating polarities. Though well-named Will and his pals never failed to construe reckless roistering as staunch self-government, knavish excess tainted gentlemanly status. One upcountry boy recorded a memorable scene from Taber’s first term, when a town marshal chased scofflaws back inside their dormitory.

At first I was horrified. The man was trembling in every nerve, fifty students around him and every way of retreat blocked up.... I had not been there two minutes before the cry was raised to throw him over the railing, which would by the fall have broken every bone in his body, then the demand was mitigated into the penalty of being pushed down stairs by force. All hands threw in their mite... and the result was he was pulled down, hooted out of the Campus.... Sometimes I found myself throwing stones and brickbats at the unfortunate individual so enraged had I become through the operation of the feelings of others on my own.56

55 A. W. B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., April 9, 1848, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL.

56 Entry of December 16, 1846, Giles J. Patterson Book, SCL.
Surely Taber was not far from this honorable uproar—few could afford to be. Three months later, students interrupted “kindling bonfires in the campus, annoying professors, & occasionally performing very foolish acts” by refusing to come to class altogether. Others were expelled. By 1848, unbridled Will had made himself sufficiently infamous to be barred from even his uncle Rhett’s home. The boy was “addicted to low dissipation,” lacking utterly “that spirit of self-denial and high aspiration after excellence without which there can be no virtue.” Blood kin or no, for Rhett there could be “no compromise with vice.”

Handsome, clever, and self-important, Taber had worked hard to win his dubious reputation. But it was not college pranks which so repelled Charleston’s elite. Even before he reached Columbia, “disagreeable accounts” had wafted through a dozen drawing rooms that Taber was “an injurious companion.” His tongue was “too free, and too foul,” spreading the “habit of filthy and wicked conversation.” Worse, rough words encouraged wanton deeds. Under his coaxing, more than one belle “behaved hardly decently” with him, and in 1846 Taber’s father threatened “to horsewhip the whole house” filled with his reprobate friends, “girls in particular.” At the College of Charleston, where he had enrolled in 1844, the rake preferred parties and “the tender sex” to hard study, and soon dropped out.

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57 Autobiography of David Wyatt Aiken, 1864, David Wyatt Aiken Papers, SCL; Robert B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., April 15, May 13, 1847, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL. Consistent with Taber’s later career, the worst eruptions of student rioting and backtalk came just after he took his degree, as underclassmen sought to emulate and outdo the example of recent graduates. On President James Henley Thornwell’s travails with these “rebellions,” see The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, ed. Benjamin M. Palmer (Richmond, 1875); LaBorde, History of the South Carolina College, 275-280.

58 Elizabeth W. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, February 12, 1845.,

Those were the least of his sins. Before he was twenty, Taber had been caught more than once \textit{in flagrante delicto} with female slaves of his friends’ parents, apparently in the act of rape.\footnote{Robert B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., n. d. [1847], December 18, 1848, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL; Davis, \textit{Rhett}, 316. It may be argued that sexual relations between free whites and enslaved blacks were inevitably a form of rape. For a narrower analysis, see Diane M. Sommerville, \textit{Rape and Race in the Nineteenth-Century South} (Chapel Hill, 2004). Yet even elite males accustomed to turning a blind eye to sex across the color line instigated by white males regarded Taber’s actions as beyond the pale.}

Many young men found the pleasures of license in the alleys near dockside, in the rough upper wards, or out on Sullivan’s Island, reckoning that lying with the girls was the quickest road to gain standing with the boys.\footnote{Until recently, the geography of transgression in southern cities has gone unmapped. Judith K. Schafer, \textit{Brothels, Depravity, and Abandoned Women: Illegal Sex in Antebellum New Orleans} (Baton Rouge, 2009) offers an important first step toward that goal for New Orleans. George Chauncey’s notion of the city as “a place of multiple overlapping subcultures” engaged in mutual “reorganization”—which informs the discussion in chapters 2-5 of this study--provides a template for considering how southerners, black and white, enslaved, free, and freed, constructed cities from the bottom up. George Chauncey, \textit{Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940} (New York, 1994), 131-267. Cf. Howard P. Chudakoff, \textit{The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture} (Princeton, 1999), esp. 7; Lynda Nead, “From Alleys to Courts: Obscenity and the Mapping of Mid-Victorian London,” \textit{New Formations}, 37 (1999): 33-46; Timothy J. Gilfoyle, \textit{City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920} (New York, 1992), 29-54; David M. Henkin, \textit{City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York} (New York, 1998).} It was the very cheapness of such acts which recommended them to budding men of honor. Yet not all was grist for the mill: there seemed something especially beastly about Taber’s lust.\footnote{Despite abundant evidence, southern historians have little studied the tie between calculation and carnality in masculine sexuality. Broadly speaking, we might say, a superabundance of lust could serve to excuse lascivious scheming in most honorable circles, on the principle that “boys will be boys.” But weighing the pros and cons of license too closely before indulging one’s appetites shocked both respectable and honorable types. This was the sign of the truly wanton, as shown in Pierre A.-F. Choderlos de Laclos, \textit{Les liaisons dangereuses} (Paris, 1964). It also seems to be what so appalled Rhett about Taber’s behavior: he responded only to proximate, material threats— affecting respectability, ultimately—not the danger “wickedness” posed to his honor.} “He is not restrained from licentiousness from convictions of its degradation, meanness & wickedness,” Rhett complained, “but merely from a sense of self-interest and expediency.” While his mother lay gravely ill in the winter of 1848, Taber was out raising Cain, attending the theater, chasing an heiress “in hopes of marrying a fortune.”\footnote{Davis, \textit{Rhett}, 316; Robert B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., January 7, 1848, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL. Davis errantly states Taber’s mother died in 1848. It was Taber’s elder sister, twenty-two-year old Marianna, who}
and Edmund Rhett--inspiring them to aspire to his heedless “debauchery.” In rambling letters dotted with classical allusions, Taber told his kinsmen how his “resolution” of chastity had “as yet been strictly observed”: in spite of splendid “ground… offered on which to sow seed,” he had “hung up my sickle until matrimony shall present a harvest.” The Rhett boys must have howled to read such doubtful words, even as they reveled in their prurience. Within days or weeks, they knew, Taber’s promises would be observed in the breach—so to speak—where the blade in question never rusted long from disuse. And doing the deed could hardly be as delicious as telling the tale to one’s fellows thereafter.

Taber’s carousing was more than the passing folly of privileged youth. It challenged paternalist values elite Charlestonians held dear, endangering all. “Let honor govern your actions; candor your opinions; resolution your decrees, and independence your decisions,” Henry Nixon urged his peers at South Carolina College. Beware the “influential comrade” who might “lead you down to the gates of death.” By example and education, Charleston’s upper crust taught its offspring the benefits of social cohesion, manly restraint, and honorable deportment. On the skilful performance of those principles, southern survival depended. “Duty,” Robert F. W. Allston emphasized to his son, “the path of duty is the path of safety.” Good men made good masters, just rulers, honorable gentlemen, instructing those who came after them. Louts like Taber jeopardized everyone and everything.65

perished on May 15, 1849. Robert B. Rhett, Jr., to Robert B. Rhett, May 22, 1849, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL. Emma Smith Taber lived long after her reckless son, expiring at Columbia on February 15, 1867.

64 William R. Taber to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., April 31, 1846, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SCL; Since a gentleman was expected to steer his friends away from dishonor, both by example and (if need be) by word, Taber’s failing was doubly damning. Cf. William H. Trescot to William P. Miles, 26 July 1842, William Porcher Miles Papers, SHC; William J. Grayson, “The Character of a Gentleman,” Russell’s Magazine, 2 (1858): 68.

What such men lacked especially was self-mastery, the anchor of just governance. However harsh slavery’s logic might be—and few whites considered it very harsh—the domestic institution which shaped it was thought to undergird an emerging vision of social harmony and merit-based command. Men who did their duty as masters were seen as guiding black servants in the same benign way husbands and fathers ruled households. Thus it was, many thought, that Charleston had seen nothing like a real slave revolt across its long history. Safety demanded spotlessness, Rhett affirmed: “The beast must be suppressed within us,” or the consequence was catastrophe.66 But will was an endlessly troublesome thing—and Will a vexingly parlous person.

It was easy, then, for Charlestonians to exaggerate the danger Taber posed. Sons so prodigal showed signs of social failure too plainly. That was how one Boston woman satirized Charleston in 1848, jeering the “whiskered booby” who inspired “manly shame” in his elders, parading King Street, purposeless, “idle and empty,” drawing others to ruin in his wake. “No high desires animate their souls,” she mocked. Rejecting religion and family life, local bravos sought “unhallowed joy at dark of night/Alone, that none may bring [their] deeds to light.” The barb struck home, and Charlestonians yelped in “alarm, distress, and beautiful confusion,” demanding self-reform. “Doubtless we need the lash,” William Gilmore Simms moaned. “We set aside our talents for our toys, [and] leave our nobler purposes undone.” Uncorrected, personal imperfections might touch off political crisis, shattering dreams of social harmony. Such laments seemed both odd and shrill to outsiders—as they do today—yet Charlestonians were “famous… for overdoing things.” Indeed, immoderation was the heart of South Carolina’s self-affliction precisely because its plantocracy felt so confident in its course and so relentlessly

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threatened. Taber’s loose living personified a crisis of social order elite Charlestonians fretted over endlessly.67

Many thought it simpler to ignore his libertinism than to confront its sources and meanings. Some excused it as a rough patch in the apprenticeship of a talented youth. And, for all of Taber’s obvious demerits, by 1849, he had reclaimed a measure of social standing, marrying well and launching a legal career. Perhaps mended fences preaced mended ways. Before long, wanton Will was parading fashionable King Street as “Wm. Taber, Esqr.,” giving clichéd political speeches to local militia companies. Surviving portraits show why men admired and women swooned. A sleek goatee, flamboyant mustache, and dandified, flowing hair convey the chivalrous masculinity of a southern Bayard.68 Yet this assertive flair was offset by an air of calm repose, classic features, and soft blue eyes—attributes attractive yet equally dangerous for opposite reasons.69 The two artists who painted Taber during this period both balanced claims of honorable manhood with gentle clues to a more manageable respectability. If only the courteous cad had realized moderation half as readily in daily life.

In the disunionist crisis of 1850-52, Taber played a minor local role, earning credit


69 The best description of Taber appears in the undated clipping, A Friend, “In Memory of W. R. Taber,” J. Ward Hopkins Scrapbook, SCL.
without stirring animosity. He toasted southern rights, strutted as a lieutenant in the Charleston Rifles, sired heirs, attended public functions, went to church. Then, late in 1852, Taber took a chunk of his rich wife’s money and bought into the ailing Charleston Mercury. No one was more surprised than his radical uncle, now Senator Rhett, who saw the paper as the public face of his personal views. But given its—and his--straitened finances, he could but fold his hands and bite his tongue.

Over the next year, as co-editor, Taber never hesitated to hurl insults at moderates and the “mob” that sustained them. His pose was Romantic, fit for a young man in a hurry, owing much to pot-valiance and prejudice. Indeed, across the early 1850s, as Rhett quit Washington when his secession plans capsized, it was Taber, quite independently, who kept the radical flag flying above the Four Corners. Though historians have ascribed the Mercury’s sectional brinkmanship to Rhett’s direction, it was latterly Taber’s attempt to out-Rhett Rhett, and his influence upon Robert Barnwell Rhett, Jr., who assumed editorial duties in 1857, which accounts for that paper’s political extremism and harsh anti-capitalist critiques. He shouted what others dared not whisper. Beyond the stately townhouses below Broad, however, such pretensions

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70 Charleston Mercury, October 10, 1850, July 7, 1851. On South Carolina’s secessionist tantrum in response to the Compromise of 1850, see Barnwell, Love of Order.

71 William L. King, The Newspaper Press of Charleston, S. C. A Chronological and Biographical History, Embracing a Period of One Hundred and Forty Years (Charleston, 1882), 154. Though Rhett was long rumored to be the Mercury’s secret owner, his influence stemmed from the pliability of its editor, John A. Stuart, who was also his brother-in-law. Davis, Rhett, 120-121.


seemed increasingly repellant, and quite out of step with the age.\textsuperscript{74} The only question was how long it would be before hubris reaped its reward.

In December 1853, Taber arrived in Columbia to cover the legislative session for the \textit{Mercury} and to deliver an anniversary oration to his alumni class at South Carolina College. At that moment, improbably, public education had surged to the front of the political agenda, and most expected Taber’s remarks on “The Essentials of a Republic” to address the topic.\textsuperscript{75} In years past, education had excited little interest so long as slaves remained unlettered and planters’ sons at school were not drunk in the gutter or rioting in the streets. Now the subject focused class tensions. As legislators debated whether to funnel precious tax dollars to shore up the shaky common school system or improve colleges which served a wealthy few, the choice became a litmus test for a host of policies pitting elite planters against small farmers, workingmen, and the growing bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{76}

Lowcountry squires who balked at paying taxes so that a poor man’s son might learn to read and write, many thought, were the same types who mocked honest labor and lorded it over the common folk on court day and at militia musters. They stuffed ballot boxes to suit their pleasure and ran the legislature like a private club, then flattered “sovereigns” with speeches on the glories of republican statecraft. “The Gov[ernment] of this state is a close oligarchy,” one upcountry leader declared, “& they can bear nothing beyond their Order.” Blue bloods could offer umpteen reasons why the 173 voters in St. Thomas and St. Dennis Parish should have their

\textsuperscript{74}By his own lights, Taber stood for “courtesy and liberality” against men whose “watchword is ‘Pay’”—a classic conflict of honor versus respectability. \textit{Charleston Mercury}, January 1, 1855.

\textsuperscript{75}During Taber’s college years, students had argued—privately—the injurious effects of democracy on republican values. Professors had preached the virtues of conservative order. But proclaiming them outside the forums of classroom or debate club was another matter entirely. See, e. g., “Speech before the Clariosophic Society,” n. d., Giles J. Patterson Book, SCL; Laborde, \textit{History of the South Carolina College}, 558.

\textsuperscript{76} \textit{Charleston Courier}, December 3, 1853, January 11, 1854; \textit{Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell}, 325-339; Francis W. Pickens to Milledge L. Bonham, December 11, 1857, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL.
own senator and the 26,000 citizens in sprawling Pendleton District no more than one, why the
banking capital of the state had no place above the fall line, why the government should lend no
aid to upcountry railroads or factories or turnpikes. All for the gentry and nothing for the
common man: that was the lesson Demos learned under the rule of his elite neighbors.77

Those at the other end of the political spectrum also argued the need to make a stand on
education. Big planters of the parishes and enclaves like lower Richland District dug in their
heels. With one eye fixed on the turbulent fortunes of too-liberal European brethren, they
sneered at the “meanness, ignorance, prejudice, and selfishness” of the “Sovereign people alias
mob.” How long would they have to endure politicians prating about the worthiness of the
“sturdy yeoman” and the “intelligent mechanic”?78 Deluded by demagogues like Larry Orr,
Frank Pickens, and Ben Perry in the upcountry, and Tommy Simons and Bill Porter in
Charleston, the *hoi polloi* would never cease its demands for more political and economic power
till the whole “South Carolina system” was overthrown. First these “lower classes” would call
for more equitable representation in the General Assembly, a popularly elected governor, and
direct balloting for presidential electors—each step weakening the lowcountry’s power in the
legislature. Finally the parishes would be abolished and the unwashed many come to preside
over the propertied few. Under the “despotism of an ignorant, selfish, vicious, idle mob,” South
Carolina would know the “tyranny of numbers” Calhoun had railed against on the national level
all his life.79

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77 Townsend, *Reply of Mr. Townsend, in Defense of his Public Conduct*, 28-32. On the electoral question generally,
see Chauncey S. Boucher, “Sectionalism, Representation, and the Electoral Question in Ante-Bellum South

78 Entries of November 9, 1855, May 31, 1856, June 8, 1860, David Gavin Diary, SHC; Representative on this score
is William D. Porter, “The Value of the Arts and Sciences to the Practical Mechanic,” in *The Charleston Book: A
To both sides, public education seemed the thin edge of the wedge of social and political reform. Across the nation, schooling was the elite’s favorite panacea for proletarian unrest, lifting up the downtrodden. But everywhere the pace of change seemed too gradual for some, too radical for others. Everywhere, propertied classes grumbled mightily about having to foot the bill. In tax-conscious, debt-ridden South Carolina, such sentiments were impossible to check completely. And, given the constellation of broader questions of class and power the education problem fronted for, it was impossible to unite, much less please, both sides on this issue.

Already in 1853, Reverend James Henley Thornwell had nearly touched off the explosion with an indiscreet public letter to Governor John L. Manning. As president of South Carolina College, the Presbyterian “Calhoun of the Church” was expected to defend his bailiwick, but Thornwell made little pretense of evenhandedness. Reform was a fine and necessary thing, he allowed, but how to pay for it? The state’s higher institutions should not be milked to teach toddlers to spell and count. Carolinians must be educated thoroughly, or not at all. The alternative was simply not safe, he cautioned, quoting Alexander Pope: “A little knowledge is a dangerous thing.” The squirearchy understood the accuracy of Thornwell’s quip, but it was too candid by half. For that aphorism, the cigar-puffing cleric spent the next two months apologizing. He never intended to suggest that the poor should not be tutored, never dreamed

79 Ford, Origins of Southern Radicalism, 287-290; Charleston Mercury, October 2, 9, 1854; Townsend, Reply of Mr. Townsend, in Defense of his Public Conduct, 3-9; Adams, Response... to the Voters of Richland District... on the Electoral Question; Samuel G. Stoney, ed., “Memoirs of Frederick Augustus Porcher,” South Carolina Historical Magazine, 47 (1946): 105-106.

that there was anything dangerous about the dear people. By the time Will Taber arrived in Columbia, class tensions were running high.81

Typically, he ignored the need for caution. On December 6, while commencement exercises droned on, Taber and his classmates were imbibing freely in the background. After the last valediction, as the audience milled about the college chapel hall, they claimed the podium, and announced their speaker rousingly. There is no accurate record of what Taber told the crowd. He spoke at length, and most of his hearers were too shocked to repeat his rash words, though conservative Richard Yeadon pronounced it “a very good” speech. It was--all but a single, fatal outburst. “Mr. Taber showed himself a determined and zealous iconoclast,” the Courier declared. Translated, he behaved like a bull in a china shop. His “views on public and systematic education… were strongly and pointedly stated,” Yeadon warned, “and will receive perhaps the dissent and censure of many who judge according to names.” What Taber had spoken, the paper implied, could not possibly be what he meant. More than this, it dared not say.82

Chief Justice John Belton O’Neall was likewise astonished. Holding a “high opinion” of Taber’s “powers of declamation,” he was “completely shocked” by the arguments he heard, denouncing them privately as soon as the speaker sat down. He was not alone: Governor Manning, Judge Ben Whitner and others, “concurred in thinking it the most extravagant and foolish speech they ever heard.” Columbia’s “brandied fops” might lap up such “folly,” but for sound men, the occasion was one of regret and foreboding. Weeks later, turning over Taber’s

81 Charleston Courier, December 3, 1853, January 11, 1854; Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, 325-339.
words in his memory, O’Neall remained half-convinced “that I must be mistaken in some respect.” No amount of “foolhardiness” could explain such an outburst.83

This much is certain: Taber went far beyond Thornwell’s gaffe. He spoke the unspeakable, declaring that a little education only made laborers “vicious and idle.” Better than bothering with public schooling, the state should train up only those best able to realize individual promise, the children of the elite. Almost any College graduation speech insinuated as much, but Taber’s tirade boasted inequality too loudly.84

Indiscretion became crisis as upcountry lawyer-editor Ben Perry scribbled down notes, scarce believing his ears. Attending a meeting of the South Carolina Press Association the next day, Perry blabbed what Taber blurted. “I must confess, that never before has it fallen to my lot,” he told the Greenville Southern Patriot, “to listen to such a farrago of insolence, ignorance and tyranny as were embodied in his speech.” Taber aimed farther than limiting the education of the poor, Perry claimed. Education was the foundation of the franchise itself: the gentry were scheming to steal the common man’s right to vote! “Never forget that you are freemen,” he told a cheering crowd of shopkeepers and workingmen on December 17, “that you are republican citizens, as well as Christian men, and that you have a duty to perform to the republic, as well as to your God, and to your families.” Long abused by the Rhett crowd for his ingenuous unionism, Perry in part was using Taber to settle scores. Yet he and others saw real danger here, too.

83 John B. O’Neall to Benjamin F. Perry, December 30, 1853, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH.

84 Although Taber’s alumni class intended to publish his speech, the uproar it caused derailed that plan. Charleston Courier, December 7, 1853. Different versions of Taber’s remarks appeared in newspapers on different dates in December, 1853. The most plausible summary of the argument appears in John B. O’Neall to Benjamin F. Perry, December 30, 1853, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH. For a text of the maudlin conclusion to Taber’s remarks, see J. Ward Hopkins Scrapbook, SCL.
Epitomizing “the dark ages of Europe and the iron rule of a feudal baron,” Perry thought, the villain’s remarks threatened the very framework of southern society.\(^{85}\)

The offended editorials Perry now unleashed harmed class harmony more than Taber’s rant ever could have. Other editors instantly chided Taber’s claims, seeking to stifle controversy at the outset. “We believe,” allowed Tom Warren’s *Camden Journal*, “the stern visaged artisan, who plies with unwavering diligence his daily task—the dusky browed smith, who wields his ponderous sledge—the honest yeoman, who plods the noiseless tenor of his way, pursuing the peaceful duties of agricultural life—that all these may become educated.”\(^{86}\) There were many pleading columns of like type. Serious though Taber’s blunder was, such blandishments promptly and publicly uttered might yet have healed the wounds he had caused. But Perry and a handful of Rhett-hating allies would not let the matter go.

Taber’s address was no youthful slip of the tongue, they declared, but the arrogant expression of “aristocratic tyranny” respectable Carolinians dealt with daily. On that basis, Perry declined to accept the challenge to duel Taber sent him: his response had criticized a strain of public policy, not personal honor. Twenty years earlier, Perry had killed another bravo. Plunking a second rich twit held no attraction, especially given Taber’s notoriously shaky claim to status. Indeed, Taber seemed to symbolize just how far South Carolina’s master class had fallen. “I detest the whole race of Aristocrats wherewith our State is infested,” O’Neall agreed, “whether they be *drunk or sober.*” Such charges painted the gentry as Taber’s co-conspirators, transforming his sin from a moment of personal excess to a polarizing episode in a pattern of

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\(^{86}\) *Charleston Courier*, January 4, 1854.
class oppression. Taber protested that he had been misunderstood, slandered, to no avail. When Perry’s cohort dared him to publish his speech, Taber pleaded that only “a crude manuscript” of his remarks was available, that he had criticized “the New England system” of schooling, not South Carolina’s, that he was wrongly persecuted. His foes would have none of it.

By December 15, outraged Columbia workingmen had rampaged through the streets to the legislature, burning Taber in effigy. “Scenes of riot and misrule” erupted in Charleston, with angry crowds milling outside the Mercury office, parading past the chivalry’s shuttered mansions, hanging Taber’s likeness, and pelting his home with rocks and filth. For a time, it appeared the mob might return with fire to finish their work. Police laid low. The following day, as Taber slipped off to the parishes for safety’s sake, moderates tried to defuse the controversy, without success. Rioters roamed the lower wards after nightfall, looking for opportunities to vent their rage. Honor’s order failed utterly.

And then respectability asserted itself. That, at bottom, was what Taber’s address had assailed: the likelihood that workingmen and petty shopkeepers could ever conduct themselves so as to benefit by education. On December 22, Mayor Thomas Hutchinson deputized more than 360 citizens to patrol the streets. Overwhelmingly, they were drawn from the ranks of the storekeepers and quill drivers Taber despised—men like his father—determined to protect their small property or slim salaries against lawlessness (Table 7.1). The next evening, Charleston mechanics rallied once more against Taber’s insult. But this time they demonstrated a different side, mounting a “large and very respectable meeting” at the Gravers’ Hall on King Street.

87 John D. Ashmore to L. L. Fraser and Thomas B. Fraser, January 28, 1854, Thomas Boone Fraser Papers, SCL; Kibler, Benjamin F. Perry, 307-308; Freehling, Prelude to Civil War, 252-253; John B. O’Neall to Benjamin F. Perry, December 30, 1853, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH; Charleston Courier, December 19, 1853.

88 Charleston Mercury, December 29, 1853; Charleston Courier, December 19, 29, 1853; Edgefield Advertiser, January 11, 1854; Kibler, Benjamin F. Perry, 306.
### TABLE 7.1

**OCCUPATIONS OF SPECIAL CONSTABLES, DECEMBER 1853**

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<th>Category</th>
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<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
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<td>57.06</td>
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<td>6.09</td>
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<td>74.76</td>
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<td>78.36</td>
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<td>2.22</td>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>361</td>
<td>100.00</td>
<td>99.98</td>
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*Sources: Charleston Mercury, December 26, 1853; Honour, ed., *A Directory of the City of Charleston and Neck for 1849*; Baggett, comp., *Directory of the City of Charleston, for the Year 1852*; Gazlay, comp., *The Charleston City and General Business Directory for 1855.**
Solemnly appointing committees and passing resolutions, the audience blasted Taber as the “ignoble… champion of aristocratic and tyrannical sentiments,” calculated “to sap the very foundation of true Democracy” in South Carolina. The chance of violence remained real here, but leaders channeled the meeting’s anger and held it in check. They dispatched a posse to the Mercury office to “request the attendance” of senior editor John Heart, who ran along prudently, addressing the crowd “in a felicitous style.”

“[I]n strong terms,” he championed education for the masses, offering no support or excuse for Taber’s conduct. Having precipitously parted with his partner’s policy, Heart hastened to deny aristocratic class ties as well. “[H]e was not only a mechanic but a working man,” Heart pleaded, promising to “use his best efforts to promote the cause of popular education,” and all but begging the crowd not to torch his press. These mild sentiments won “hearty approval” from his interrogators, who “freely absolve[d] him” from blame and let him scurry home. Clearly, they were alarmed by the rioting, too. Before Heart’s arrival, the meeting had rejected “harsh and imprudent means in manifesting our disapprobation.” Now after a few “laconic and pointed” speeches, the crowd went home to bed.

Peace was short-lived. The mechanics’ meeting was organized by the city’s respectable working class: shopkeepers, clerks, and journeymen, aiming to rise within the social order, not overthrow it. The bosses they bowed to daily guided their efforts—the factors and commission merchants who crowded the East Bay wharves, the attorneys of Broad and the wholesalers of Hayne, plus a solid phalanx of King Street shopkeepers, dockside builders, and black-coated

89 Charleston Courier, December 23, 1853.

90 Ibid. It was perhaps this experience which led Heart to join the Charleston Mechanic Society in September 1854. Constitution of the Charleston Mechanic Society, Instituted at Charleston, South Carolina, 1794 (Charleston, 1858), 37.
bankers, insurance agents and manufacturers. They rallied in the lower wards, sidestepping the “Neck Boys,” unskilled laborers, sailors, and freewheeling youths who caused much trouble.

On Christmas Day, wild rioting broke out again downtown. “[T]he scenes of reckless exposure of life and property which that day presented were never before witnessed in our city,” the Courier fretted. It was “a miracle that lives were not destroyed and the city wrapt in flames.” Long into that night, Mayor Hutchinson’s deputies battled disorder, and the memory remained for years to come.\textsuperscript{91} For some, it shaped political choices tangibly and immediately. For all, it made the threat of divisions Calhoun had warned against inescapably real.

As for Taber, he slunk home once the worst was over and went straight back to justifying his conduct. To local papers, he declared “surprise” at learning of mobs and meetings interested in his views. They were not his fault. Perry’s personal “hostility and bitterness” was “the single voice” which had raised all the ruckus. Bluntly, Taber denied expressing “objectionable sentiments” in the first place. “[D]isinterested gentlemen” backed him up, he declared, but opinion here was mixed. On December 31, as Charleston braced for another round of rioting, Taber published a formal version of his troublesome speech, calling for support. That concession quelled the mob, but could not save his reputation. Even this sanitized text took harsh ground against state-funded education of the poor. And Taber’s highhanded tone did nothing to allay charges of “aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{92}

Public discussion quickly devolved into bickering over the accuracy of the transcript. Few doubted that Taber’s real views were more reactionary. In mid-January, the Mercury

\textsuperscript{91} Charleston Courier, December 28, 1853. There seems to have been no idea that local slaves or free blacks would take part in this uproar, and no evidence that they did. The “exertions of our citizens and the police” suppressed most “nuisances” on Christmas Eve. Charleston Courier, December 26, 1853.

\textsuperscript{92} Charleston Courier, December 29, 31, 1853.
published a letter of support from a “large body” of Charleston “gentlemen,” but the damage was done. The 132 men who signed their names here were overwhelmingly commercial types: clerks and factors of the lower wards, plus a few planters from the parishes beyond. Craft workers, shopkeepers, tradesmen, and professionals were strikingly absent. King Street, Broad, and Hayne—the heart of Charleston’s emerging bourgeois culture—turned its face against him (Table 7.2). More generally, these two lists suggest that while men of honor split ranks in the controversy, proponents of respectability came down solidly against Taber’s elitist words. After all the political commotion had died down, when partisans proposed yet another public meeting to vindicate his name, the battered editor sensibly declined. “[T]he Public really have had enough of me and my Address,” Taber allowed.93 Honor’s advocates had taken a hard blow. The Rhett crowd was bruised. It was time to retreat.

Across the next three years, Charleston politics continued divided and bitter, and the blundering orator who had brought the Holy City to the brink of class war remained a polarizing presence. Politically, Taber was a dead man, still vocal and active, but notoriously unelectable. The Mercury’s influence waned and its finances turned grim. To Taber’s critics, the meaning of his misfortune was clear. Maintaining a united front was central to white Charlestonians’ social identity: those who broke ranks would suffer extreme sanctions. But Taber and his acolytes missed this melodramatic moral. Instead of bowing their heads, they bided their time, scheming vengeance. Only another collision between honor and respectability would draw Charleston back to the jeremiad’s path.94

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93 Charleston Mercury, January 10, 14, 1854; Edgefield Advertiser, January 11, 25, 1854.

94 Charleston Courier, January 2, 5, 7, 1854; (Columbia, SC), Daily South Carolinian, April 7, 1854; Charleston Mercury, February 23, July 7, 1856. For one attempt by Taber to dig himself out of the mess he had caused, see William R. Taber, The Harmony of Power and Law, the Basis of Republicanism; An Address Delivered before the Moultrie and Palmetto Guards, June 28th, 1856 in Hibernian Hall (Charleston, 1858). It had no noticeable effect on his fortunes. Needless to say, after Taber’s miscue, the conservative position on education reform was wrecked.
### TABLE 7.2
OCCUPATIONS OF TABER SUPPORTERS, DECEMBER 1853

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</tr>
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<td>Tradesmen</td>
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</table>

From 1854 onward, Taber’s troubles drew into his orbit an odd troupe of malcontents and men-on-the-make: intransigent secessionists, still chafing from the failures of 1851-52; cultural aristocrats, annoyed by the commercialism and crudeness of life in honor’s citadel; young hotspurs and self-admiring flash fellows, yearning for prominence and a leg up in the world; smug libertines, looking to tweak Charleston’s moralizing provincialism. The starry-eyed Rhett boys, brilliant ineffectuals like Paul Hayne, Fred Porcher, and William J. Grayson, contrarians such as the Charleston Standard’s Leonidas Spratt, and political benchwarmers like Frank Richardson, John Carew, and Andrew Burnet typified this misfit’s parade. But it was “Radical Jack” Cunningham—by common assent, “the most Byronic” of southern gentlemen—who bonded closest with Taber now, propelling him both by word and deed toward his final crisis.95

“Radical”? Son of the taciturn Laurens District Unionist leader Robert Cunningham, offspring of the hated Tory “Bloody Bill” Cunningham, John came by his unlikely nickname the hard way. In the 1840s, he had risen from run-of-the-mill planter’s son to promising lawyer in neighboring Abbeville. Both ambitious and snappish, he followed a little too closely the cues of his prickly kinsmen William Lowndes Yancey and Louis T. Wigfall.96 Eventually, he picked the wrong woman to seduce, trading rifle shots with a rival eager to win reputation and redress honor. In a short-term sense, Cunningham prevailed, sending a bullet through his enemy’s ear and neck before hundreds of onlookers, but the victory proved pyrrhic. After a year in jail for

95 Witness to Sorrow, ed. Calhoun, 14; Ralph B. Draughon, Jr., “William Lowndes Yancey: From Unionist to Secessionist, 1814-1852” (Ph. D. diss., University of North Carolina, 1968), 62. Taber’s membership in the Charleston Rifles linked him to Carew, Richardson, and others. Charleston Mercury, October 10, 1850. The common opinion of this crew was summed up in the caveat one respectable critic leveled against Richardson: “said to be smart, but I never perceived it. Wouldn’t suit me for bus[iness].” Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, 1: 408, R. G. Dun and Company Collection, Baker, HU.

96 On Wigfall, Yancey, and Cunningham as blood brothers, see Draughon, “William Lowndes Yancey,” 57-64; Joel Smith to Armistead Burt, October 17, 1843, John Cunningham to Louis T. Wigfall, March 2, 1843, March 4, 1844, E. P. Alexander to John Cunningham, March 31, 1844, John Cunningham to E. P. Alexander, March 31, 1844, all in Armistead Burt Papers, DU.
attempted murder, he decamped to Charleston, seeking a fresh start. Across the next two decades, his crippled sister upheld a measure of failed respectability, leading the movement to restore Mount Vernon and stumping for a monument to John C. Calhoun. Her unrepentant brother followed Yancey’s path further still, commandeering the Charleston Evening News and defying all comers. When Taber’s crisis came in 1853, Cunningham resisted temptation to join the mob calling for his head. Soon rival editors became fast friends, with Cunningham playing the elder-brother role Yancey had once served for him.

They were two peas in a pod. Each had risen in youth from questionable origins to a promising career by way of South Carolina College and the bar. Each had seen his fortunes derailed by scandal, endured purgatory, and rescued himself through the pen. Both were “good talker[s]” and “High liver[s],” with a taste for liquor, an eye for women, determination to make their names. Ten years older than Taber, and linked by blood, marriage, and fascination to the notoriously exiled duelist/politicians Yancey and Wigfall, Cunningham drew his admiring colleague to his peril in the same way Taber lured the young Rhetts. Each abhorred the political status quo in Charleston, aching to push back against the mob and its respectable

97 Louis T. Wigfall to Armistead Burt, April 7, 1844, Armistead Burt Papers, DU; Eric H. Walther, William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War (Chapel Hill, 2006), 70; Lowry P. Ware, Old Abbeville: Scenes of the Past of a Town Where Old Time Things Are Not Forgotten (Columbia, 1992), 46, 55-57; Gordon C. Rhea, Carrying the Flag: The Story of Private Charles Whilden, the Confederacy’s Most Unlikely Hero (New York, 2004), 87-89.

98 Barbara J. Howe, “Women in Historic Preservation: the Legacy of Ann Pamela Cunningham,” Public Historian, 12 (1990): 31-61; I. S. Snowden to Ann P. Cunningham, April 20, 1854, R. C. Gilchrist to Ann P. Cunningham, June 29, 1857, John Quinlin, Sr. to Ann P. Cunningham, May 3, 1858, all in Ann Pamela Cunningham Papers, SCL. In the spring of 1854, Taber achieved a “complete triumph” speaking before a meeting of Pam Cunningham’s Calhoun Monument Association in Greenville—an achievement which must have rankled Perry. (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, April 7, 1854. Few letters from either Taber or Cunningham have reached public repositories, but the bond between them is clear from William R. Taber, Jr. to John Cunningham, July 20, 1855, John Cunningham to William R. Taber, Jr., July 20, 1855, both in Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SHC.

99 R. G. Dun and Company Collection, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, 1: 411, Baker, HU; For the respectable version of Cunningham’s very unrespectable life, see (Spartanburg) Carolina Spartan, March 15, 1893, and the remarkable endorsement of the Edgefield Advertiser, October 15, 1856.
lieutenants. Conservative by nature, each embraced the creed of southern rights and the cause of secession. Abolition’s growing power shaped the columns they wrote, but the central concern and political purpose of their words struck closer to home. Only unyielding militancy, Cunningham and Taber agreed, could break the Broad Street Clique’s hold on local politics.

Across the 1850s, the Clique kept the peace—and power in their own hands—by sharing the spoils. Charleston politicians “differed on no important principles or purposes,” Will Grayson remembered. “The only matter in dispute was whether one or the other should control the power and emoluments of the city government.” Formerly, the poles of civic conflict had been the Mercury office where the honorable Rhett clan clustered, and the quarters of Petigru and King, Charleston’s most respectable law firm, short steps away on Broad. With the repudiation of Rhett’s revolution in 1852, however, and Taber’s disastrous speech the following year, moderates gained the upper hand.

Half the aldermen and legislators in Charleston had clerked under James L. Petigru and his partners, and few lawyers could afford to be on the outs with them. Politically, their watchword was stability, order and restraint, an ethic attracted the most powerful merchants, bankers, and entrepreneurs. At the core of the Broad Street Clique were men like Henry and Robert N. Gourdin, partners in the Gourdin, Matthiessen and Company factorage, Henry Conner, president of the Bank of Charleston and the South Carolina Railroad, and his son, James, U. S. District Attorney for South Carolina, George Trenholm, managing partner for John Fraser and

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100 The best study of state politics and the Mercury’s positions during this period remains Harold S. Schultz, Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 1852-1860 (Durham, 1950), 58-133.

101 Walter J. Fraser, Jr., Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City (Columbia, 1989), 210.

102 Laura A. White, “The Fate of Calhoun’s Sovereign Convention in South Carolina,” American Historical Review, 34 (1928-29): 757-771. By 1862, one socialite could describe the Rhett as “hitherto hated” by most of Charleston’s leading families. The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1865, ed. John F. Marszalek (Baton Rouge, 1994), 196. The city’s commercial class trumped that sentiment, not least because of Taber.
Company, the city’s leading commission merchant, and Isaac Hayne, the reptilian state Attorney General. Before his death in 1854, the group’s guiding spirit had been rough-hewn Ker Boyce, the jack-of-all-trades who began as a clerk in the piedmont and wound up a millionaire on the East Bay. Like most Clique members, Boyce had been a devoted Calhounist, and felt no scruples about using economic clout to further his conservative vision of South Carolina. “The interests of all classes of the community have been well cared for,” “Publicola” told the Courier in 1853. That was the highest praise Boyce and his crew could have wished for.103

Clique leaders usually assumed a secondary status or none at all, preferring to promote their favorites and direct the action from afar. “Such men neither need nor seek offices,” Robert Gourdin explained; “they can seize and improve opportunities and occasions” at their leisure. Boyce perfected this “wire-pulling” technique with his creature William Aiken, Charleston’s most prominent legislator in the 1820s, and his namesake son who rose to the governorship, Congress, and great wealth by reading cues carefully. In the 1850s, William Denison Porter was rewarded for his services as “a party man” with a string of posts ranging from the city attorneyship to the President’s chair in the state Senate.104 Charles Macbeth and Tom Simons, who helped deliver the working-class and ethnic vote, likewise owed their success to the Clique’s beneficence. They knew it, too, as did all of Charleston. Most of these men were moderates, after 1852 moving toward alliance with James L. Orr’s National Democratic faction,


but that juncture was impelled more by temperament than ideology. Across the 1850s, money triumphed over bloodlines, respectability over honor, greased palms over clean hands—order over conflict. First and foremost, that was the Clique’s political purpose.¹⁰⁵

Defeating the Clique meant dividing its supporters, pushing defense of southern rights to a point moderates dared not cross. Coupled with that strategy, Taberites looked to profit by the crisis their champion had unleashed. As poor whites and gabbling immigrants flooded into southern cities across the 1850s, men like “Long-Winded” Spratt prophesied doom. First “pauper labor” would strive to exclude slaves and free blacks from competition with whites. Soon enough, though, they would turn against slavery altogether.¹⁰⁶ How to control this swelling mob, bending it for virtuous purposes, focused radical argument. A class-based counter-gambit was their desperate ploy.

We err, then, in imagining the Mercury crowd of the mid-1850s as committed disunionists: apart from Rhett, few Charlestonians of consequence clung to that dream. What fueled radicalism, ironically, was dread of internal disunion, the growing sense that, without extreme measures, “democracy may gain a foothold” in the place “purest in its slave condition.” In the conflict between those systems of labor and politics, numbers could not be allowed to prevail. That had been the burden of Taber’s disastrous speech, the strategic lesson of the crisis he triggered. The same class-based concerns had shaped Calhoun’s final efforts to save the Union, and would ground James Hammond’s moderate “Mudsill Speech” to Congress in


1858. The trouble was, Taberites could never settle on a coherent policy to rally their state—certainly not without united leadership.

Political dissonance echoed from the clashing themes of Taber’s Mercury, Spratt’s Standard, and Cunningham’s Evening News across the period 1854-56, each paper pointing radicals in a different direction. Yet all stood against the business-as-usual tone of the Clique’s mouthpiece, the Courier. Anxious to draw attention beyond recent civic strife, Taber concentrated on the dangers of the Kansas-Nebraska Act (which doomed local hopes of anchoring a transcontinental railroad), the disgusting alliance of southerners with unprincipled northern Democrats, and the need to promote slavery in Kansas. Taberites assailed the fledgling National Democratic Party in South Carolina, accusing Clique men and leaders like Orr of giving southern rights short shrift in their haste to curry favor with Yankeedom. Enlarging slave territory would allow poor men to move west, acquire bondmen, and firm up the foundation of planter society.

While the Mercury demanded more land for slavery—and for supportive, hopeful, soon-to-be-slaveholding immigrants—the Standard urged more slaves for the land. Since, as reasonable men conceded, bondage benefitted master and servant alike, Spratt thought it foolish to shut the transatlantic slave trade. More blacks on the auction block meant more chances for middling men to join the master class, ultimately ending white waged labor—the source of political conflict—altogether. Meanwhile, Cunningham’s paper pursued an antithetic solution to working-class militancy, promoting the nativist American Party to disenfranchise the mob.

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108 Charleston Mercury, March 15, 1856; (Savannah) Daily Morning News, March 17, 1856; (Wakarusa, Kans.), Kansas Herald of Freedom, May 3, 1856. The best account of the uproar over Kansas appears in Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2: 61-84.
Strikingly, Taber’s *Mercury* advanced both Spratt and Cunningham’s arguments alongside its own.  

Equivocation—to the point of political whiplash, if need be—seemed central to uniting the Clique’s opponents. And public claims needed no close link to private aims. Radical Jack’s brief bid for political power proved that point clearly. From its first appearance in Charleston in the fall of 1854, all knew that Know-Nothingism was “a Trojan Horse,” but none could say for sure what lay inside. Where conservative “Hunkers” had fought proletarian “B’hoys” in the 1840s, Charleston nativists transformed class conflict of policy and purpose into a beguiling cultural politics of values and style. The American Party would know “no distinction of classes,” Cunningham promised. Yet the group declared itself as unique and distinctive as any volunteer association: Know-Nothings dressed differently—stovepipe hats became a proud symbol—spoke differently, insisted that they had been born differently. Democratic opponents embraced an ethic of personal merit, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or family history, but that “mob-o-cratric” creed only dragged Americanism into the gutter, Know-Nothings declared. Under their leadership, native-born, propertyholding citizens alone would wield the franchise. 

In Charleston, though, Americanism aimed less at revolutionizing the political order than holding back social forces that seemed bent on tearing their conservative world apart. Though Cunningham’s faction—“impatient men,” mostly, committed to drive disunion forward, or at

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111 Marchio, “Nativism in the Old South,” 42. Irish-born Andrew Magrath, for example, deliberately rolled his ‘r’s in public speech, to great effect. (Abbeville, SC) *Abbeville Medium*, May 7, 1907.
least raise their own standing—spouted endlessly about the “meanness, ignorance, prejudice and selfishness” of “foreign loafer[s], vagabond[s]” and “criminals” deciding every election, they were even more alarmed by the conflict Taber had unleashed. The irony was that Know-Nothingings’ vague list of enemies encouraged native-born—and aspiring immigrant—non-elites to embrace their crusade, and a measure of honor besides.112

Long before Know-Nothingism gelled in Charleston in October, 1854, Taber had been “honored with a place in its councils,” counting Cunningham’s cronies among his “warmest personal and political friends.” Yet the Mercury held nativists at arm’s length, fearful of rekindling the animosities of 1853. South Carolina Know-Nothings veered away from the abolitionism of northern cadres, and muted the anti-Catholic theme southern leaders shouted. Instead, they revised the critique Taber’s Columbia address had launched, seizing the high ground of honor against the low-born foes—immigration, drink, and corruption—Americans imagined were threatening their world. “Yes!” ‘Tell’ told the Mercury, “the land must and will be purged of the foul foreign influence” that finds its source in “the vile naturalization laws that make a cesspool at every magistrate’s door, and every election poll.” Taber resisted the movement’s embrace, declaring it “doomed,” but betrayed abundant signs of sympathy. Though he announced “for the hundredth time my opposition to Know-Nothingism” in the fall of 1855, in the next breath Taber promised to vote for nativist candidates on the ground of personal merit.113 The leopard’s spots were plain to see.

112 Holt, “Politics of Impatience,” 315-322; Entry of June 18, 1856, David Gavin Diary, SCHC. On the fractured character of Know-Nothingism, see especially Isaac W. Hayne to James Chesnut, July 15, 1855, Chesnut-Miller-Manning Papers, SCHS; William D. Overdyke, The Know-Nothing Party in the South (Baton Rouge, 1950); Brian E. Crowson, “Southern Port Cities and the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s” (Ph. D. diss., University of Tennessee, 1994), 135-185; Frank Towers, The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War (Charlottesville, 2004).

113 Charleston Mercury, January 13, November 3, 5, 1855. Notably, Taber’s name was absent from the call for a public meeting to organize opposition to Know-Nothingism in mid-August. (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, August 15, 1855.
Americanism had already jarred Charleston conservatives, electing Cunningham and two allies to the state legislature in October 1854, and winning the sheriff’s office for John Carew the next summer. But that was the limit of its success. In both cases, elections were bitter and factious, with serenaders terrorizing immigrants and shouting down the “foreign” and “Popish” candidates of Gourdin’s “Mongrel Party.” Immediately, respectable Charleston lashed out against nativists’ gains, targeting their paranoid platform as well as the group’s secret purposes, rituals, and membership. By the fall of 1855, Know-Nothings were in retreat all across the South. In Charleston’s civic elections in November, they swept the working-class Seventh Ward, and won more than forty percent of the vote across the Upper Wards. Yet the Clique’s hegemony and respectability’s rising power were affirmed. Broad Streeters shut out Cunningham’s candidates and, three days later, South Carolina’s Know-Nothings disbanded. The American Party’s collapse pushed radicals into direct confrontation with Charleston moderates. For Taber, the scars of 1853 had never healed. He and the rest of the Mercury camp remained embittered toward Orrites like Perry who had assailed them, and the Gourdins and Conners who had let the rioting and accusations go forward. He fumed as legislators pushed through sweeping educational reforms, each step a rebuke to his errant arguments. His resentment grew with the collapse of the Know-Nothing gambit and his own chronic failure to

114 Citizen, Three Letters on the Order of the Know Nothings, Addressed to the Hon. A. P. Butler (Charleston, 1855); Crowson, “Southern Port Cities and the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s,” 163-171. Fearing riots, Charleston Know-Nothings and their opponents agreed to special measures to preserve “quiet and good order” at the polls before the 1855 election. Charleston Mercury, November 5, 1855; Alfred Huger to Robert N. Gourdin, November 23, 1855; Robert Newman Gourdin Papers, EU; Schultz, Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 80.

115 Crowson, “Southern Port Cities and the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s,” 171-174. On the anti-Know-Nothing campaign, see Marchio, “Nativism in the Old South,” 43; Lawrence M. Keitt to Sue Sparks, May 30, October 22, 1855, Joseph Allison, et al., to Laurence M. Keitt, November 1, 1855, all in Laurence Massillon Keitt Papers, DU; Entry of August 24, 1855, James Foster Sloan Diaries, SCL; William H. Heyward to Louis Manigault, September 3, 1855, Theodore Barker to Louis Manigault, September 5, 1855, both in Louis Manigault Papers, DU; S. B. Cloud to Eldred Swearengen, August 25, 1855, John Eldred Swearengen Papers, SCL; Sophia Noble to Martha Burt, June 5, 1856, Armistead Burt Papers, DU.
gain office. He picked arguments with other editors and chastised Senator Andrew Pickens Butler for kowtowing to the North.¹¹⁶

Taber’s timing could not have been worse. Hard on the heels of the Mercury’s sniping, Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner singled out Butler for special abuse in a vituperative speech. That led South Carolina’s decidedly non-radical congressman Preston Brooks to avenge the insult to his kinsman (the ill and aging Butler was his uncle), colleague, and state by thrashing Sumner on the Senate floor. Taber surely winced. The bold strokes Brooks dealt abolitionism seemed almost to mock the editor’s honorable impassivity.¹¹⁷ All of Taber’s fine talk had added little to his power or reputation. But a short flurry of blows from Brooks’ cane had rallied the South and won him a paladin’s prestige. Likewise, Taber’s younger brother Albert’s selfless service to fever-ridden Norfolk the previous summer had gained more public acclaim—and did more to retrieve the family name—than a hundred defensive Mercury columns. In the spring of 1856, actions spoke louder. Come autumn, radical Will would be denied no more.¹¹⁸

In October, when a committee headed by Henry Gourdin nominated Judge Andrew Magrath for Congress, old animosities flared. Magrath was an Irish-born moderate, “very brilliant, spirited, and talented,” popular with the city’s working class, active in voluntary associations and the local militia, an intimate of Orr and a standard-bearer for the Broad Street

¹¹⁶ Edgefield Advertiser, April 16, May 28, 1856; Charleston Mercury, June 27, 1856.

¹¹⁷ The best brief analysis of the Brooks-Sumner affair is Freehling, Road to Disunion, 2: 79-84. See also William James H. Hoffer, The Caning of Charles Sumner: Honor, Idealism, and the Origins of the Civil War (Baltimore, 2010).

¹¹⁸ On the admirable and successful Albert Rhett Taber—who must have driven his elder brother mad—see Charleston Mercury, March 17, 1856, March 23, 1857; Chalmers G. Davidson, The Last Foray: the South Carolina Planters of 1860: A Sociological Study (Columbia, 1971), 253.
Clique. Taber seized his chance. In a series of scathing essays in the *Mercury*, “A Nullifier” launched into Magrath, attacking his “blighted ambition” and “bankrupt character.” Charleston was stunned both by the violence of the articles and the willingness of the paper to print them. Not only was Magrath a magistrate, and so unable to defend himself by recourse to the *code duello*. He was also absent from the city when the attacks appeared, nursing a wife dying of tuberculosis at Aiken. “Nullifier” struck a low blow, and, many felt, the *Mercury’s* editors were to blame.

Perhaps Taber believed he was merely evening the score with those who had injured him so badly three years before. Though their private relations had always been civil, Magrath was a natural enemy: common, foreign-born, moderate, and careful. Doubtless, Taber enjoyed nurturing “Nullifier”’s youthful exuberance, personally and politically reckless though it was. He had always found pleasure in such gambits. Perhaps, too, he was striving to keep up with the example of Brooks and his compatriot Cunningham. In mid-summer, when Jack had traded shots with the *Standard’s* junior editor over imagined libels, it had been Taber who stood second

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120 *Charleston Mercury*, September 24, 26, 29, 1856. The reference to a “bankrupt character” aimed to remind respectable readers of the “sort of a cloud around Magrath” that had lingered “for some years”: debt had driven him to insolvency early in his career. William P. Miles to Robert N. Gourdin, September 28, 1856, Keith Morton Read Collection, UGA. By 1855, even ardent supporters allowed that his “embarrassments shake confidence in him” among respectable folk. R. G. Dun and Company Collection, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, 1: 411, Baker, HU.

121 *Charleston Courier*, October 2, 1856. Part of Magrath’s attraction as a target was that he had led Charleston’s Irish Volunteers during the 1853 riots (with James Conner serving as lieutenant), doing little to rein in public disorder. *Charleston Courier*, September 1, 1854.

122 The contrast between these cordial private relations and Taber’s allowance of the attacks of “A Nullifier” made Ed Magrath livid. *Charleston Courier*, October 2, 1856.
for him, negotiating an honorable settlement, and sending him off—beyond the sheriff’s reach—to the Virginia springs. But here he was building his own coffin.

On September 26, acting through James Conner, Ed Magrath stepped into the role Brooks had played in Washington short months before, challenging both Taber and Heart for “insulting and libeling” his incapacitated brother. “You knew, in attacking… him,” Magrath declared, “you would be exempt from… personal accountability.” As Carolina’s champion had done with his cane on the Senate floor, so Magrath would teach the sneaking coward who slandered his brother a lesson he would not forget. For Taber, the jaws of honor’s trap snapped shut a second time, and held fast.

This time he did not, could not run—though it took Conner a full day to find him and deliver Magrath’s note. Instead, astoundingly, Taber sought shelter under respectability’s cloak—precisely as the despised Sumner had done--claiming responsibility for publishing the articles, yet posing as the defender of a free press. Worse, Taber trampled consistency in his haste to escape judgment. In the same breath that he denied his opponent’s right of challenge, the hunted turned hunter, demanding that Magrath resign his judgeship to fight him. “He has no

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123 Charleston Mercury, July 30, 1856; Charleston Courier, July 30, 1856; (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, July 31, 1856; Crowson, “Southern Port Cities and the Know Nothing Party in the 1850s,” 177. The Cunningham-Hatch duel drew notice as far away as New York. (Washington) Daily National Intelligencer, August 4, 1856; New York Herald, August 2, 1856.

124 Charleston Courier, October 2, 1856; Edward Magrath to John Heart and W. R. Taber, Jr., 26 September 1856, Papers re: Taber-Magrath Duel [file 247.01.01 (C)01], Conner Family Papers, SCHS.

125 Charleston Courier, October 2, 1856. This issue gives the fullest printed account of correspondence between the principals, and the seconds’ accounts of the negotiations on the dueling ground.

126 Edward Magrath to John Heart and W. R. Taber, Jr., 26 September 1856, William R. Taber, Jr. to Edward Magrath, September 27, 1856, both in Papers re: Taber-Magrath Duel [file 247.01.01 (C) 01], Conner Family Papers, SCHS. In the duel’s disastrous aftermath, radicals resurrected Taber as the defender of a free press, essentially to disguise the real dynamics of the affair—and to attack Magrath, Porter, and other Clique candidates as threatening democratic liberty, much as Taber had been denounced three years before. Charleston Mercury, October 10, 11, 13, 1856.
right to be a candidate,” Taber blared, “if he is to cease to be a man.” Those wounding words missed their apparent target by a country mile: Magrath had no knowledge of the “Nullifier” letters or the drama unfolding in Charleston, but the ricochet surely struck closer to home, perhaps as their author intended. On receipt of Ed Magrath’s note, Taber had turned to Cunningham, just returned from his Virginia sojourn, to stand as his second. But Radical Jack excused himself—refusing to reciprocate Taber’s act of friendship—because he was a candidate for the same seat Magrath was vying for.\(^\text{127}\)

Timing was everything in this social drama: since Magrath’s challenge did not reach Taber till late on Friday, and his note accepting the bid to duel did not pass out of his hands before Saturday afternoon, there was ample reason to think that the hostile meeting would never take place. No gentleman fought on the Sabbath, and by the time the combatants were to meet, late Monday afternoon, gossip would have spread the news widely. Surely someone would stop it.

Taber and his (second) second, Andrew Burnet, could not but have taken that chronology into account as they picked up the gauntlet: acting honorably, rooted in editorial respectability, what could go wrong, so long as the hero stuck to the script of his melodramatic role? As it turned out, almost everything.\(^\text{128}\)

First, Burnet got cold feet, dishonorably begging off from his duties early Sunday morning. Meanwhile, out on Sullivan’s Island, young Edmund Rhett got wind that his patron...
and co-conspirator on the “Nullifier” letters was soon to trade shots. Rhett sent Ike Furman, a still more minor Taberite, hurtling by rail to Aiken “with a view of preventing the collision between our mutual friends”—by challenging Magrath directly. He reached the careworn judge mid-afternoon Sunday after a journey of 120 miles, delivered Rhett’s demand to the astounded man, and waited fruitlessly for an answer till the 11:00 p.m. train to Charleston boarded. Nothing was settled, yet he came away with words which should have saved Taber’s life. Though the duel was “entirely beyond my control,” Magrath declared—the work of vengeful men seeking “to hunt me to the death”—“[o]n no account” should it proceed before he returned on the Monday afternoon express. Once he reached Broad Street, Magrath would answer Rhett’s note.129

Next morning, when weary Furman delivered Magrath’s letter to the prominent lawyer and Clique lieutenant Ben Carroll, the impending crisis was “known throughout the city.” Yet no one seemed to expect the horrid plans to actually come off. “Magistrates knew them, conservators of the peace knew them, and pious men, and even clergymen, were as well acquainted with the facts as the parties interested.” Indeed, weeks later, Carroll protested that he had done “all, consistent with the honor of the parties concerned, to arrest the duel.” But Magrath had not told Furman of his wife’s grave illness, and Carroll never told the Taber camp that Magrath was on his way.130 As the hours passed, affairs ground on to disaster.

Most disastrously, that morning Jack had stepped back into the honorable vacuum left by the retreating Burnet, goaded no doubt by Taber’s allusion to unmanliness.131 By mid-afternoon,

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129 Fitzsimons, “Hot Words and Hair Triggers,” SCHS; Charleston Mercury, September 28, October 4, 1856; Charleston Courier, October 4, 1856; New York Herald, October 4, 1856.

130 Charleston Courier, October 6, 1856; Charleston Mercury, October 6, 1856.

131 While Magrath’s side seems to have expected Taber to back down, Cunningham would have none of it. So, too, old Alfred Huger refused to counsel delay. “[D]on’t diplomatize,” he warned. “You have given a challenge[,] they
he had located pistols, bucked up his champion’s courage, and bustled him into a carriage headed up King Street toward the dueling ground. Taber could but go along. Some of the crowd which saw them passing must have murmured, too, that Cunningham had little incentive to stop the gunfight, since Taber’s pistol offered his best chance for winning the seat Magrath contested. Instead of confronting Cunningham—and risking a challenge or humiliating dismissal—a train of carriages and riders trailed Taber’s coach north at a distance, each honorable man expecting the other to intervene.\textsuperscript{132}

Gray skies and midday showers had promised to postpone the hostile meeting, but that hope vanished as afternoon clouds cleared. Near sunset, the antagonists met at the Washington Race Course, accompanied by seconds, a surgeon, and several well-armed onlookers. Still hoping to avert bloodshed, Taber’s protégé, Edmund Rhett, again claimed authorship of the offensive letters. But the editor’s fingerprints were all over those lines, and he did not deny his role.\textsuperscript{133} Even then, most expected a single shot to satisfy the debt of honor.

Again, it did not turn out that way. At the first exchange, both men missed, perhaps deliberately, though neither would yield or apologize. More ominous, as the crack of pistols echoed over neighboring wards, no magistrate or constable, no high-minded citizen stepped forth to stop the killing. Honor’s votaries here betrayed their impotence, relying disastrously on respectability to police their defining ritual.

\textsuperscript{132} \textit{Charleston Courier}, September 1, 1856. Gossip said that the duel attracted at least fifty spectators. “This beats bull-fighting all hollow,” quipped one northern paper. \textit{Boston Daily Atlas}, October 7, 1856.

\textsuperscript{133} John Heart told Henry Gourdin what everyone already believed, “that Taber was the author of the articles,” not Edmund Rhett. More than this, “nowhere has Mr. Taber denied the authorship” which “internal evidence” abundantly proved. James Conner, undated statements, Papers re: Taber-Magrath Duel [file 247.01.01 (S)01-01, (S)01-02], Conner Family Papers, SCHS.
After a brief consultation, Magrath and Taber fired again, still without effect. Now Dr. John Bellinger intervened, pressing Conner and Cunningham to reach a settlement. They argued over terms for nearly an hour, while the sun dipped low and the adversaries stood rooted to their positions, still expecting respectable outsiders—or twilight—to intervene, unable to decide who should apologize for what. With each passing minute, tempers rose. Alfred Rhett brandished a pistol and made menacing remarks. Finally there was no avoiding a third exchange, and this time Taber fell, shot between the eyes. At twenty-eight, he died on the spot, a martyr to the perils of class division, and a warning to those who refused to make common cause with their neighbors. The centrality of melodrama and the power of the jeremiad were affirmed once more.

Taber’s death threw Charleston into a renewed frenzy for internal unity, a terror and hatred of difference, division, and self-seeking. His funeral the next day crowded elite St. Philip’s Episcopal Church “with an assemblage, drawn together by a common feeling of respect and affection,” which exploded in anger as soon as his “shining talents” were laid to rest.

Conner, Cunningham, and their pals were blasted for mismanaging the “lamentable and indeed

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135 The details of the duel are fully recounted, with much recrimination, in *Charleston Courier*, September 27-30, October 1-6, 1856; “The Charleston Duel,” *Spirit of the Times*, 30 (2 February 1861): 625; Fitzsimmons, “Hot Words and Hair Triggers”; Hudson, *Journalism in the United States*, 403-406; James Conner correspondence October-December 1856 [file 247.01.01 (C)01], Papers re: Taber-Magrath Duel, Conner Family Papers, SCHS. Copies of most of the Conner correspondence, along with statements by James J. Pettigrew, and a useful scrapbook of newspaper clippings treating the duel’s aftermath are found in James Johnston Pettigrew Papers, NCDAH. The fullest—though perhaps most embellished—narrative of the duel appeared in North Carolina’s *Weekly Raleigh Register*, November 19, 1856.

136 *Charleston Mercury*, October 1, 1856, September 30, 1857. Two months later, honorable partisans urged the erection of a monument to Taber in downtown Charleston, but respectable forces scotched that notion. (Savannah) *Daily Morning News*, November 29, 1856.
dreadful” contest, which violated Wilson’s Code on a dozen points, and should never have come to that final shot. They turned on each other, shielding wrecked reputations, waving pistols, threatening revenge. Yet all knew that no sequel could redress the tragedy. Its outcome was too theatrically flawed and politically dreadful, James Petigru noted cynically.

It was a disastrous event; the end disappointed everybody. If [Taber] had killed Magrath, all would have been well. It would have swelled the public sympathy into an immense vote for his brother, who would have gone to Congress, and Taber, poor fellow, would have been a sadder and a wiser man for the rest of his life. But the catastrophe did not wait for the proprieties of the drama, and made everything wrong. That is the entanglement; not that the difficulties of the plot were so great… or that there was any necessity that one man should die, or that poor Taber should owe his life to a concession, which he did not love his life enough to make, but that, they none of them took into consideration the great risk of the wrong man being killed.

“Drama”? “Plot”? “Disappointed”? Petigru’s letter is part political analysis, part theatre review, a critique of a melodramatic performance gone awry. The problem with Taber’s death, it seemed to say, was that respectability had triumphed—all too honorably.

Taking a broader view, or seeing a broader opportunity, others widened the critique. Dueling and honor itself came under respectable rebuke. Charleston’s Catholic Miscellany expressed “Christian horror” at Taber’s death. “Ask ninety-nine men in a hundred what honor is and they can give no intelligible answer,” Will Grayson declared.

The direct tendency of this law, or principle of honor, is to produce and foster in society, a factitious sentiment of personal dignity, a morbidly sensitive self-love, a

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137 Charleston Courier, October 6, 1856, January 21, 1857; Charleston Mercury, December 12, 1856. A convenient summary of this finger-pointing appears in Wilson, Carolina Cavalier, 95-96. As northern newspapers noted, Cunningham’s attempt to justify the conduct of the duel exploded claims that it constituted a wrongful attack on the freedom of the press. New York Herald, November 16, 1856.


139 Charleston’s women struck several telling blows against honor at this moment, for rather different reasons. See, e.g., Susan P. King, “A Man of Honor,” Harper’s Monthly Magazine, 19 (1859): 224-236. One origin of this story—written by the respectable daughter of James L. Petigru—may well have been John Cunningham, who followed up the dueling debacle by squirming out of a rape charge the following year. “Jack is ruined anyhow, and deserves his fate,” declared Barnwell Rhett. Robert B. Rhett to Edmund Rhett, November 22, 1857, Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers, SHC.
promptness to take offence, a readiness to avenge slight injuries, a false reputation for elevation of character, a false shame, inordinate pride, a distorted standard of right and wrong, of civilization and refinement.\textsuperscript{140}

Instead of binding the society of gentlemen together, honor and its mechanism of redress threw all into anarchy and disorder, transgressing Christian precepts, moral standards, and the public good.

In sermon after sermon, the clergy assailed the \textit{code duello}.\textsuperscript{141} To Arthur Wigfall--brother of the notorious duelist Louis--dueling promoted “an aristocracy of crime,” not a society of honor. “It is cowards that keep up dueling,” Rev. John Adger agreed. “We stand ready to cheer on every man who strikes a blow against that bloody monster.” Charleston especially required change.

We believe Charleston to be forever disgraced before men, and to be also guilty before God, not only because such crimes are committed with impunity within her bounds, but also especially because in the recent case, at least fifty reputable citizens must have known beforehand that the duel was coming on, and yet not one caused the parties to be arrested.

For Adger, the answer was communal reform and moral regeneration. Others advocated the formation of anti-dueling societies, the passage of stricter laws and anti-dueling pledges to be


\textsuperscript{141}There had been earlier critiques of dueling—Wilson’s codification was the most famous—but these belonged to a generation firmly rooted in the ethos of honor. Nathaniel Bowen, \textit{Duelling, Under Any Circumstances, the Extreme of Folly: A Sermon; Preached October—1807, in St. Michael’s Church, Charleston (Charleston, 1823); Robert Henry, A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of Edward P. Simons, Esq., and Archy Mayson, Esq., Late Members of the House of Representatives of the State of South Carolina; Delivered in the Representatives’ Chamber, On Sunday, 7th December 1823 (Columbia, 1823); John England, “Address on the Origin and History of the Duel, Delivered before the Anti-Dueling Society of Charleston, S. C., in the Cathedral of Charleston, 1828,” in \textit{The Works of the Right Reverend John England, First Bishop of Charleston}, 7 vols., ed. Sebastian G. Messmer (Cleveland, 1908), 7: 425-449; William H. Barnwell, \textit{The Impiety and Absurdity of Dueling. A Sermon Preached in St. Peters’ Church, Charleston, on the 9th Day of June 1844} (Charleston, 1844).
taken by political candidates. Soon the citizenry took up the refrain in the Courier and the Mercury. But the problem Taber’s death posed went deeper than this, all knew. “It is a satire sharper than the edge of Juvenal,” Edwin Winkler told Charleston Baptists, “to argue that what presumes to be called the best society, must be kept in order by the frequent or occasional use of pistols.” A different basis of unity would have to be found.

Ironically, that respectable quest and the renewed strength of the jeremiad coalesced in a deeper faith in factional politics and party discipline. Instead of dissolving the city’s warring camps and cliques, Taber’s death increased their power and sense of purpose. Just as voluntary associations linked like-minded men, partisans argued, political combinations harnessed for the common good might overcome the internal divisions Charlestonians so feared. The trouble was, melodrama had done its work too well: each group believed in its own altruism and the villainy of its opponents too firmly to seek common ground. This Manichean strain appeared prominently even before Taber was cold in the grave. At a public meeting at South Carolina Institute Hall on October 6, leaders of the Broad Street Clique affirmed their faith in Magrath’s good character, urging him to reconsider his decision to withdraw from the congressional race in the wake of the tragic duel. Socially and politically, that was impossible, of course. The meeting’s real purpose was to unify the faction and to declare “No Compromise” with its foes.


143 Edwin T. Winkler, Dueling Examined; A Sermon delivered in the First Baptist Church of Charleston, on Sunday Morning, Jan. 18, 1857 (Charleston, 1857), 18-19. Honorable attempts to parry respectable thrusts were pitifully weak. Charleston Mercury, November 6, 1856. This may explain why respectability’s advocates offered few of the melodramatic details of Taber’s death which so devastated honor’s advocates elsewhere. Cf. Irina Reyfman, “Death and Mutilation on the Dueling Site: Pushkin’s Death as a National Spectacle,” Russian Review, 60 (2001): 72-88.
A month later, the Clique’s handpicked replacement, William Porcher Miles, won election handily.¹⁴⁴

Miles had already figured in the Clique’s machinations, though more as pawn than player. Tall, handsome, and of a slightly rakish temperament, he was appointed Professor of Mathematics at the College of Charleston in 1843 at age twenty-one, laboring there quietly for the next twelve years. By 1849, his talents and erudition had brought him to the public eye, and a Fourth of July address served as his political coming-out. Against northern aggression, he urged, southerners needed to “act and feel as one man,” purging dissenters and using their combined power to control their fate at Washington. That was music to the ears of Calhounist moderates, but for Miles politics remained a purely intellectual exercise. Like his friend and fellow scholar William Trescot, he was happiest observing and analyzing. Practical action seemed outside his sphere.¹⁴⁵

 Appropriately, Miles’ political testament, *Republican Government not Everywhere and Always the Best; and Liberty not the Birth Right of Mankind*, was delivered to the Alumni Society of his college in 1852, not to some political rally. It was a tellingly conservative and insular statement, making no mention of the North, slavery, or sectional conflict. Instead, Miles concentrated on the struggle between “Mind” and “Brute force” in modern life and its impact on his own city. It took no more than a stroll down King or along East Bay to see that “Freedom of Thought, Freedom of Action, and Freedom of the Press” had “run riot, until they often degenerate into the grossest License and… in consequence, the widest field lies open for sowing the seed of every hurtful weed of Doctrine.” Listen to the foreign chatter in wharfside taverns,


see the strange parade of faces in the streets, and it was clear that the American “nationality is daily diluted” and weakened. Perhaps “the Bad” would “gradually vitiate and corrupt the whole.” The land of liberty—especially its cities—was in danger of “becoming a sort of Lazar-House for all the Social and Political Diseases of Europe.”

For snivy Miles, the political problem and its solution were equally clear.

[T]he truckling in so many of our larger cities to what is openly and unblushingly called ‘The Foreign Influence,’ and the attendant Bribery and Corruption which mark their municipal elections, are tending not only to denationalize us as a Nation, but to degrade us as a People, and it behooves the Educated and Intelligent Classes at once to interpose their influence, and say authoritatively that these things shall no longer be.

Respectable men must stand up for their principles, Miles declared. “POLITICAL LIBERTY… is not an Inalienable Right, but an Acquired Privilege.” Only those blessed with “Intelligence, Virtue and Patriotism” should be permitted to enter the public forum. Without this bar, government must soon slide “into an absolute Democratic Despotism in the hands of a Numerical Majority!”

As this astonishing speech suggests, Miles would have gotten on famously with Will Taber, had his politics been a little less nationalist, or made a marvelous Know-Nothing, were he less squeamish about the rough-and-tumble of local affairs. Instead, Miles touched off a public debate with John Cunningham in October 1854 by suggesting that legislative elections were rigged. Should “places of honor and trust… be open to the highest bidder?” he asked.

Be put at auction, like so much merchandise, and be notoriously conferred by the united influence of secret and irresponsible cliques who stab in the dark—the votes of dead men who have been rotting for weeks at Magnolia [Cemetery]—and the wretched drove of Elliott-street cattle, whom we have seen driven from poll to

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147 Miles, Republican Government not Everywhere and Always the Best, 11, 15, 23.
poll like oxen to the shambles?... If so, let us shorten the process, and cast aside
the humbug of an empty form. Let writs be issued to the “Kings of Elliott-street,”
and the Chiefs of irresponsible Political Associations, and let them send whom
they list to our Legislative Halls. This will be more straight-forward and manly—
far less degrading—than the present mode of open buying and selling, truckling,
maneuvering and equivocating.

Having tallied more votes in the contest than any other candidate, Cunningham took offense at
Miles’ remarks, demanding a public statement that “Bribery and Corruption” were not imputed
to him. Of course the system was crooked; everyone knew that. But Radical Jack bought no
votes, to be sure! And precedent offered absolution, in any case: vote-buying had “been so
often and long set by men of high character, or party organizations of acknowledged dignity, that
the practice has become too broadly regarded as either a necessity, or fair game, for the
opprobrium of dishonor, treason or infamy to be fairly attached to it.”

Unlike headstrong Taber, egghead Miles was not the sort to get shot in a duel. The
professor’s reply never quite rejected the implications of his earlier letter, but it did acknowledge
Cunningham’s “friendly consideration” and hoped to “remove all ground of complaint.” That
vague concession avoided gunplay and portrayed Miles as man of integrity. The following
summer, when he risked his life alongside Taber’s white-sheep brother Albert, nursing the sick
of Norfolk in a yellow fever epidemic, Charleston cheered Miles’ selflessness and bravery once
more. He had become the Queen City’s White Knight, upholding the values and virtues it
claimed to cherish most.

The Broad Street Clique could hardly miss such a chance. Who better to stem disunion,
unify Charleston, and spearhead reforms to bind the rollicking Neck and the lower wards

148 Charleston Mercury, October 18, 19, 1854. Miles was hardly the first to make such charges. Cf. “Letter on

149 Charleston Mercury, October 18-21, 1854.
together? Even before Miles had left Norfolk, Gourdin, Conner, and company nominated him for mayor. They accomplished his election on the strength of a brief speech and a host of tricks he might have found “notorious.” In this case, worthy ends might justify shady means. Immediately on taking office, Miles launched a sweeping program to reverse what he called the “desocialization” of Charleston. 150

First Miles moved to win back the city’s public space from the rabble, passing restrictive ordinances on land usage and public order, hiring extra street sweepers, upgrading drainage and sewerage. He promoted new gas lighting for the lower wards. Most important, he replaced the patronage-ridden City Guard with a modern police force. His Bulldogs never lacked for detractors, but by 1860 there had been no repeat of the rioting Will Taber had sparked. As all knew, controlling class conflict between the upper and lower wards was the key role and political purpose of Miles’ police. In this, they were eminently successful. 151

But how to pay for that progress? Charleston’s accounts were badly in the red by 1855, and though the local economy was growing, that was based more on easy credit than capital accumulation. Miles funded his police by slashing the budget for fire protection—not a popular or prudent move, given the political clout of Charleston’s volunteer fire companies. To balance the books and pay for other reforms, he rejigged the tax system, with Robert Gourdin’s guidance. In fiscal terms, his policy was sound and conservative. Socially, it stank. At the Four Corners, his levies seemed stiff but “eminently fair.” North of Citadel Square, the numbers looked


crooked. Masters and merchants got away with only token fees on their property, while the lower wards they dominated won the lion’s share of improvements tax hikes funded. When Miles stepped down from office—or rather, was boosted up, by the Clique, to a seat in Congress—in October 1857, Charleston’s streets were a little cleaner and better patrolled, and its bottom line a little brighter perhaps, but the dream of civic unity was farther off than ever before. The failure of Miles’ administration was shown first in the mayoral election of 1857, as the upper wards stood solidly against his chosen successor. Indeed, analysis of balloting for the General Assembly in Charleston between 1854 and 1860 shows that splits between the upper and lower wards actually widened (tables 7.3-7.6). Various neighborhoods promoted their own slates of candidates for office, as did merchants, propertyholders, militia and fire companies, ethnic groups, and “Young Charleston.” Coalition tickets were still proposed, and every interest reached out to others to broaden its appeal, but increasingly men geared slates toward divisive bloc voting. More “Working Men’s” and “Democratic Mechanic” tickets were offered, with great success, and by 1858, the city’s proletariat was holding worrisome rallies downtown on election eve to anoint its favorites. Jack would show himself as good as Radical Jack, and more potent, too.153

Voting also showed divisions within Charleston society. By 1856, the custom of voting particular tickets was well established, shaping local outcomes. Four years later, those

152 Miles, Mayor’s Report on City Affairs; [Robert N. Gourdin, et al.], The Disabilities of Charleston for Complete and Equal Taxation, and the Influence of State Taxation on her Prosperity; also, an Examination of the Measure of Mr. James G. Holmes, For the Liquidation of the Debt of the City, with the Ordinance Adopting the Same; Being Reports of the Committee of Ways and Means, Made to the City Council of Charleston, April, 1857 (Charleston, 1857); Mitchell King to Robert N. Gourdin, October 12, 1857, Robert B. Rhett to Robert N. Gourdin, October 13, 1857, William P. Miles to Alfred Huger, November 10, 1857, Mitchell King to Robert N. Gourdin, October 12, 1857, all in Robert Newman Gourdin Papers, EU. By 1859, local taxes had become an even more serious cause of internal division. See Charleston Courier, May 31, 1859; Tax Payer, To the Citizens of Charleston and All Who Have Her Interests at Heart [Charleston, 1859].

153 Charleston Mercury, November 3, 1853, October 10, 12, 1854, November 6, 8, 9, 1855, October 17, 1856, November 4, 1857, October 11, 1856; Charleston Courier, October 14, 1858, November 2, 1859.
TABLE 7.3
VOTER SUPPORT BY WARD, 1854 GENERAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION

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<th>Wd4</th>
<th>Wd5/6</th>
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*Source: Charleston Mercury, October 17, 1856*
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<td>47</td>
<td>590</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Symons</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>458</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Charleston Mercury, October 11, 1860
tendencies were stronger than ever, especially in the upper wards (tables 7.7-7.8). Money and prestige south of Calhoun squared off against sheer numbers north of it. To preserve communal power, men of the Neck focused on ticket voting and parading to the polls *en masse*. Citizens of the lower wards fought back by manipulating the nominations process, buying all the votes they could, and intimidating supporters of rival candidates. By 1860, corruption—or “Calhounery,” as it was called—was as widespread as ever. New, though, was the way bribery had configured with the jeremiad. To promote unity through the victory of one’s faction, all manner of subterfuge was acceptable. To defeat the corruption of opponents, any measure was laudable. It was a xenophobic, self-deceiving, socially explosive credo.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Franklin Gaillard to James J. Pettigrew, October 18, 1858, Robert F. W. Allston to James J. Pettigrew, October 21, 1858, James J. Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, October 24, 1858, all in Pettigrew Family Papers, SHC.
TABLE 7.7
TICKET VOTING, 1860 GENERAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION
“WISE AND PRUDENT MEN” TICKET

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Wd 1</th>
<th>Wd 2</th>
<th>Wd3</th>
<th>Wd4</th>
<th>Wd5/6</th>
<th>Wd7/8</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td>54.8</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>39.8</td>
<td>41.1</td>
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<tr>
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<td>56.4</td>
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<td>50.6</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J. J. Pope</td>
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<td>35.2</td>
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<td>45.4</td>
<td>40.9</td>
<td>52.4</td>
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<td>34.9</td>
<td>52.1</td>
<td>47.2</td>
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<td>23.7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>38.2</td>
<td>44.8</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| All Candidates             | 44.00| 47.91| 41.45| 47.38| 36.48 | 40.79 | 43.09 |
| Elected Candidates         | 49.83| 53.12| 49.07| 54.24| 42.57 | 52.14 | 50.73 |

*Source: Charleston Mercury*, October 11, 1860.
### TABLE 7.8

**TICKET VOTING, 1860 GENERAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION**

**“ANTI-CLIQUE TICKET”**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Wd 1</th>
<th>Wd 2</th>
<th>Wd3</th>
<th>Wd4</th>
<th>Wd5/6</th>
<th>Wd7/8</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
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<td>71.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. P. Lining</td>
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<td>19.1</td>
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<td>14.1</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>15.7</td>
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<td>36.2</td>
<td>27.6</td>
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<td>W. S. Elliott</td>
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<td>46.4</td>
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<td>34.9</td>
</tr>
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<td>55.6</td>
<td>49.5</td>
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<td>David Ramsay</td>
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<td>59.2</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| All Candidates          | 42.28| 40.58| 36.37|41.88|39.04 | 48.69 | 41.36 |
| Elected Candidates      | 43.27| 45.33| 43.48|51.30|45.54 | 59.33 | 48.98 |

*Source: Charleston Mercury, October 11, 1860.*
CHAPTER EIGHT:
CARRY OUT THE GREAT DRAMA

There was no going back, Congressman John Durant Ashmore told Ben Perry, explaining why upcountry moderates had abandoned opposition to disunion in the weeks following Lincoln’s election. Privately, foot-draggers spoke of the shift as suicide—"felo de se," James Hammond called it—yet Ashmore mixed fatalism with a bitterly triumphant streak of schadenfreude. "[T]he deed is done, the die is cast," and the Union already sundered in spirit if not yet in fact. Like his powerful patron Larry Orr, Ashmore had been "driven" since the events at Harper’s Ferry, "in spite of myself," toward the party of crisis. "My very soul shrank with disgust & contempt from some [of those] men," he allowed. Yet he grew grimly elated to see radical loudmouths "trembling in their shoes… to find that Orr & myself were ready for action."¹

Extremists expected moderates "to crotch the wheels—to put on the breaks & then as heretofore to abuse us as submissionists." Not this time. When serenaders confronted the congressman at a Columbia hotel, he "responded in a very definite, decided" appeal for disunion. "It did me good to see them tremble & quake," Ashmore declared. Those who had "clamoured" so often for secessionist unity could have it now—and choke on it.² The world would find out soon enough who was resolute and who would flinch.

After independence, unsurprisingly, the tide turned back. Did separation mean that Washington would no longer deliver his mail, a shocked Ashmore asked timidly? It meant that--

¹ Lawrence T. McDonnell, “Struggle against Suicide: James Henry Hammond and the Secession of South Carolina,” Southern Studies, 22 (1983): 109-137; John D. Ashmore to Benjamin F. Perry, November 19, 1860, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH. For radical doubts that the statements Orr and his cronies made in support of secession could be trusted, see Charleston Mercury, October 30, 1860.

² (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, November 14, 1860; John D. Ashmore to Benjamin F. Perry, November 19, 1860, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH.
in spades—came the reply, and much more besides. But by then, as the reluctant revolutionary said, the damage could not be undone.

In its complex, confused interplay of purpose—self-destructive vengefulness, self-deceiving fatalism, catastrophic brinksmanship, and more—Ashmore’s response to Lincoln’s election epitomizes the careening course of moderates on the other side of the state, in the conservative citadel of Charleston. Enmeshed in the coils of the South Carolina jeremiad, alive to the warring dictates of honor and respectability’s codes, accustomed to the melodramatic performance of political relations and social identity, ever seeking the main chance, men hurrahed for the secessionist cause, hoped mostly it would never come to that, and fell into line. As play and performance, subversion and commerce, disunion overwhelmed the men who made it.

In the first days of November, the whole city seemed alive with symbolic secession, ambiguous, limited, disconnected, but cumulatively powerful. For radicals, the danger was that the state would fall back on a “cooperationist” course, or do nothing at all. Moderates—and covert Unionists, too—urged the need for cooperation with other southern states, or following the lead of an Alabama or Georgia. But combination would fizzle, fire-eaters believed, and no other state would lead the way. Every day that disunion was delayed put South Carolina in greater peril, and lessened the chance that any action would be taken at all. “[C]hock the wheels of this great enterprise,” radicals warned, “produce confusion, distrust, trouble and disgust, and you inaugurate a policy of reaction that must jeopardize the result, sowing the seeds of division

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3 Horatio King, Turning On the Light: A Dispassionate Survey of President Buchanan’s Administration from 1860 to its Close, Including a Biographical Sketch of the Author, Eight Letters from Mr. Buchanan Never Before Published, and Numerous Miscellaneous Articles (Philadelphia, 1895), 48-49.
and paralysis amongst the people and States of the South." At the end of October, Governor Gist called the legislature into special session to authorize a secession convention in case of Republican victory. When that crisis materialized, Charleston radicals scrambled to avoid further debate and delay. They succeeded, but revealed a host of internal divisions in the process, pointing up how hard it was to separate genuine separatism from the temporizing fakery of their opponents.

Unsurprisingly, the Clique took the lead in responding to Lincoln’s triumph, not the hot-headed Rhett crowd. News of the crisis reached South Carolina late on November 6. The next morning, Robert Gourdin, grand jury foreman in Charleston’s federal court, declined to make presentments to what he now deemed a “hostile” authority. Presiding Judge Andrew Magrath and District Attorney James Conner likewise resigned their positions in protest, effectively beheading federal justice in the state. Down at the U. S. Customs House, William Colcock quit his post as Collector of the Port rather than assess tariffs which could only benefit “the enemies of my country.” Within hours, that quartet of unlikely rebels had been transformed into local heroes, and the tableau vivante of the enraged Magrath rending his robes of office became the stuff of legend.

But the Clique could never fully guide the course of events. The quittings they enacted were cathartic performances, melodramatic disclosures of character, not political events. They

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4 *Charleston Mercury*, December 5, 1860.

5 Any treatment of these men’s motives is necessarily adductive. Only Colcock left any sort of correspondence or memoir dealing with this moment, and his postwar autobiography is silent on questions of motivation. But he was notoriously close-calculating (and financially hard-pressed), badly burned by radicalism in the crisis of 1850-52. By 1860, he had learned his lesson: stick close, but stay ready to jump clear. See William Ferguson Colcock Autobiography, SHC; William F. Colcock to John Colcock, [1850; misfiled as November 22, 1851]; January 22, 1853, William F. Colcock to Mary W. H. Colcock, February 20, 1850, June 9, 1851, William F. Colcock to Emmeline Colcock, n. d. [April 1860], Colcock Family Papers, TU.

6 *Charleston Mercury*, November 8, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, November 8, 1860.
looked toward no practical action, and were essentially self-contained. They could not prompt Alfred Huger, the Unionist postmaster, to follow their lead, nor did they inspire other Carolinians to break ties with Washington. Indeed, naval officer John Laurens told the *Mercury* that he saw “neither wisdom nor patriotism” in giving up his commission just yet. Likewise, Edward White, chief architect at the new Federal Customs House going up on East Bay, declared himself ready to resign at the pleasure of the state, but now he “considered it unnecessary”—that is, unprofitable—“to obtrude myself upon the public.”

Like most, these men recognized the long odds against disunion actually coming off.

We may question, too, just what Magrath and his fellows meant by their action. They would be replaced by the incoming Republicans within a few months. Did their resignations aim at more than simply playing at secession, and thereby holding more rabid disunionists in check? There is little reason to think so. For men so alert to the pulse of public affairs, there must have seemed no surer way to keep their political fortunes bright once the current crisis had passed off. Individually, we cannot untangle their motives, but we should recognize the symbolic displacement of deep play when we see it. The actions of the Broad Street Clique were never to be taken at face value.

That is one reason to look closely at the 1860 Association. That crafty, misunderstood cabal claimed to come together in mid-September to promote “resistance, by the slaveholding

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7 *Charleston Mercury*, November 8-10, 1860.


States, to the aggressions of the non-slaveholding States.” Meeting over Sam Courtenay’s bookstore on Broad Street each Thursday at noon, the group was rumored to include “some of the wealthiest, most influential men in the state.”¹⁰ There were hotheads in their ranks—young Turks like Gabriel Manigault and William Tennant—but from the first the Association was a Clique affair. Bill Porter was president, wire-pulling Robert Gourdin stood behind him as chairman, and Isaac Hayne and others took prominent roles.

It had been conservative Edward McCrady’s effort to publish a speech by John Townsend to the planters of St. John’s Colleton Parish which drew the group together as the “Society of Earnest Men.” By November, this “prominent” circle had dropped that name, and some must have wondered whether earnestness had been more than an empty boast. The Association adopted a constitution, recruited members and donations within their ranks, corresponded with radicals out of state, and distributed pamphlets in support of separation. Beyond that, though, it is unclear just what the club aimed at. One supporter claimed that its mission was “to spot traitors to the South, who may require hemp ere long,” but this outburst drew an official rebuke in local papers. The Association promoted “resistance” to Northern “aggression,” its charter affirmed, but rejected vigilantism as a mode of resistance. Indeed, it is hard to see what form members thought resistance was supposed to take. Although they declared it “necessary” to defeat efforts at conciliation with the North—as everyone did--there was little suggestion of support for separate state action in the tracts they circulated, or the candidates they

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¹⁰ Robert N. Gourdin, “Public Letter from the 1860 Association,” November 19, 1860, Archibald Rutledge Papers, SHC (also in Robert F. W. Allston Papers, SCHS). See also 1860 Association Circular, October 1860, Hinson Collection, CLS; Charleston Mercury, October 6, 1860.
nominated for office. Most of the group’s leaders were conservatives and cooperationists, many of them commercial men with close ties to England and the North.  

After Lincoln’s election, as political talk grew warmer, Association leaders called fewer general meetings, preferring to direct activity through executive sessions over supper at the Gourdin brothers’ mansion. By December, they came to advocate disunion by South Carolina alone, “If She Must.” That caveat had allowed moderates to avoid decisive action for three decades. Bitter-enders hoped it would serve them again in 1860—or at least provide political cover if all went wrong. To radicals, the meaning of such double-talk was plain: though individual members might be well-meaning and even “earnest,” the 1860 Association had become “the victim of political tricksters.”

Certainly other Charlestonians were anxious to do more than rely on Gourdin’s faction for their salvation. On the evening of November 8, a meeting of “citizens of influence” came together at Institute Hall to organize a response to news of Lincoln’s victory. The 1860 Association played a leading role in getting the meeting up, though it was hotheads and younger men who were active, not moderates like Hayne or Gourdin. Townsend chaired the meeting, Tennant acted as secretary, and Manigault presented the only resolution. Here again, however, melodrama prevailed over practical politics. That outcome was hardly accidental. A “number of citizens of all classes of the community” had formed a committee that morning, Manigault explained, to consider “the propriety of giving public expression to the feelings of the citizens of

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12 John K. Young to Robert F. W. Allston, February 18, 1861, Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers, SCL.
Charleston” in their current crisis. That faceless crowd now called for “an assemblage of a large body of citizens” at the Institute Hall for the “performance” of an unspecified “grave and deliberate act.”¹³ Again, just how radical such a show might be, or what it could possibly achieve, beyond the expression of feelings, was left unsaid.

In the next scene of the evening’s drama, moderation was consciously cast aside. Adopting Manigault’s report without dissent—for who could dissent?—the meeting moved outdoors, where “a large concourse of citizens, numbering many thousand,” went streaming down to the Charleston Hotel, “to form a procession” to serenade those who had resigned that day. Someone—certainly no Clique supporter--called on slave-trade advocate Leonidas Spratt for a speech, and while the crowds milled about, he harangued them for half an hour in a “particularly forcible and happy” style.¹⁴

It was no longer a question of action Carolinians faced, Spratt declared, “but only of the form of action.” This sentiment brought “deafening cheers,” as it was intended to. Not even the most hardened Unionist dared deny the need to resist. With bands thumping, the procession moved off through the streets, visiting the homes of Magrath, Colcock, and Conner in turn.¹⁵ Each of those unlikely heroes addressed the parade, reaffirming his determination to act (though how and when, no one said) and calling upon the crowds to do the same. As in the YMSA procession, speaker and audience here tried on new roles and applauded each other’s performances. Starting out as concerned, moderate citizens, they came closer to revolution with every step they took.

¹³ Charleston Mercury, November 9, 1860.

¹⁴ Charleston Courier, November 9, 1860.

Parades are pure play. Were paraders then only play-revolutionaries? Perhaps, but conservatives feared the worst. The reins were no longer in their hands. That lesson was underscored when Spratt spoke, and again at evening’s end, when marchers wound up at the Mercury office, just across from the rooms of the 1860 Association. There young Edmund Rhett, Jr. declaimed on the correctness of that paper’s--and his family’s--course since 1828. He even sought to appease the ghost of Will Taber. “[E]mancipation and insurrection, or revolution, is now before you,” Rhett announced, “and the policy of the MERCURY stands vindicated this day from all the vain and foolish aspersions that hate, and malice, and fear, have attempted to put upon it.”16 The crowds cheered once more and strolled home to bed. It was all very manly, very respectable, a grave and deliberate act indeed.

The same scenes were played out the next night on the stage of the Institute Hall. That morning’s papers had brought dire warnings from Columbia. Unable to defeat the call for a secession convention, “non-actionists [we]re striving to postpone the day of election.” “[G]rave and substantial doubters,” led by members of Charleston’s legislative delegation—Clique men all—used every trick to derail disunion. Time was on their side. House Speaker James Simons urged caution and slow deliberation, seeking to sow doubt. George Trenholm begged legislators to wait till a conference with other states could be held. Henry Lesesne defended cooperation outright. More dangerous than any of these rearguard actions, though, was the deceptively radical resolution Henry Buist introduced to set the convention date for mid-January.17 That looked like a calm, decisive step toward independence. But it would give nearly two months for tempers to cool, or for South Carolina’s timid neighbors to opt out of disunion, equally safe bets.

16 Charleston Mercury, November 9, 1860.
The men who gathered on Meeting Street that evening in a mood of “intense excitement” knew that delay meant death to secessionist hopes.

This was “the most imposing” rally Charleston had seen since Lincoln’s victory, the *Mercury* declared.\(^{18}\) It was also more radical and socially diverse than the meeting held the night before. Those marchers merely applauded the protest others had made. This rally aimed at practical action. The fifty-one vice presidents and four secretaries appointed reflected the city’s legal, commercial, and manufacturing elites. They also included six members of the Vigilant Rifles.

This time, Clique and 1860 Association leaders were conspicuously absent. It was the popular lawyer John Honour who sat in the chair, the brinksmen Spratt who presented the meeting’s resolutions. “He had been charged with being radical,” Spratt admitted,

but it was scarcely true. He counseled no illegality—no violation of the law. The measure he wished for was peaceful and constitutional. He would not peril its success by any measure that would give the General Government the legal authority to strike. He counseled no proscription: we were united, and he deprecated a division; but convinced that no action would be taken by the State, that liberty could only be vindicated by rebellion, then he was a rebel.

The crowd responded with “cheers that made the very rafters ring,” and by evening’s end those reluctant revolutionaries Magrath, Conner, and Colcock had been tasked to travel to Columbia to demand an end to delay.\(^ {19}\) For radicals, the irony was exquisite.

Word of the Charleston meeting and the departure of its delegates broke the back of opposition to an early convention date. By the time Magrath’s group arrived on the afternoon of November 10, consensus had been won. Five hours of backroom badgering drove

\(^{18}\) *Charleston Mercury*, November 10, 1860.

\(^{19}\) *Charleston Courier*, November 10, 1860; J. W. Claxton to Mr. Jones, November 10, 1860, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL; Benjamin F. Whitner to J. Frank Fooshe, n. d. [1920s], Benjamin F. Whitner Papers, SCL; Amelia N. Pinkind to Isabella A. R. Woodruff, November 11, 1860, Isabella Ann Roberts Woodruff Papers, DU Dalton.
cooperationists to concede defeat lest they be branded as cowards and turncoats to the southern cause. “[N]o one can resist the current,” Bill Porter warned foot-draggers. “We are too far committed.”

Yet even here disunion soft-pedaled. Elections were set for December 6, with the convention to meet eleven days later. But any mention of secession itself was studiously avoided. Even fire-eaters recognized that stressing that option now would only spook moderates. More than this, they might still need to fall back from their goal, and so spoke only of “the general welfare of the state.” At night, the vote on the bill came down, 91 to 14 in the House, all the Charleston members joining with the majority. The radicals had won handily, and it was word of the Charleston rallies that turned the tide.

“When Charleston is ready for action,” John Cunningham crowed, “you may take it as an indication that the State is ready for action, and when such a man as Judge Magrath tells you it is time for action, I tell you there must follow him the only influence in the city of Charleston that might cause you to doubt as to what course you might take.” Taber’s ghost must have smiled at that jibe. There was now no mistaking the sentiment of the people, James Conner agreed.

We in Charleston have felt the fever—we have caught the excitement; and I wish you all had been with us last night and witnessed the manifestations, not only greater than I have ever seen, but greater than those older than I have had the opportunity to witness. It was an excitement that pervaded the whole community. It manifested itself in no wildness. It was earnest but determined. It discussed little; passed few resolves, but sent back one loud echo, that the day for deliberation is passed and that the hour of action is at hand. Charleston, which has been at times considered lukewarm, and by virtue of her commercial interests conservative in an eminent degree, has been the first to move.

20 Charleston Mercury, November 11, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 16, 1860; William D. Porter to James H. Hammond, November 11, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, LC.

21 House Journal, 1860, 19; Charleston Courier, November 12, 1860. These divisions are glossed over in the public record, which notes only the final, unanimous vote, 117-0. House Journal, 1860, 33-36.
And that had won the day. As much as he deplored radicalism, Conner, like all Carolinians, craved unity. It was the empty sound he celebrated—“one loud echo”—not the meaning of the words themselves.22

Two days later, Charleston’s emissaries returned to yet another rally at the newly-christened “Secession Hall.” Formerly the showplace of reformist enterprise and the Clique’s favored meeting place, now the South Carolina Institute was commandeered quite pointedly by local radicals. “The solid men of the city were there en masse,” the Mercury noted, and nearly two hundred were appointed vice presidents or secretaries. Some, like J. J. McCarter and Henry Gourdin, were well-known Unionists, and others notoriously “slow,” but that was no matter. The point was, all were present and passive. With that, the melodrama could proceed.23

“We will have no division,” Magrath warned gravely. “Whoever leads my State in the path of honor and duty, is the leader for me.” Factionalism, not threatening Yankees, was secession’s sternest foe. “We must be true to the high destiny,” George Elliott told cheering crowds outside the hall, “let no distracting councils divide the State, but let us all move on like the people of this glorious old city, and carry out the great drama you have inaugurated.”24

Whatever men thought about secession, the cause of the jeremiad would not be denied.

For Clique men, too, thinking about secession was probably not so important. Power for themselves and their peers had ever been their cause. Across more than a decade they had ridden into office on money, men, brave words, social fears—anything that came to hand. Even now it seemed likely that Clique men like Magrath and Conner would lead the state, providing that they

22 Charleston Mercury. November 11, 1860; Undated entry, p. 38, William Ferguson Colcock Autobiography, SHC.


24 Charleston Courier, November 13, 1860.
mouthed the correct phrases. Once in power, they could direct things as suited them best, as they always had. But this time they were riding the tiger.

The finale of Charleston’s “great drama” was enacted on the same stage on November 15, just a week after the first angry, tentative meeting. Now the “vast hall was beautifully decorated with banners and palmetto branches, and a live palmetto was planted at the entrance.” Crowds jammed every corner and spilled out in the street to welcome the city’s heroes home from Columbia. “Torches and fireworks lit up the front” of the Institute, the Mercury reported, “and the continual explosion of crackers reminded us that the new ‘Independence Day’ is at hand.”

First, Mayor Macbeth addressed the throng, amid “loud cheers and waving of hats,” applauding the respect for “law and order… in our community” which all had shown while pressing the cause of revolution forward. It had not always been thus, Taberites remembered. Then Robert Gourdin spoke, congratulating fellow citizens “on the unity of opinion and purpose” they had shown. “Harmony in counsel and unity in action are… essential to our political deliverance and independence,” he affirmed. Senator Porter sounded the same themes.

Your danger lies not in isolation, but… in the effort to patch and tinker up this quarrel, and save the Union from the perils into which it is now plunged…. In the position you have assumed, you cannot retreat. You must go forward or be utterly degraded and disgraced.

Charleston had been “the herald and pioneer” of the revolution, he exulted. Now “[w]e must have faith in each other and charity in each other, for the heart of every Carolinian is true. Let there be one party, and that party the city against a common foe.”

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25 *Charleston Mercury*, November 16, 1860.

26 *Charleston Mercury*, November 16, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, November 16, 1860.
One after another, Charleston politicos hammered that message home, declaiming the themes of the jeremiad like a disunionist Apostles’ Creed. Demagogues like Michael O’Conner and William Whaley whipped up the crowd, begging it to “hand me a rifle and assign me a place” in the line of battle. Cooperationists ate crow, bowing to the will of the people. “We are] now all cooperationists,” Joe Pope plagiarized, “and all secessionists.” What else could he say?27 “He who would advise [men] to hesitate and deliberate now,” Charles Simonton warned, “was a traitor to their best interests.”28

Only a single voice dared anything like dissent. “Very general and enthusiastic applause” greeted the evening’s last speaker, George M. Coffin. One of the most prominent of Charleston’s National Democrats, popular among the city’s workingmen—and soon to endorse the Vigilant Rifles’ letter to Governor Gist--Coffin counseled “a course of moderation and prudence, accompanied by firmness.” Like many moderates, he made no reference to secession at all, pledging only to be loyal to his state. “He hoped that the community would sustain the Banks in their integrity,” the Mercury recorded, urging the rally against “any act” which might precipitate conflict with “our friends,” the Democrats at Washington.29 On that tepid, rambling, discordant note, the meeting broke up, leaving men to wonder just what they had done.

From this evidence, can we say that lifelong moderates like Gourdin and party men like Porter had thrown in the towel? Hardly. Melodrama constructs itself around the twist of fate—sharp, sudden, but expected as inevitable by all. This is the stuff of theater, and of politics too. In the spring of 1833, when war with Washington had seemed inevitable, Carolinian

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27 This, of course, transfigured Thomas Jefferson’s famous attempt to allay party sentiment in his first inaugural address. James D. Richardson, ed., A Compilation of Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 20 vols. (New York, 1897-1907), 3: 13.

28 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 1860.

29 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 1860.
intransigence vanished abruptly. Henry Clay fashioned an admirable compromise (if only to spite his nemesis Andrew Jackson) and Calhoun bore the olive branch back to Charleston himself. No one called out that agreement as a surrender of principle. It was better than war, and few mentioned its flaws thereafter. The same rationale was applied to a thousand duels which never came off. As much as men might say that retreat was impossible, dishonorable, cowardly, it had ample precedent in South Carolina’s past. And, ultimately, any action could be justified so long as the goal of unity was seen to be advanced. To that outflanked strategy, moderates clung to the bitter end.

Over and over in November, Charlestonians employed the methods of melodrama to affirm the jeremiad’s twin themes of unity and action. Secession was reduced almost to a byproduct of these goals. But why then did radicals harp on unity and action so incessantly? Why hold meeting after meeting, even sending a delegation hurtling off to Columbia, unless they feared that with any less effort the whole movement in the Queen City might break down? Even when outward signs suggested “harmony,” “firmness,” and “a unified front,” fire-eaters knew better than to read those signs at face value. They never dared to push the question of immediate, unilateral secession too hard.

Disunion, many historians declare, was a foregone conclusion. Yet separatists knew that some--perhaps many--only feigned determination to resist. Playing possum is often the best way of wreaking havoc. Others, sincere in their radicalism so long as the question remained abstract, expected to retreat to safer ground once crisis came. But by calling an end to debate and demanding internal unity toward practical action—however playful--secessionists narrowed the

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parameters of play in the game of disunion. That was the only way a last-minute reversal could be nixed. Dissent had to be written out of the great drama, defined as “out of bounds”: treachery, pure and simple. To speak against prompt action was to transgress publicly affirmed boundaries of legitimate performance.³¹

Disunionists, then, did not try to eliminate dissent by refutation. They sought only to suppress it by shaping rules of conduct and roles to be enacted.³² They succeeded precisely because Charlestonians approached secession as a form of play and a type of theater. Yet divisions could be contained, many feared, only so long as strict rules and narrow boundaries held firm. Increasingly, that meant threats of force, open or implied. In the end, that was what the rallies and calls for unity and action were all about.

This point comes through clearly when we examine legislative and convention election campaigns in Charleston in the fall of 1860. Even without the rancor Will Taber and John Cunningham caused, city politics in the 1850s was remarkable for corruption and factionalism, often spilling over into violence. The scene that hardware merchant Titus Bissell described in 1855 was fairly typical come election time: the radical bank clerk William Leitch and the conservative dry goods merchant C. F. Jackson “of King Street got pol[i]ticking and probably taking some Tea & Jackson bit off his Ear.”³³

Everyone understood that politics and violence went hand-in-hand at street level. Rallies and serenades stirred passions, and with a few boasts and a little liquor, crowds became mobs

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³³ Titus W. Bissell to “Mother,” August 1, 1855, Titus Bissell Papers, DU; W. S. Leitch to James H. Adams, November 30, 1855, James Hopkins Adams Papers, SCL. Five years later, Jackson joined the Vigilant Rifles.
looking for someone to fight. Men identified with their candidate, their faction, and saw in its victory a measure of personal affirmation. Securing that surrogate triumph required an effort of manly self-assertion akin to claiming honor, not a course of tedious moral suasion. Breaking heads was the quickest way of changing minds, and eminently satisfying, too.34

In contests where emotions ran high, it was common for a candidate’s bully boys to linger at the polling place to ensure that all went smoothly for their favorite. In the mayoral election of 1859, for example, Charley Boag and Martin Roddy, two street toughs armed with liquor, knives and broom handles, prowled the lower wards to drum up support for their leader, former *Mercury* editor and Know-Nothing John Carew. Just what they thought of their candidate’s stance on local improvements or taxation is unrecorded. Taking a more expressive approach to civic duty, they wandered into the bar of the French Coffee House at day’s end and “commenced to shout for Carew.” Roddy, reputed to be a prize fighter, “struck the counter several times and also the tables” with his club, and threatened to “whip any man that would say Macbeth was Mayor.” Both were spoiling for a fight and, when no one else offered, they laid aside their loyalties and tore into each other on a minor pretext.35

But Boag’s pugilism was like his politics. He fought to win, no holds barred, and stabbed Roddy twice with a dagger. Arrested for murder, he declared his credo boldly: “Ugly or fair, no one can whip me.” The crowd that cheered his acquittal outside the Charleston Courthouse three

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35 *Charleston Courier*, January 14, 1860. Roddy’s willingness to take on “any man” was no idle boast. Eighteen months earlier, he had been acquitted of two charges of assault and battery on police officers. State v. Martin Roddy (January 3, 1858), p. 186, Criminal Journals, 1857-60, Records of the Court of General Sessions, Charleston County, SCDAH. Prior to his career as a street tough, Roddy had tried to rise by a more respectable route, taking a leading role in the Association of Friends of Irish Independence. (New York) *Freeman’s Journal*, January 20, March 2, May 4, 1844; *Charleston Courier*, April 27, 1848.
months later could not but admire such bloodstained determination. It was the vow of an undeniably self-made man, so artlessly self-respecting as to be almost respectable. Intimidation was coin of the realm come election time, all knew, and it paid handsomely.  

The threat of violence was especially powerful beyond Broad Street, where polling took place in local firehalls. As enclaves of boisterous masculinity, fire companies put other voluntary associations and militia groups to shame, and winning the backing of their members could prove key to electoral success. While some candidates like J. J. Pettigrew, David Ramsay, and Charles Simonton pursued high rank in militia service as the path to office, in most cases these appointments secured the loyalties of only a limited constituency, voters they might have attracted in any event. There were, moreover, only so many militia offices to go around. Membership in or patronage of a fire company carried similarly high status and probably paid greater political dividends.

Service as a fireman was seen as more democratic and public-spirited than command of an elite group like the Charleston Light Dragoons. It appealed to a wider economic spectrum of voters and purchased the loyalty (and, if need be, the fists) of comrades eager to show off their masculinity and fidelity. When Robert Duryea stood for election to the legislature in 1860, the sixty men of the Eagle Fire Engine Company stood with their president, marching to the hall of the rival Marion Fire Engine Company to cast their ballots. Doubtless they offered friendly encouragement to others along the way. Duryea won seventy-one percent of the vote at that poll

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36 *Ibid.*; State v. Charles L. Boag (January 14, 1860), p. 549, Criminal Journals, 1857-60, Records of the Court of General Sessions, Charleston County, SCDAH; Charles Lawton Boag later rose to the rank of corporal in Company I, 1st South Carolina Volunteer Infantry (Gregg’s Regiment), perishing at the battle of Gaine’s Mill, on June 27, 1862, aged 26. Randolph W. Kirkland, Jr., *Broken Fortunes: South Carolina soldiers, sailors and citizens who died in the service of their country and state in the War for Southern Independence, 1861-1865* (Charleston, 1995), 31. In Charleston’s Magnolia Cemetery, the broken column which marks Boag’s grave declares him game to the very end: “Tell them at home/I die fighting/in defense of my country/and for the honor of So. Ca.”
and was elected handily. In this case, no violence broke out, but none could doubt the meaning of the firemen’s manly display. Voting in Charleston was a deeply factionalized, tribal experience.

Election Day mobs and faction fights had long been staples of Queen City politics. By the 1850s, however, dollars and drink did more to swing elections than fists and clubs. Crooked balloting and vote-buying were epidemic. At first, faction leaders simply herded would-be voters from poll to poll, where they declared fictitious identities, cast ballots, and pocketed a few coins for their trouble. To check such bribery, and control the power of working-class immigrants who flooded into the upper wards in these years, the legislature enacted a poll tax in 1856, establishing strict qualifications of property or residence for voting.

But Charleston’s “street politicians,” especially foot soldiers of the Broad Street Clique, were undeterred. H. C. Hendricks, the local tax collector, simply submitted falsified lists of taxpayers’ names to the assessment office. Receipts were generated and votes cast. Just how widespread such fraud was, no one could really say. “[M]any of the persons who were said to be fictitious [proved] to be really living persons,” Tommy Simons offered weakly, “many of them good and solid men. Also… some of these persons did go in their own persons—were recognized and got their poll-tax.” Ward Six’s poll manager saw signs of corruption everywhere:

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37 Charleston Mercury, October 11, 1860.

38 Rebecca M. Rutledge to Edward Rutledge, October 5, 1832, Rutledge Family Papers, SCL; Yorkville Compiler, September 28, 1840; John H. Sargent, Conspiratio Horrible! Or, a Short Account of the Horrible Conspiracy Formed by the Managers of the Late Elections Against John H. Sargent, Esq., He being a Candidate for Representative; and Having had Many Votes for Him, his Name was not Counted or Mentioned in the Returns, he having been declared no Candidate (Charleston, 1842); Eugene Sue, Jr. [pseud.], The Mysteries of Charleston: A Brief View of Matters and Things in General, the Internal Arrangements and Progressive Improvements, Past, Present, and Future, in the Great Metropolis of Charleston, With a Peep into the Various Ramifications of Society in its Several Aspects, Moral, Social, Political, and Financial (Charleston, 1846); Thomas Lehre to Whitemarsh B. Seabrook, September 8, 1850, Whitemarsh B. Seabrook Papers, LC; Herbert W. Aptheker, “The South Carolina Poll Tax, 1737-1895,” Journal of Negro History, 31 (1946): 131-139.
[O]ne [voter] was challenged, and not having his papers, went off and did not return; one came with a receipt for Daniel Battle; as he looked rather suspicious, witness asked him his name, when he replied Daniel Black. Witness then told him he could not vote at that Poll, when he was asked to return the poll-tax receipt, which was refused. In the afternoon, Henry Denken came up to vote, and was asked where he resided, to which he replied that he resided in the last house on Vanderhorst-street. Witness replied that was his residence, and refused to receive Denken’s vote. Another one, who came in along with the receipt of Jacob Acker, had forgotten his name altogether.39

The story was laughable, especially since such rigmarole was needless. If votes were needed, as Miles and Cunningham admitted, a few drinks, a dollar or two, or the promise of patronage could always snag them. Joe Johnson and the “Duke of Hampstead,” James Eason, turned out tractable working-class voters on demand from the factories they ran, just as Henry Peake could use his post as superintendent of the South Carolina Railroad to advantage.40 They were among the most powerful and popular men on the Charleston Neck, but all candidates and their backers deployed money, influence, and jobs to win elections.

Not to use those tools was simple foolishness. “Who would live under a Government where a man had to be honest to obtain office,” Isaac Hayne sneered, “or really great to be thought so? How much preferable it is to attain distinction by a little dexterous wire-pulling.” Hayne’s question was sarcastic, but its point rang true. There was no other road to office in Charleston: a man who did not “treat” voters or look out for his constituents was unelectable. Conversely, in fending off one’s foes, there was almost no corruption a little money could not cure.41

39 Charleston Courier, January 12, 1860.


41 Isaac W. Hayne to Charles W. Pinckney, April 23, 1860, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Jr., Papers, SCL. The logic of fighting corruption by buying votes was spelled out earlier by one Clique leader. “It is true I regret the means which no doubt both parties have made use of in the contest,” William Colcock told his mother, “but I hope
By 1860, the scale of crookedness and its social implications had grown to frightening proportions. “The City was actually bought,” Jim Pettigrew declared after the contest of 1858, “the lower sort with money, the rest with other equivalents.” The powerful bank director and commission merchant Moses Mordecai had provided the money and James Campbell, an ambitious Broad Street lawyer, doled it out. Pettigrew, Tom Simons, and four other moderates had been beaten by the trick, to the “disgust” and “astonishment” of “everyone.”42 Blaming “the Jew” Mordecai was easy. But Elliott Street and a dozen lanes like it regularly went to the highest bidder. Nearly all were in on this scheme, giving or taking bribes or “winking at it,” except the losers. The common denominator of politics in secessionist Charleston, the great bond in the factionalized body politic, had become party loyalty, self-interest, and graft. The only alternative, one wag suggested, was to draw straws for office, a system which might prove “a great advantage” in the end. “I mistrust our own people,” Daniel Hamilton declared, “more than I fear all the efforts of the Abolitionists.”43

That fear of subversion through spoilsmanship reached new heights in April, 1860 when the national Democratic Party met in Charleston. Before 1856, Carolinians had associated parties and conventions with the pursuit of private interest and the betrayal of state rights beliefs. Publicly, they held both at arm’s length. But the rise of James L. Orr and his cronies undermined that principle, demonstrating the benefits of “organization” and winning the 1860 meeting of their party for the Queen City. The convention was expected to be a political love feast,

that these means may only serve to make the virtuous & the good resolve to eradicate & crush them down & thus extract some ultimate good out of a present evil.” William F. Colcock to Mary W. H. Colcock, December 1, 1831, Colcock Family Papers, TU.

42 James J. Pettigrew to William S. Pettigrew, October 24, 1858, Pettigrew Family Papers, SHC.

nominating the “Little Giant,” Stephen Douglas, for president and affirming his noncommittal views on slavery and territorial development. If all went well, some thought, Orr himself might walk off with the vice-presidential nomination. But the plan went awry.

Carolinians never fully trusted Orr and his “consolidationist” ways. They deplored the “wirepulling” methods of the state convention which met in March to pick delegates for the national meeting. And for Charlestonians, observing the making of a presidential candidate up close proved deeply distressing. The hundreds who crowded Institute Hall each day could see all too well the horse-trading and spoilsmanship they feared at the heart of national politics.

“The Convention itself was not without its striking and even grand features,” Henry Randall thought,

but the eager and selfish partizan becomes the more disgusting when he struts and rants over the political stage in the character of a pretended patriot; and oh! what an abyss of utter, sordid and unmitigated depravity the eye takes in which is permitted—I should rather say forced—to look behind the scenes! You are apprised of the treachery, the falsehood and the general baseness which marked the conduct of certain persons in that Convention…. It is to me like one of the distorted dreams of a night of fever.

The melodramatic metaphor was apt. When William L. Yancey demanded safeguards for slavery in the party platform, Charleston saw Douglasites squelch his appeal. When Alabama’s delegation walked out in protest, locals watched in humiliation as their own men sat by dumbly, toeing the party line. One by one, as southern contingents bolted the convention, the jeers of the crowd against South Carolina’s delegation mounted. Finally, Tommy Simons led his troops off

44 James L. Orr to Benjamin F. Perry, March 5, 1860, Benjamin Franklin Perry Papers, ADAH.

in shame and confusion. They had little choice. “If they had not retired,” Barney Rhett, Jr. declared, “they would have been mobbed.”

Yet public opinion was not ready to embrace the radical alternative either. “Mr. Rhett”—Barnwell, senior—“I hold to be the most untrustworthy politician in the state,” Henry Ravenel declared. His was a common view, directed toward father and son, radical clan and clients. Nationally, the convention’s collapse wrecked the Democratic Party and vaulted Republicans into power. Locally, it suggested just how threatened South Carolina politics was by the corruption and untempered ambition of its citizens. The warnings of the jeremiad echoed once more. “Men who will talk politics,” Isaac Hayne counseled, “must talk after the old teachings.”

Fears of internal disunity and subversion dominated legislative elections in the fall of 1860. Even as the threat of a showdown with Yankee abolitionists loomed, Charlestonians remained obsessed with rooting out traitors in their own ranks. The goal, all agreed, was to send “true and reliable men” to Columbia, “representatives of the different interests of our City and State, without reference to any PARTY considerations.” But none could agree who those men might be. In the four weeks between September 13 and October 8, more than fifty tickets came forth bearing the names of nearly ninety candidates. While the first slates strove to balance voices of caution with men of action, distrust crept back in and straightforward “Fusion Ticket[s]” became increasingly rare. Extremists and moderates, conservatives and radicals regarded each other as the gravest threats to southern safety. What if balance overbalanced in favor of one’s rivals, toppling all into the abyss? To “forget all party differences, prejudices and personal obligations,” men feared, was to stand naked and unarmed before the foe. “Old issues

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46 Henry S. Randall to Robert F. W. Allston, May 22, 1860, Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers, SCL; Robert B. Rhett, Jr., to William P. Miles, May 12, 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, SHC.

should be buried,” one notice cautioned, but men soon came to believe it was they who were being prepared for burial by smiling newfound friends. Better to let others pursue the golden mean in making up candidate lists, and defend one’s aims and faction by means “ugly or fair.”

Within days of the appearance of the first middle-of-the-road tickets, the columns of the *Courier* and the *Mercury* exploded with political ads, nearly all hewing to specific lines of faction. Some offered long disquisitions on the wisdom of their choices. Others provided simple lists of names. The core division resolved itself, as always, in terms of conflict between the Clique and the *Mercury* crowd. On September 13 and again six days later, city newspapers listed slates of “wise and prudent men,” Broad Streeters all, for the voters’ approval. On September 24, the *Mercury* published a pure “Anti-Clique Ticket,” which excluded all of the wise men of Broad (see tables 7.7-8). Between these two poles, a host of coalitions fused and dissolved.

At first, men sought support in the blandest terms of political ideology, putting forth “Southern Rights” tickets of uncertain stripe, or warning that “the South Expects Every Man to Do His Duty.” Another slate promised to meet the crisis “fairly and dauntlessly, regardful alike of the true interests of Carolina, her principles, her honor, and her institutions.” The vagueness of these platforms only encouraged public suspicion, however, igniting debate over whether locals should demand pledges from candidates on their course of action in case of Lincoln’s election. If the “Genuine Ticket” was genuine, let it prove itself by specific promises.

“Why, sir,” ‘Ulysses’ told the *Mercury*,

I do not doubt, that there are abolitionists in our community. I know that there are some, who look on the institution of African slavery in the South, as only temporary, and destined soon to go out. Of course, what protection can I expect from such men as my Representatives in our Legislature? They will make

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48 Charleston Mercury, September 13-October 8, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 13-October 8, 1860.

49 Charleston Mercury, September 13, 19, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 13, 19, 1860.
efficient agents for an abolitionized Federal Government, in our Federal offices, but they will not be good agents for me.

But pledges went too far, ‘Telemachus’ replied. To “inquire into the political principles of a man is one thing, and to pledge him to advocate a particular practical measure quite another thing.” “No Pledges,” agreed another writer, “Send None We Cannot Trust.” The pledge question was just another attempt to draw divisive “party lines,” driving separate secessionists into office. “Let the people think,” he warned; all talk of disunion was premature. “Not Cliques” was the answer, “But Truth.”

Trust was not so quickly won, though, truth not so easily discovered. In late September, unsigned cards appeared in local papers, calling on candidates to affirm support for a state convention in the event of Lincoln’s victory and to pledge to promote secession at such a meeting. Partly this tactic aimed to flush out closet conservatives. Partly it hoped to counteract Clique rumors of “submissionists” within radical ranks. Unsurprisingly, the demands drew almost no response. Only one long-shot candidate, Arthur Lining, showed his stripes as a fire-eater. He was defeated resoundingly on election day. Success at the polls, most recognized, had more to do with the performance of personal character than enunciation of political beliefs.

Charlestonians wanted “the true element, gentlemen of sound judgment, prudence and firmness… who would sooner perish than dishonor the State that gave them birth.” But like all honorable and respectable men, they dreaded too close an inquiry into the nature of the “true element.” That reticence placed all on a broad and nebulous middle ground—a playing field, a

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50 Charleston Mercury, September 14, 24, October 4, 5, 9, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 24, October 1, 4, 5, 1860.
stage, a marketplace, and a terrain of intrigue, too. Radicals and conservatives alike felt confirmed in their politics and their growing anxieties.\textsuperscript{51}

As questions of policy and principle wilted, the election campaign became an exercise in advertising. Slates of candidates were sold to the public in the same way hats, dry goods, or daguerreotypes were. “Friends,” “Many Citizens,” and others in the know offered testimonials to their product’s worthiness. Icons of ships, trains, palmetto trees, and more—having no direct link to either candidates or campaign—were used to draw attention and gain voter loyalty. Comforting words and phrases were repeated to assure Charlestonians of the safety and wisdom of lending their support to a ticket. Surely it was a sound and true thing to advocate “sound and true” men, whatever their views.\textsuperscript{52}

To this end, most tickets focused on the characteristics of voters, not candidates, stressing points of potential affiliation: social class, voluntary group ties, ethnicity, or neighborhood. “One Who Watches Well” advised the public—“Mechanics! Working Men! Merchants!” in particular—to choose Henry Peake.

Reared among us, he by his own industry, perseverance and attention to business, has earned the ‘well done’ of all who know him. A mechanic by profession, he has guided the ‘Iron Horse,’ and by his skill and ingenuity done much to increase the wealth of our city. Nurtured in the lap of poverty, with that honesty of purpose which should always characterize the ‘self-made man,’ he has by his sinewy arm brought himself into prominence.

Who would not rally to so respectable a figure, “the self-made man, the friend of the laboring man, and the benefactor of the poor”?\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{51} Charleston Mercury, September 21, 28, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 26, 29, 1860; New York Tribune, October 17, 1860.

\textsuperscript{52} See, e. g., Charleston Mercury, September 25, October 5, 6, 8, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 15, 24, October 5, 9, 1860.

\textsuperscript{53} Charleston Courier, October 6, 1860.
Other testimonials made similar claims. According to “Many Firemen and Mechanics,” Robert Duryea was “worthy of a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull altogether.”54 “Neck Boy” supported Andrew Burnet as the voice of “the young men of Charleston.” A “Mechanic and Working Man” pitched Courier editor Richard Yeadon, of all people. The most divisive statements urged voters of particular localities to come out for their neighbors, offering no hint of views or qualifications. For Third Ward sovereigns, it should have been enough to know that David Ramsay and George Coffin lived among them. “The Neck Boys Will Vote for the Neck Candidates,” another card promised. The reason was self-evident.55

With each new ticket, fears of subversion grew and hopes of a united front dwindled. Factionalism seemed the greatest threat and the only salvation. How ironic that, when the votes were counted, the result was a saw-off: ten Broad Streeters and ten anti-Clique men won. On a city-wide basis, the most successful tickets had advocated “a combination of various interests” and an end to bickering and conflict (see table 7.6).56 Charleston’s voters had looked beyond the clash of factions and interests, apparently, finding common ground.

Appearance proved illusory. Across the city during the two days of balloting, “disorder and violence” reigned. It was the largest voter turnout Charleston had ever seen, and among the most crooked as well. Drunken voters-for-hire were squired around the polls. Mobs and bully boys had a field day. To top things off, one poll manager from the Neck stabbed another from

54 Charleston Courier, October 8, 1860. The appeal for Duryea quotes from The Iliad, where Zeus warns the minor gods against making such a pull against his overwhelming power. Homer, The Iliad, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York, 1999), 92-93.

55 Charleston Courier, October 5, 8, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 8, 1860.

56 Charleston Courier, September 15, 1860.
the lower wards over allegations of fraud. The *Courier* found the whole scene “deplorable,” but for most it was just as usual. That was frightening enough.\(^{57}\)

There were pronounced divisions, too, within the body politic along lines of party organization, geography, and social class. As tables 7.7-8 show, voters who cast ballots for the “wise and prudent” men of the Clique tickets exceeded that of anti-Clique candidates by less than two percent. When only successful candidates of both parties are compared, the ratio is virtually identical. At the ward level, however, the geography of party became clearer. In the lower four wards, successful Clique men outpolled opponents consistently, topping votes cast for elected anti-Clique candidates by more than five percent in Wards One to Three. Conversely, successful anti-Clique men left Broad Streeters behind on the Charleston Neck, outpolling them by more than seven percent in the Upper Wards. Unsurprisingly, the closest contests, decided by almost identical margins of victory, were waged along either side of Calhoun Street, in the middle-class Fourth Ward and at the Lower Neck polls. At street level, the landscape of party was clearly defined.\(^{58}\)

For a few, like incumbent lawyer Henry Buist, voters gave high levels of support citywide. More commonly, candidates drew from a base of strength in one or two wards and did what they could elsewhere. George Coffin’s backers concentrated in Wards One, Two, and Four, where he attracted two-thirds of the vote; north of Calhoun Street, three of five voters refused to back him. Likewise, Robert Gourdin’s popularity plummeted as he moved north through the city. The lower wards wanted to send him to Columbia, but low tallies in the Neck crushed those hopes. Mapping—and comprehending—the terrain of voter support for particular

\(^ {57} \) *Charleston Mercury*, October 9, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, October 9, 1860.

\(^ {58} \) Calculated from *Charleston Mercury*, October 11, 1860.
candidates or tickets is difficult except in broad outline, yet the geography of faction seems to have had closer ties to issues of class or ethnicity than to political ideology per se.

There were, for example, numerous tickets printed in the *Mercury* or *Courier* purporting to represent mechanics or workingmen. In every case, moderate Henry Peake’s name appeared prominently. Radical James Eason, though listed on fifteen of thirty-five notices in the *Mercury*, was excluded from all mechanics’ slates but one. Yet on election day Peake gained 87.7 percent of votes in the Upper Wards while Eason secured 86.9 percent, far more than any other candidate. In both cases, too, this was at least thirty-five percent higher than the levels they achieved at any other poll. Eason and Peake, of course, were major employers in that neighborhood. Conservatives Michael O’Connor and Robert Duryea also drew well in the north end, where working-class Irish voters clustered, faring worse south of Broad.\(^59\) As such cases show, electoral success depended less on what one said or thought than on whom one was, or claimed to be. Voters were drawn to men and factions based in specific neighborhoods with particular class and ethnic characteristics. They shunned or fought others who did not meet their tribal vision of what a representative ought to be. Whatever balance or unity Charleston had achieved by mid-October 1860 was largely chimerical, the product of the clash of fearful local interests.

Six weeks later, when voters selected delegates to the disunion convention to be held in Columbia on December 17, such factionalism was thought to be vanquished for once and all. Instead, internal divisions and fear of dissent came forth as never before. Once the legislature had called for the election of delegates in late November, calls went out for a public meeting to nominate a single slate of candidates, avoiding the conflicts and disorder of past campaigns. But in contrast to every other parish and district in the state, no meeting materialized in Charleston,

\(^{59}\) Calculated from *Charleston Mercury*, October 11, 1860.
and the competitive nomination process went forward as it always had, through cards and tickets published in local papers. The same factions, the same language and patterns, and many of the same names that had figured in October’s battle reappeared here.

Early tickets hoped to “unite all parties in the community” on the ground of immediate action, regardless of past politics. Personal character, not ideology, once more focused attention. “You want men who can guide you in council,” one advertisement declared, “and lead you in war,”

Men unmoved by popular fury; deaf to popular applause; with no selfish ends to gratify; with no higher aim than the good and welfare of their country; who cannot be influenced either by fear or favor; who would disdain to pursue any course not dictated by their calm and honest judgment, and who would pursue it if life and fortune were the forfeit.

True enough, perhaps, but where were such heroes to be found? Mistrust crept in quickly. “Remember that the whole power of the State will be in their hands,” ‘the People’ warned. Once elected, “they may do what they please.” Men too rash might put South Carolina in peril, moderates worried. Men too timid might shun independence, radicals feared. Again the demand for pledges resounded.  

On November 23, a Rhett faction ticket, signed ‘St. Philip’s and St. Michael’s,’ made two unequivocal promises. Its candidates would vote for unilateral secession “as soon as the ordinance… can be formed and adopted.” Once South Carolina had gained its freedom, they would oppose any effort to reunite with the nonslaveholding states “in any form of government whatever.” Three days later, ‘Secession’ demanded that all candidates take the same pledge,

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60 Charleston Mercury, November 21, 24, 1860.
making their views “distinctly understood.” Excuses or explanations would not do. Only “a simple ‘Yes’ or ‘No’” could answer.\textsuperscript{61}

The trick worked. Demanding a public statement of support for secession played on desires for a united front and promised to ease fears of internal subversion. Since the Rhett crowd had already answered ‘Secession’’s questions, too, other candidates could hardly refuse to follow suit without looking soft on disunion. One by one, candidates fell into line or withdrew their names from consideration. Dissent seemed effectively quashed.

And yet, the more perfect apparent unanimity, the more Charlestonians doubted and split hairs. Rumors of plots were everywhere. “Are the schemes and chicanery of small politicians to prevail upon so grave an occasion as the present?” ‘Cato’ asked.

Is money to be spent and are votes to be bought when our rights and liberties are at stake? Already it is rumored that Elliott-Street has been purchased for a clique. Will the people of Charleston permit this degrading practice to be revived?

“From the very excited gesticulations of many of our citizens all along Broad Street,” another writer declared, “one would suppose there was a perfect war of cliques.” Working-class sections of the lower wards had been corrupted “and that respectable portion of the upper wards seems to be swallowed up, head and ears, at a single clash.” The worst of it was, ‘Vox Populi’ claimed, a secret cabal had given false pledges in response to ‘Secession’’s questions and was working to steal the election from Charleston’s true champions. “Down with the Clique Nomination!” he cried.

Enquire upon the street, and you can soon ascertain which ticket is alluded to. I tell you it is composed of men who were not in favor of secession but a short time ago, and would not be now, were it not that they see it is the popular side, their declarations to the contrary notwithstanding. Up and be doing, and meet combination with counter-combination, or we will be mere tools in the hands of a few political adventurers.

\textsuperscript{61} Charleston Mercury, November 23, 26, 1860; Charleston Evening News, November 23, 1860.
Such “morbid and relentless” charges threw all factions and pledges into question. As ‘Truth’ told the *Mercury*, the only way of defeating tickets dominated by “cliqueism and wirepulling” was by offering still more tickets. Yet these “counter-combinations”—counter-gambits, Walter Steele would have said—would surely be subject to the same doubts and fears as the first batch. Political tribalism had run amok.62

If some men paraded a phony disunionism, others did not. Claudian Northrup, J. J. Pringle Smith, W. B. Carlisle, and others built complicated loopholes into their avowals of secession, hand-wringing *caveats* which voters had no trouble picking to pieces. John Honour declared that separation should be accomplished “as soon as practicable,” not as soon as an ordinance could be written. The wealthy merchant William Lawton warned that “excited feelings or undue haste” should not drive South Carolina forward. Disunion was an “inherent right,” he asserted, but should be spearheaded by “the first State prepared to lead.” More than that he would not say.63

Even “Earnest Men” like Robert Gourdin and John Townsend refused to promise immediate action. “I will not give a pledge which may place me in antagonism to the welfare of South Carolina,” Gourdin hedged. Independence should be declared “at the earliest practicable period,” Townsend agreed, “when that secession can be made most effectual.” Such foot-dragging was too blatant to fool anyone. Moderates Kit Memminger and Ed McCrady simply declined to answer questions. Their silence spoke eloquently.64

62 *Charleston Mercury*, November 28, December 1, 3, 1860.

63 *Charleston Mercury*, December 3-4, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, December 4, 1860. Pressed on this comment, Honour dug in his heels, refusing to support immediate secession. *Charleston Courier*, December 6, 1860. Note, too, that the doubted Carlisle was a Minute Men leader.

64 *Charleston Mercury*, December 1, 6, 1860. See also Daniel H. Hamilton to Robert N. Gourdin, November 26, 1860; William M. Lawton to Robert N. Gourdin, December 8, 1860, both in Robert Newman Gourdin Papers, EU;
In the days before the election, the *Mercury* published lists of candidates, carefully categorized according to pledges they had given or refused to give. But even the most positive response to ‘Secession’’s questions might still be bogus, ‘Answer’ charged. A man who promised to vote to take South Carolina out of the Union as soon as an ordinance of secession could be framed was not bound thereby to help frame that ordinance. No document, no disunion. That was just the sort of logic Broad Street lawyers loved. It was also the sort of fear that showed how much Charlestonians doubted their neighbors’ loyalty.⁶⁵

As it turned out, there were good reasons to fear such schemes. On election day, Clique men or their allies captured nine of the top twelve spots on the ticket (see tables 7.7, 8.1-2). At least seven of the twenty-two delegates chosen had not given positive responses to ‘Secession’’s questions. The same sort of divisions between the lower wards and the Neck polls which shaped October’s election reappeared here. North of Calhoun Street, Rhett Senior ranked fourth among all candidates in votes cast; in Wards Two to Four he did not make the top dozen. Overall, Townsend and Gourdin ranked third and fourth in the balloting. Everywhere outside Wards Seven and Eight, they stood no worse than fifth. In the upper wards, however, they ranked twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth respectively. Clique members, past and present, showed special strength in Ward Four, but did well at all four lower polls. Clearly, factional potency, not pledges or ideology, played the key role in electing convention delegates, just as it did in every other legislative contest. Even at the hour of disunion, Charleston remained a city divided along complex party lines.⁶⁶

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⁶⁵ *Charleston Mercury*, December 3, 5, 1860.

⁶⁶ *Charleston Mercury*, December 7, 1860.
In December 1860, then, a remarkable drive for unity and a corresponding fear of internal subversion galvanized political life in the Queen City. Men were not yet ready to give over the rhetoric of honor, deference, and statesmanship as a framework for ordering civic life, but that worldview had been steadily eroded by the demands of party loyalty, respectability, the triumph of cliques, factions, demagoguery, puppet candidates, brinkmanship, and the acid of electoral corruption. The stakes and complexity of the political game seemed greater than ever before. Four-handed chess barely began to describe it.

Against this backdrop, we may return to the question of the Young Men’s Secession Association parade and what it meant. There is a striking anomaly at the heart of Sam Roberts’ description of the procession, which was replicated in all other accounts. Although it sketched the November march vividly, Roberts’ letter provided no names or personal details about any participants. Indeed, we have almost no information about the YMSA at all. We do not know who formed it, or when, or why, specifically. We have no indication of its size, structure, or membership, and only the barest clues about its leadership. There is no evidence that the group did anything before or after the evening of November 23 to further the cause of disunion, or any other purpose. All that we have is the call it published in local papers two days before, declaring plans to tramp the city’s streets of a late autumn evening, plus a handful of accounts of the march by journalists and observers. As an organization, the group left no other sign of its purpose or meaning. But that silence may be telling too.

The parade announcement opened the march to the general public, yet made clear that the YMSA would guide its course and shape its significance. “Persons desirous of subscribing” to the procession were instructed to leave their names at the *Courier, Mercury, or Evening News*

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67 It can hardly be supposed that Roberts did not know any of the marchers. He was, among other things, an officer of the Charleston Fire Engine Company, and had marched in many such processions. *Charleston Mercury*, January 10, 1855.
offices. Designated club members would then call on volunteers “to aid them in carrying out their patriotic intentions.” What such a visit entailed or what “aid” consisted of, we can only conjecture, but there must have been as much sizing-up as there was simple coordination. Disparate groups and persons had to be made to fit with the club’s own vision of the march. Were there individuals or social or ethnic groups pushed to the rear of the column, broken up and intermingled with other formations, or sent to the sidelines? Again, we cannot say, though the drive for unity and factional discipline must have exerted force here as elsewhere. Neither Roberts nor anyone else named a single person who took part either as marcher or observer. The only men we know who likely appeared in the procession are J. S. Stevens, who accepted the Osborn and Durbec transparency on the club’s behalf, and the parade marshals, charged with choreographing the affair and maintaining order as the Association saw fit: Samuel Mathews, Benjamin Feldmann, L. Sherfesser, and G. C. Chapman.

These men, plus J. B. Nixon, signed the club’s announcement of the parade which appeared in local papers. They were hardly distinguished civic leaders. Of Chapman and Stevens, we know almost nothing. There is no J. S. Stevens or G. C. Chapman listed on census rolls, tax lists, or city directories from 1856 to 1861. The only Charlestonians of their surnames are commercial small-fry: clerks, bookkeepers and the like. For such, playing a leadership role in the YMSA parade would have marked a sizeable step forward among their peers.

68 Charleston Mercury, November 21-22, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 21-22, 1860.

69 Perhaps Stevens was the twenty-five year old bachelor planter from nearby John’s Island, J. L. Stevens, who appears in the 1860 Census. Possibly Chapman was the eleven-year old youth, George Chapman, who shows up in a Charleston boarding house in the 1850 census, apparently living without kin. No evidence could be found to corroborate either possibility. Here and below, information on kinship and household structure is derived from Schedule I (Free Inhabitants), Charleston District, South Carolina, Seventh (1850), Eighth (1860) Census of the United States, RG 29: Records of the Bureau of the Census, NA.
TABLE 8.1

VOTING BY WARD, SECESSION CONVENTION ELECTIONS, NOVEMBER 1860,
ELECTED CANDIDATES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Wd 1</th>
<th>Wd 2</th>
<th>Wd 3</th>
<th>Wd 4</th>
<th>Lower Poll</th>
<th>Upper Poll</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. G. Magrath</td>
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<td>392</td>
<td>491</td>
<td>717</td>
<td>563</td>
<td>388</td>
<td>3112</td>
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<tr>
<td>W. P. Miles</td>
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<td>390</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>555</td>
<td>524</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>2782</td>
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<tr>
<td>John Townsend</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>464</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>2380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R. N. Gourdin</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>417</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>2333</td>
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<tr>
<td>H. W. Conner</td>
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<td>333</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>433</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>496</td>
<td>2329</td>
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<tr>
<td>T. D. Wagner</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>409</td>
<td>451</td>
<td>420</td>
<td>379</td>
<td>2186</td>
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<td>R. B. Rhett</td>
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<td>263</td>
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<td>340</td>
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<td>289</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>395</td>
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<td>432</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>243</td>
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<td>308</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>345</td>
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<td>218</td>
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<td>278</td>
<td>272</td>
<td>274</td>
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Source: Charleston Mercury, December 7, 1860.
TABLE 8.2

VOTING RESULTS BY WARD, SECESSION CONVENTION ELECTIONS, NOVEMBER 1860, DEFEATED CANDIDATES

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<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Wd 1</th>
<th>Wd 2</th>
<th>Wd 3</th>
<th>Wd 4</th>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>361</td>
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<td>327</td>
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<td>177</td>
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Source: Charleston Mercury, December 7, 1860.
Louis Sherfesser (or Shirlesse, or Scheffersee), by all indications an ambitious if threadbare young man, could also take pride in his status as a marshal. An eighteen-year old Prussian immigrant, Sherfesser still lived with his mother, a middle-aged widowed dressmaker, and her three other children in a small house just west of King in the Fourth Ward. He owned no property in 1860, but surely held hope for the future. Sherfesser had been employed as a clerk in a downtown shop for less than a year, yet already he had married his sweetheart, a twenty-four year old German immigrant. In January, he had won election as Second Axeman in the prestigious Charleston Fire Engine Company. Guiding the YMSA march was another feather in his cap.70

Ben Feldmann, too, was a young man on the rise. In 1859 he worked as a bartender at the American Hotel, on the corner of King and George. A year later, he moved up the street a few doors, opening a little confectionary and cigar store just south of Calhoun. Feldmann was this group’s lone taxpayer on the eve of secession, a further sign of ambitious character. With the skills of glad-handing and manly banter his jobs demanded, there was no telling how far he might go. Like his fellows, he must have hungered for the respectability and social stability which signaled manhood’s attainment in antebellum Charleston.71

The other parade marshals could already lay small claims to being “solid” men. Though still a bachelor, the twenty-four year old Mathews was a skilled mechanic (a boilermaker working in one of the foundries north of Calhoun), a propertyholder with a small house on

70 Charleston Courier, January 10, 1860; R. S. Purse, comp., Charleston City Directory, and Strangers Guide for 1856 (New York, 1856); Leonard Mears and James Turnbull, comp., The Charleston Directory: Containing the Names of the Inhabitants. A Subscribers’ Business Directory, Street Map of the City, and an Appendix, of Much Useful Information (Charleston, 1859); W Eugene Ferslew, Directory of the City of Charleston, to Which is Added a Business Directory... 1860 (Savannah, 1860).

71 Mears and Turnbull, comp., The Charleston Directory; Ferslew, Directory of the City of Charleston ... 1860, 51; List of the Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1859 (Charleston, 1859); List of the Tax Payers of the City of Charleston for 1860 (Charleston, 1860), 91.
Tradd, and an officer in the Washington Fire Engine Company. Nixon, who signed the call but was not appointed a marshal, was better known than the rest as the owner of the Merchants’ Hotel, a few doors south of Feldmann’s shop on King. None of these men had played any significant role in the city’s political life heretofore, and none would have any measurable impact on its course thereafter. Like Sam Roberts, they were decidedly petit bourgeois: neither slaveholders nor likely to draw much direct benefit from the peculiar institution. But neither were they the sort of roughnecks who crowded the upper wards. As the club’s appointed leaders, they may hint at its social composition, and the constituencies that joined the march—though there is no way of verifying this directly.

Right or wrong, of course, any contemporary would have linked the YMSA to the Young Men’s Christian Association, which took root in Charleston—just across King Street from George Cook’s studio, three doors down from Steele’s Hat Hall—in the weeks after the rioting Will Taber’s Columbia speech sponsored. Just as secessionist groups hoped to steer fence-sitters into support of disunion, in March, 1854, the YMCA promised “to guide the young man amid the quicksands and breakers that beset his entrance into city life, [give] him ennobling friendships, and [point] the way to virtue and to God.” Perhaps there was no organizational tie between the YMCA and the YMSA—though Tommy Simons, the Democrat leader who endorsed the Vigilant Rifles’ petition to Governor Gist was a YMCA stalwart, and at least a few Vigilants were YMCA members. But disunionists would have understood the complaint evangelicals made about youth come to town: “Prayer meetings, lectures, and the other services of the sanctuary have little or no attraction for him, and he is never found there.” Without

72 Frederick A. Ford, *Census of the City of Charleston, South Carolina, for the Year 1861* (Charleston, 1861), 110; *Charleston Mercury*, February 7, 1859. Simons served as president in 1855, and vice-president in 1856. *Charleston Mercury*, March 15, 1855, February 13, 1856. By early 1856, 430 young men had joined Charleston’s YMCA. *Charleston Mercury*, March 3, 1856.
enlisting “the hearts and employ[ing] the hands” of Young Charleston in the cause of separatism, youthful dissent would surely “prey upon our vitals and steal away our strength.” Yet by emulating the strategy of the YMCA, “approach[ing] the citadel” of apathetic youth’s “heart by degrees,” YMSA cadres might draw in young men “in our daily walks, both in the counting-house, the forum, the market-place, and the workshop, who can never be reached… unaided and alone.”

Perhaps: though it seems hard to imagine that no overlap existed between the membership, strategies, and secondary purposes of these groups, evidence remains conjectural. Why men paraded with the YMSA, what they thought their action meant, remains obscure.

We can begin to solve these puzzles by retracing the demonstrators’ steps. Understanding where they marched helps explain why they marched. Sam Roberts’ letter describes this course precisely. There was nothing random about the route: it was planned by the Association leadership and published in local papers beforehand. The marchers knew where to assemble and where they were headed. The crowds knew where to congregate. All participants had a clear understanding of what would occur.

There were rules, then, both implied and explicit, which governed the conduct of the procession, boundaries to the action, and a precise, chess-like geometry to its movements. The rally formed on Citadel Green, in the shadow of the state military academy, heading down through the showplace of commerce, King Street (see map 8.1). It veered east, then south again along Meeting, past the public market, the South Carolina Institute Hall, the Mills House, and the Hibernian Hall, down to the Four Corners. Swinging left by the City Hall, the courthouse and guardhouse, and St. Michael’s Episcopal Church, demonstrators moved through the heart of Broad Street, past rows of banks, print shops and law offices. They turned north on East Bay, parading by the old Customs House, the scene of much turmoil in Revolutionary times and the

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73 Charleston Mercury, February 21, 1859.
MAP 8.1

YOUNG MEN'S SECESSION ASSOCIATION MARCH ROUTE, NOVEMBER 23, 1860
days of Nullification. Then they streamed up past the wharves and counting houses to Queen Street, just south of where the sprawling new customs house was going up slowly, a symbol of federal power, and dozens of local jobs filled by federal patronage. Then it was straight by the shops and firehalls on Queen and all the way back up King (with perhaps a bawdy cheer as they passed the bordellos on Chalmers and Beresford Streets) to the Citadel Green again.

This was a route of rich associations and political meanings, calculated to make the occasion “credible.” Everywhere they went, the Mercury reported, marchers encountered “the waving of handkerchiefs, and the cheers of the multitude that thronged the streets.”\textsuperscript{74} The procession never strayed south of Broad, into the narrow, quiet lanes where the gentry dwelt. It went nowhere near the swampy maze of theaters, mills, prisons, and poorhouses at the west end of Broad, nor into the solidly middle-class residential neighborhoods north of there. It stayed off the side streets and away from the alleys which were home to the city’s free negroes, sailors, and unskilled laborers. It avoided the disorderly, radical upper wards, and passed deliberately between the meeting rooms of the 1860 Association and the office of the Mercury, striking neither Scylla nor Charybdis. Marchers stuck fast to Charleston’s most public spaces, the avenues of commerce, trooping past stores and factorage houses, wharves and markets. These were the town’s most liminal places, the terrain of greatest political contention. They even passed by Steele’s Hat Hall, appropriately enough.

What can this description tell us about the procession’s purposes and meanings? First, the march was obviously a game, as both social theorists and Walter Steele’s readers would have understood the term: a “focused gathering” where individuals clustered temporarily around a common activity. These men and women defined a specific field of play within which particular rules of conduct and interaction were observed. Within its bounds, participants were

\textsuperscript{74} Charleston Mercury, November 23, 1860.
transformed: social distinctions of wealth, rank, and class were revalued or held in abeyance and skill at play alone determined one’s degree of success. Parade marshals guarded against deviations from the rules—impromptu speeches, random acts of violence, public drunkenness—and may have imposed penalties where required. So long as the game proceeded and the players remained in bounds, a social bond linked participants, and behavior which might have seemed outlandish, unacceptable, or even illegal in other circumstances was interpreted here as appropriate, even praiseworthy.\(^75\)

At game’s end, connivance ceased. The next day, proud standard-bearers changed back to drab tradesmen and shopkeepers. The historian Johan Huizinga stressed this liminal power of social and political subversion in his assertion that play “creates order, is order.” Whatever else it did, the Young Secessionists’ march allowed Charlestonians literally to play at disunion, pretending to an identity, individual and communal, that existed only as an abstract possibility. By trying on new characters, gauging social reaction to their behavior, players could embrace, modify, or discard the provisional order they had conjured up. The parade gave middle-class men the freedom to be dress-up revolutionaries for an hour or two, and to hope for more.\(^76\)

Certainly this is not to trivialize the marchers’ actions. It is, rather, to treat the apparently ephemeral as deeply meaningful. Virtually all ‘serious’ social interaction is approached by such

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indirection. For southerners to cross the bar to political independence in 1861, dozens and hundreds of such tentative, transgressions were required first. Viewing the disunionist march as play, moreover, suggests just how open-ended and evolving the process of secession in Charleston still was by late November. For reaction to the march was by no means a foregone conclusion, nor was it at all unified. According to the Mercury, there was popular enthusiasm for the procession as it transpired, but similar behavior played out on different terrain might have elicited a response far less encouraging. So we may deduce from election statistics, and so perhaps imagined the parade marshals who planned the route and controlled the conduct of play. When the “boys of the town” of Mount Pleasant, just beyond Charleston’s northern boundary, “got up some transparencies and had a torchlight procession” on November 10, a disgruntled Unionist scattered the parade and wounded eight demonstrators with a shotgun blast through an open window. In Charleston, one mishap like that might have unleashed a whirlwind of violence.77

Even as the march unfolded, not all Charlestonians pronounced it a success. Yeadon’s Courier said nothing the next day, except to chide participants for carelessness in handling fireworks. The editor recognized the march as play, but berated it as “harmful fun,” mingling “childish folly” with “inconsiderate rudeness.” “Point your rockets at the stars,” he warned, “and not at people or houses.” Both sniping criticism and broader silence labeled the march a species of sport within which issues of power and potential violence lay only half-hidden. If this incident is at all representative, then, disunion remained a veiled and contentious problem for fire-eaters and conservatives alike. Less than three weeks earlier, the Mercury had declared all

77 Charleston Mercury, November 12, 1860.
discussion of secession “premature.” By November’s end, the question was still by no means settled.  

That is one way of reading the tracks marchers left. There are others, complementary and interlocking, yet distinct. The YMSA was not only playing at politics by parading the city’s streets. It was performing quite deliberately in a thespian sense. Enacting a tale particular Charlestonians told about themselves, it satisfied “the human propensity” Erik Erikson describes “to create model situations in which aspects of the past are relived, the present re-presented and renewed, and the future anticipated.” Men here demonstrated disunion as a social drama eventuating in bloodless triumph before a rapt audience that “textualized” their performance and anointed it as history—and prophecy.

This was street theater, a ritualized form of communication as familiar and cathartic to Charlestonians as Greek tragedy was to ancient Athens. The men who marched assumed roles, manipulated props, and enacted scripts of political and cultural import to their audience, melodrama at its best. As marchers streamed on stage, toward the center of town, fireworks, colored lanterns and martial music set the scene. In the evening darkness, it must have been hard to pick out the features of any actor, yet the Mercury, like Sam Roberts, paid close attention to the banners they carried. These signs revealed their bearers’ character and foreshadowed the drama’s course for onlookers as clearly as any soliloquy, or electoral ticket.

Yet the newspaper mentioned no leader or dignitaries, no persons or groups which made up the throng. In this, the march’s theatrical purposes were fully achieved: divisive individual

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identities were temporarily dissolved in a heroic commonality. The effect of the transparencies, acting like giant photographic slides when light was projected upon them, must have been especially striking in presenting this theme. The thoughts and words of the demonstrators were by this device seemingly unified, magnified, and projected outward, hanging magically in midair, while drums beat and trumpets blared to underscore the message. The dramatic effect was impossible to escape. Momentarily, marchers became gloriously indistinguishable from the roles they assumed and the symbols they bore.\(^\text{80}\)

Considered as theater, as in play, the actors here employed a distinct division of labor and a common code of conduct, performing a script that would have been socially unacceptable in other settings. What was paraded through the signs they carried and the play they enacted was the sense of impending danger their characters and audience suffered under, their determination to triumph over threats by transcending internal divisions. Torches, lanterns, banners, flags, transparencies, uniforms, music—and the absence of any weaponry: each conveyed political information about the participants as a group and the themes of their drama. Each sign drew attention toward the social roles and collective character of the marchers, away from potentially divisive personalism. They urged onlookers not to disaggregate the spectacle into particular identities but to take heart in this public demonstration of common purpose.\(^\text{81}\)

This was the melodrama of the body politic, a fiction Charlestonians clung to desperately

\(^{80}\) On the use of transparencies as a form of theatrical device and commercial marketing, see Charleston, S. C., Theatre playbill, March 12, 1825, HTC, advertising Rembrandt Peale’s Lafayette transparency. For other examples from the disunion campaign, see Charleston Mercury, December 12, 17, 19, 1860; Charleston Daily Courier, December 12, 1860. From 1848 onward, the “scene artist” David M. Deveaux had sold such transparencies, along with “Masonic aprons, Banners… Fire Caps, and all kinds of Decorative Painting” from his shop at 122 King Street (“at the Sign of the Fireman”). Charleston Daily Courier, April 2, 1848.

on the eve of secession. All accounts recognized this theater and these themes. In their words and silences we can see the origins of Confederate belief: from the steady tramp of boys and men, indistinguishable from one another, united and determined, to the birth of a southern nation. In other times and places, Charlestonians were only too aware of the internal division, doubt, and conflict which threatened their world. On this stage, such fears were banished or projected outward. Young men swung down the street shoulder to shoulder, bold, united, confident. Let the Yankees come.

By design, of course, it was not Yankees the demonstrators’ action impinged upon, but Charlestonians. As in militia musters, the actors here were not simply pawns, proceeding by rote. Their demonstration provided a stage for interpreting and acting upon social reality and political identity. It was the South Carolina jeremiad itself marchers performed. A mechanism for improvisation, the parade was truly “a world-building activity.”

As the procession’s scripted drama drew to a close, too, a segment of participants and onlookers most moved by the performance demanded another act. Unwilling to abandon the liminality of the moment, they marched back down to the Mills House, where Congressman Laurence Keitt and other radicals were staying, serenading politicos with disunionist songs in return for an affirmative speech. The words those leaders offered only served to complement the more rousing and dramatically significant responses serenaders enacted. On this evening, the Mercury noted, such balcony scenes went on into the wee hours. And so melodramatic imagination pushed the margins of political disbelief a little farther back.

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The marchers, then, were actors as well as gamesmen, depicting themselves as worthy of honor: united, decisive, venturesome, action-oriented. They portrayed respectable champions of southern rights, rehearsing a bright, bloodless revolution which would triumph by daring forth without division, not by numbers or force of arms. No wonder their audience cheered so lustily. In Charleston in 1860, politics meant the desperately deep play of theater, games, and suicidal fantasy.

Such saber-rattling served more mercenary purposes, too. The potent connection between politics and commerce in this episode was unmistakable to participants and observers both. The YMSA deliberately staged its march in Charleston’s business district, and prominent among its organizers and participants were tradesmen and shopkeepers, the commercial middle class. Merchants contributed banners, transparencies, and perhaps much else to the parade. In the days following, some displayed its flags and symbols in their store windows. They filled local papers with ads hawking radical sentiment alongside commercial goods. Further than this, the march relied on a visual style of persuasion in just the same way King Street shops did. Politics here abandoned its appeal to the rational entirely: what mattered was that onlookers were led to see in this procession possibilities yet unrealized, and to move from imagination toward attainment of the vision they had conjured up.

Through such demonstrations and public rituals, Charlestonians learned to crave disunion in the same way they longed to purchase daguerreotypes, or new boots, or Walter Steele’s hats. In truth, the link between politics and enterprise was neither as new nor as strange as these techniques might suggest. Commerce nestled at the heart of politics in Charleston and all across the South, in more ways than one. Civic politics depended on the same loyalties of class, kinship and patronage that nurtured trade. In both areas, too, higher purposes mingled with dogged
pursuit of the main chance. The men who marched looked to the welfare and honor of their community in the same way leaders of the Broad Street Clique did. Yet none could be unmindful of the opportunity the parade offered to advance their own ambitions. Even patriots long to get a leg up.

Marchers may have had deeper motivations still for their actions, the terrain they chose, and the way they shaped their political message. Inextricably bound with the drive for unity in the South Carolina jeremiad was the fear of internal subversion. Melodrama and the code of honor were predicated on detecting and punishing counterfeit gentlemen. So, too, the themes of Steele’s ad linked politics as play, theater, and commerce with the question of betrayal. Even the banners YMSA marchers carried warned of “traitors” taking the field. But who were these Judases? That, at root, was what the torchlight procession aimed to discover, testing the loyalties of marchers and observers both. It exacted unspoken pledges from participants as surely as ‘Secession’’s questions did.⁸⁴

Those who joined the parade declared themselves young “men well-tried and true” to the southern cause, even though the few we can identify belonged to some of the most traditionally mistrusted groups in Charleston: immigrants, Germans and Jews, shopkeepers, clerks, mechanics. On that evening, they submerged individual identities in common allegiance to the state, demanding acknowledgment of support from those they marched by. That is one reason they trooped through the city’s commercial heart and along its turbulent waterfront, too. By custom, these were some of the most suspect areas, where dissent might have to be rooted out. The parade, then, was more than a simple celebration of militant Charleston. It was a political

confrontation between actors and audience, requiring each to portray zeal and constancy, playing them out in ritual fashion.

How sincere were such professions? “The playful nip denotes the bite,” psychiatrist Gregory Bateson reminds us, “but it does not denote what would be denoted by the bite.” That analogy goes far toward explaining the simple blandness of the marchers’ political program. By making the question turn on the options of “resistance” or “submission,” the unity all desired might be achieved, conflict dissipated, subversion vanquished more easily. Whether the doctrines men held privately clashed with public professions mattered little on that evening. The point of the march was to make men take a stand—“to stop debate and initiate action,” as Northrop Frye phrased it—not to persuade them of the wisdom of that choice.85

Thus the meaning of the YMSA parade goes to the heart of the disunionist campaign in South Carolina. At first glance, it seems surprising how leaderless, uncoordinated, and non-confrontational the secession movement was. Once the parameters of choice were established, there was little purposeful attempt at persuasion at all. But surely there was no need. Any true man would shun submission. Any loyal Carolinian would abstain from splitting hairs over the nature of resistance. As Miles, Keitt, and others were wont to say, “a word and a blow” was the South’s only answer to Northern aggression—“and the blow first.”86 Now was the time for decision, not dithering debate.

In Charleston especially, the radical campaign seemed remarkably decentralized, issueless, and off-the-cuff, more a free-form cultural festival than a political conflict. There was

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86 Laurence M. Keitt to James H. Hammond, October 30, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, L.C.
no organized disunionist party, no leadership cadres coordinating the action, visibly or otherwise. Although militants frequently congregated in well-known locations, such as the Mercury office, the French Coffee House, “Lord John” Russell’s bookstore, or the rooms above Courtenay’s print shop, their meetings were too impromptu and infrequent to accomplish much.87

These settings, too, were hardly congenial for drawing in the city’s merchants, workingmen, and petit bourgeoisie. As with other political activity, that mobilization went on primarily through clubs, factories, and associations in dozens of settings dispersed across the city. There was no possibility of creating a united secessionist leadership to guide so fragmented a community on such short notice. The multiplicity of electoral tickets brought forth in the fall campaigns proved that fully. For a committed radical and inveterate schemer like Barnwell Rhett the consequence was deeply ironic. Across nearly thirty years he had worked and waited for the chance to lead his state in the drive for independence. Now, without an effective party structure, he was reduced to the status of political oracle and bit player.88

Neither was there anything like a campaign to convince Charlestonians of the wisdom of secession. In the Mercury, the Evening News and, less frequently, the Courier, the question was approached ad hoc by letter writers, reprinted speech excerpts, and abundant reportage of local disunionist doings. But even the Rhetts’ editorials said little in support of the movement’s merits. They appealed more to passion than reason, keeping proposals general and views palatably vague. More surprising still was the silence of the local pamphlet and broadside press.

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Nearly a hundred books and tracts of various lengths were printed in Charleston in 1860, yet almost none of these focused on disunion. The cost of the Blue Ridge Railroad or the benefits of teaching slaves about the Bible attracted as much attention.89

Only the 1860 Association published pamphlets promoting secession. But even these showed different degrees of earnestness. In all, the group issued just six tracts between September 1860 and April 1861, five of which came from the Mercury’s columns. Press runs for these essays were massive, and several went through multiple editions, but their impact seems uneven at best. Certainly it was greater in the countryside, and perhaps beyond South Carolina’s borders than within Charleston proper. James D. B. De Bow’s The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder was simply not geared to an urban audience. Townsend’s The South Alone Should Govern the South, and African Slavery Should be Controlled by Those Only Who are Friendly to It was cogent propaganda, but surely reached few non-elite readers. And none of the tracts offered any practical program of action beyond injunctions to “Read and Send to Your Neighbor.” Given the temporizing secessionism of Gourdin and his circle, that was hardly surprising. Outside the 1860 Association, public discussion of “the Question” seemed deliberately suppressed for the sake of internal unity. Only traitors could consider “Resistance” or “Submission” a question at all.90


Charlestonians spoke instead of “the DECISION”—or kept mum altogether. Once made, political choice spurred manly action. The methods of melodrama leapt forth once again. Leaders were impelled to open declarations of loyalties, common citizens to public demonstrations of allegiance. Secession in the Queen City became a kaleidoscope of street-corner speeches, ward rallies, barroom boasts, torchlight processions, and midnight serenades, turning and shifting around a central axis of fear, honor, and self-interest. Like all Charleston politics in the last antebellum decade, these localized, multivalent activities joined broad social interests with narrow materialism.

As the YMSA march shows, despite claims of common alignment and internal cohesion, the unity these activities performed was cobbled together only roughly and provisionally. There was no single voice to Charleston politics, even at the hour of disunion, no common course of action. As with all civic affairs, rather, the direction of the secessionist tide was the outcome of disparate and often contrary thrusts by competing factions claiming to represent and mobilize Charleston’s contending tribes.

At street level, the public manipulation of symbols and the enactment of social dramas drove secession forward. In this respect, the pantomime of the Torchlight Procession shared much with a score of speechifying rallies held around the city in the weeks leading up to disunion. Consider the flag-raising Meeting and Hayne Street merchants held in mid-November. In the round of ceremonies responding to Lincoln’s election, Charleston’s “solid men” of commerce were conspicuously absent. This was the most conservative section of the populace, open to the greatest suspicion of disloyalty. Men in the business of selling might also be in the business of selling out. Coupled with those doubts, the looming suspension of specie payment by local banks put merchants under extra strain. Squeezed for cash, they had no choice except to

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91 Townsend, *The South Alone Should Govern the South*, 1.
press their customers in turn to pay up credit accounts. Invariably, these fellows had little hard money either. Resentment smoldered. “Forbearance in the community is nearly exhausted,” ‘Many Merchants’ told the *Mercury*.92

The ceremonial flag-raising aimed to counteract those feelings. In front of the Charleston Hotel, the merchants erected a hundred-foot “Liberty Pole” of Carolina pine. On the morning of November 17, a throng of several thousands gathered around it expectantly. “[T]he windows and balconies, as well as every other available standpoint that could command a view of the proceedings were all filled by ladies.” Everyone anticipated a memorable performance.93

They were not disappointed. Shortly after eleven o’clock, the cannon of the Lafayette Artillery roared out, a band struck up the “Marseillaise”—the “hymn of Revolution”—and a huge Palmetto flag was flung to the breeze. This was “truly a grand and inspiriting spectacle,” the *Mercury* declared. The merchants’ flag was “a symbol,” hardware store owner Alfred Price told the crowd, “of their loyalty to the State, and their readiness to vindicate the integrity of her soil and sovereignty.” One by one, local merchants and professionals trooped to the podium, pledging for “the cause of Southern emancipation.” Their declarations were “much too long to be in good taste,” thought Edmund Ruffin, but they were anything but dull.94

First, Theodore Barker contrasted the fates of North and South after secession was accomplished and federal tariffs overthrown. “Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant

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nation rousing herself like a strong man,” he plagiarized, “and shaking her invincible locks; methinks I see her, as an eagle, mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her endazzled eyes at the mid-day beam!” Next came Fred Robertson, a local physician, who compared secession to the pivotal battle of Wagram. There, against heavy odds, Napoleon’s troops had marched on, “never quailing… amid the smoke and carnage… to victory or death,” and so would South Carolina! Midway through his gory fable, Robertson was interrupted when someone placed a small Palmetto tree on the platform, drawing cheers from the crowd. The speaker never missed a beat. “Green and beautiful thou art now,” he addressed the tree, “mayest thou ever flourish, and may thy sons rally around you, and resolve with their best blood and energies to defend you even unto death.”

Defend a tree? And so it went: “like a gallant ship amid the stormy seas, reef every sail and breast the gale,” advised a shoe store owner. “The sooner blood was spilt perhaps the better,” mused a lawyer’s clerk. The druggist’s assistant Sam Hammond conducted a virtual disunionist séance, conjuring the radical departed one after another. “Hark to the mighty voices of Calhoun and Hayne and McDuffie,” he told the audience.

They ask, ‘What! will ye, the sons of Sumter and Marion and Moultrie, submit to old Abe Lincoln? [Never.] Will ye look at the flag of your State, which is now flaunting proudly to the breeze from your liberty-pole—look at it, while every angel eye of Heaven is peering through the cloudless skies and smiling down upon it—look at it and say will ye submit to Black Republican domination? [Shouts of No! No!] If ye do, O shades of the venerated dead, look down from on high, I pray you, curse the coward heart—wither with your frowns the craven soul—brand with indignant voices “traitor, traitor” on each dastard brow!

The crowd went wild.96

95 Barker here plundered the well-known words of Washington Irving, The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon (New York, 1922), 45.

96 Mary Bachman to Kate Bachman, November 19, 1860, John Bachman Papers, CM.
To modern sensibilities, the action here seems overblown, the rhetoric more than a little ridiculous. But not to the audience that saluted the merchants’ flag: they expected melodrama and enjoyed every minute of it. Like the Torchlight Procession, the merchants’ flag-raising revealed itself as play and theater both. Players constructed the action here as a game, focused around the raising of the flag and the making of speeches. Once they stood before the throng, the men on stage assumed remarkable new identities, catching the audience up in the spirit of performance and enlisting them to play along. Cannon boomed, music blared, and brave rituals were enacted, wood and cloth and trees transformed into symbols of deep meaning. Men pretended to summon spirits or act the part of daring warriors. Collectively, they portrayed themselves as revolutionaries, and for the moment they were. Upon that liminal ground, southern independence became fleetingly real.

Ultimately, however, the central purposes of this rally, and others like it, converged on questions of commerce and subversion. The themes were closely intertwined. Quite deliberately, the flag-raising was performed in the heart of the city’s retail district by a coalition of merchants, underlings and neighbors. Some of these doubtless hoped that rendering public support for secession would pay off on their balance sheets. Within days, many of the shops on Meeting and Hayne were decked out in disunionist bunting. Likewise, ambitious young clerks like Sam Hammond could not help but see that a pleasing performance on stage would boost their career prospects. Secession might be made a paying proposition--and who would complain of that?

But what the Meeting Street rally was selling, first and last, was the dream of social unity. Raising the flag aimed transparently at raising the social and political stock of the men who organized it. Barker, Robertson, and the rest took the stage and spoke so melodramatically
precisely to dispel fears that Charleston merchants were soft on secession. Their audience came to show that they, too, stood with their state. The speakers performed appropriately, the crowd acted as required, and both sides parted affirmed, reassured, elated. The shade of Calhoun would discover no traitors in their midst.\(^97\)

On this ground, then, the South Carolina jeremiad seemed realized. As Charlestonians made common cause around their liberty pole, factional and class divisions melted away momentarily. In large measure, that explains why this meeting, like most others, seems so loose-limbed and aimless. It did not yearn toward anything in particular, nor did it suggest any spark which might link it with past events or future plans. It seems remarkably self-contained and \textit{ad hoc}: a politicized \textit{tableau vivante}.

So long as we consider secession the summit Charlestonians were striving toward, their behavior in this instance makes little sense. But, as the merchants’ rally shows, secession was a means, not an end in itself, a vehicle Carolinians employed to gain the goal they truly aimed at. Indeed, we might better view “southern emancipation” as a pretext for performance at the flag-raising and the YMSA march. And the response to Lincoln’s election itself. The purpose of this rally—and of disunion—was to root out traitors and create a united front. Social Unity was not essential as a mechanism for achieving secession. Rather, secession came to seem essential for achieving social unity.\(^98\) It was not finally the Yankees, but each other, Charlestonians feared most.

That reversal puts the endless round of serenades Charlestonians performed in these weeks in a very different light, too. In both structure and organization, serenades differed from processions, flag-raisings, and other forms of radical ritual. These were frequently spontaneous

\footnotesize{\(^97\) One scholar aptly describes such behaviors as “alibis.” Roland Barthes, \textit{Mythologies} (New York, 1972), 128-129.}

\footnotesize{\(^98\) Cf. Elizabeth R. Varon, \textit{Disunion: The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859} (Chapel Hill, 2008).}
events, never announced to the public beforehand. Although they made no effort to conceal performances--to say the least--serenaders showed no interest in entertaining bystanders either. Serenades broke down the barrier between actors and audience deliberately, requiring all to take part and be judged accordingly.

From all we know, serenade participants were uniformly male and always made their rounds under cover of darkness. The practice was one of long standing among the “young men of Charleston.” Peter Neilson had admired the “considerable spirit” of serenaders in the 1820s, and political rivalry kept the custom thriving down to the hour of secession. By then, its forms and dynamics were well established. Normally, serenades took place after a club meeting or political rally, though a simple night on the town could provide the impulse to action. But serenades were neither an afterthought, nor were they promiscuous gatherings, as flag-raisings and other events usually were. Participants here were already known to each other and had achieved common ground politically before they set forth in song. A united front was the foundation of serenade. What, then, was its purpose?99

Serenaders’ action aimed to enhance social unity, to test others by their example, and to affirm singers in their political achievement. Whether accompanied by a band or proceeding a capella, marchers moved through the streets, belting out partisan songs beneath the windows of prominent public figures. Those leaders were expected to offer thanks, usually accompanied by an expression of their views on the crisis of the day, and often “refreshments” as well. In the course of an evening, serenaders might visit four or five homes, gaining and losing participants

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99 Peter Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States of America, Interspersed with Original Anecdotes, Illustrating the Manners of the Inhabitants of the Great Western Republic (Glasgow, 1830), 316. For examples of serenades, see Charleston Mercury, October 13, November 7, 13, 17, December 17, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 18, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, May 12, 1860, December 22, 25, 1860.
along the way, and stopping off at local pubs *en route* to improve their voice. It made for a rowdy, exciting, manly night.100

The ludic and theatrical character of the serenade was obvious. Usually, the sight of a crowd of boisterous, tipsy men belting out “Dixie” under the gaslights would draw police, not public approval. But the political pretext of these performances denoted them as worthy and public-spirited, even marginally respectable. These were consciously ordered games aiming to overcome dissent and strengthen social unity. They allowed performers to portray themselves as true-hearted heroes, to test the devotion of those who aimed to lead them, and to gain a “well done” from fellow radicals for their own high spirits. The popularity of such exercises is easy to understand.101

At their most banal, serenades were simply an extension of club or militia activity, often directly so. Yet serenaders flouted disorder openly and carried along with them the hint of suppressed violence. In this sense, serenades were really charivaris, group-sanctioned rituals of honor and shame enacted to enforce social unity.102 That all accounts of Charleston serenades conclude on a note of mutual affirmation and common cause only shows that speakers at these encounters had the wit to say what was expected of them. And then, of course, there was no going back. Local moderates like Tommy Simons and John Honour were prodded toward the radical camp by serenades, and outside Charleston calls made on James L. Orr and William W.

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100 *Charleston Mercury*, October 12, December 10, 11, 1860; *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 15, 1860.


Boyce were instrumental in squelching cooperation in the upcountry. The Mercury’s editor was pleased to hear “the hearty cheers and the well-done of our fellow-citizens” echo in the still of the night. But compliments were not the main reason the men of the Phoenix Fire Company were bellowing outside his door, as he inadvertently revealed. Their visit was “incentive to greater effort” on behalf of secession, a reminder that, for good or ill, he was “thought of.” Any Rhett would find that fact warming, but for other men the sound of song operated in the same way the sight of the blue cockade did. When serenaders came calling, it was time to face the music.

As a goad to political conformity, serenades worked well. That is the ultimate lesson John D. Ashmore’s over-the-cliff response to disunionist hecklers taught. There is no sign that any rally which began in song ended in riot, though local papers would have suppressed such incidents, and relevant records are lost. Still, no one missed the aggressive edge and vigilante spirit songsters brought to their task. When the Charleston Light Dragoons serenaded Frank Richardson on December 6, he was quick to “disclaim some opinions which had been unfairly attributed to him,” that he opposed seizing the federal forts in the harbor mouth. Others took pains to explain away moderate pasts and hail the dawning revolution. True radicals put the burden back on serenaders themselves, in the best tradition of the jeremiad. “Strive… to be united,” Barnwell Rhett told one crowd. “Let us present a hollow square to our enemies.” Here was the highest purpose of the serenaders’ action, and the chief end of secession, too.

On December 20, Charlestonians played out the climactic scene in the social drama of

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103 Charleston Mercury, December 10, 13, 1860; (Spartanburg) Carolina Spartan, November 8, 1860.

104 Charleston Mercury, October 12, December 9, 1860.
disunion. More than three thousand people packed “Secession Hall” that evening. At the center of the stage, bedecked with banners and palmetto boughs, on the surface of a simple writing desk, lay a single sheet of paper. Every eye rested on it. One by one, through the anxious crowds, one hundred seventy stern-faced men in broadcloth mounted the platform and set their names upon the page. They were planters, lawyers, merchants, manufacturers, farmers, editors, famous and little-known. Gourdin and Hayne and Conner were there, Magrath, Manigault and Honour, Miles, Spratt and Simons, Richardson, McCrady, and Rhett, of course, who knelt melodramatically to pray before signing. When, at last, the procession of delegates had ended, dour David Jamison, presiding over the meeting, took up the sheet and held it forth to the astonished audience. “The Ordinance of Secession has been signed and ratified,” he announced. “I proclaim the State of South Carolina an Independent Commonwealth.” His words unleashed a thunderous shout, rolling over the hall and into the streets, where thousands more took it up. Out on Meeting and over on King, cheering men by the hundreds raised their hats aloft on walking sticks, shaking them wildly. “There is great public rejoicing, testified by happy faces, congratulations, ringing of bells, booming of cannon &c. &c.,” Ben Whitner recorded. “I hope it is emblematical of our future State of existence as a nation.”

Whether the unity, harmony, and resolution of the signing ceremony would carry into the months ahead, as Whitner hoped, none could say. Certainly, however, the scene at Institute Hall was “emblematical,” just as the whole secessionist campaign had been: a contrived, symbolic

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106 John A. May and Joan R. Faunt, South Carolina Secedes (Columbia, 1960), 16; Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina, held in 1860-’61. Together with the Reports, Resolutions, &c. (Charleston, 1861), 46-47; Thomas Choate to Arthur G. Cudworth, December 21, 1860, Arthur G. Cudworth Papers, SCL; Charleston Mercury, December 21, 1860; Charleston Courier, December 21, 1860; (Spartanburg) Carolina Spartan, January 3, 1861; Benjamin F. Whitner to Ann Whitner, December 20, 1860, Whitner Family Papers, SCL.
ceremony enacted to affirm a radical shift in the social order, not to ignite one. Ethnographers call this a rite in the indicative mode—focused deliberately on what is and has been, not aiming at any sort of prospective change. Signing the Ordinance did nothing to create a new government or a new nation. In December 1860, the “Independent Republic of South Carolina” could not even deliver its own mail, much less defend its sovereignty. The “foreign” flags flying over the forts in Charleston harbor were emblems, too, constant reminders of that weakness. The text of the Ordinance only announced that the state had repealed its ratification of the Federal Constitution—giving no reasons—and that the Union “is hereby dissolved.” Even that “hereby” was misleading. Actually, the repeal had taken place eight hours earlier, when convention delegates voted on the question down the road at the St. Andrew’s Hall. The true purpose of the signing, then, could hardly be to accomplish secession, though the city marshaled all the pomp and ceremony it could, plus a larger venue to accommodate the jubilant host. That fact was old news long before sundown.107

Setting names on paper in the presence of the assembled citizenry was, rather, a symbolic act once more, a piece of theater denoting determination, volition, and concord. With one voice, at long last, the polity had spoken. It was that unity, so painfully sought, that Carolinians celebrated on that December night, fully as much as their achievement of political separation. Independence, after all, might prove temporary. No one expected tiny South Carolina to toddle on for long unaided. Already outsiders sputtered that, vote or no vote, the state lacked any right to overturn the federal compact. Playing at signing some “Ordinance” could have no bearing on that debate. It was only one more sign, symbolic as ever, of the will to resist.108

Symbols are tricky, delusive things, Charlestonians knew. No scrap of paper could keep faction down. Unity would be achieved by deeds of force, not words of valor. Resolute soldiers, not wire-pulling politicians, would make disunion real. That was the message Sam Tupper and the Vigilant Rifles sent forth in the weeks leading to secession. While others speechified over Lincoln’s win, they were studying William J. Hardee’s Tactics. While merchants raised flags and young men held torchlight processions, they were taking up arms and drilling. Some members shared in those other “emblematic” activities, to be sure. But for these men as a group, for whatever reason, radicalism did not stop at symbolism.

Nominated as a delegate to the secession convention in November, Sam Tupper hastened to decline the honor. Other Vigilants had refused to stand for the legislature a month before. Grateful he was for the compliment, Tupper told the Mercury, but his talents were better employed “in the continuance of those duties” which he considered “of the most vital importance.” Let others fool with fine talk and fanciful deeds, Tupper seemed to say. Opponents whispered that he was simply hiding political conservatism behind a front of military activity. Regardless, Tupper declared, he would press forward unrelenting with “the disciplining and equipment of a gallant body of men, who are earnestly preparing for the inevitable conflict before us.” For these, as for all Charlestonians, politics at the end of 1860 meant many things—play, theater, intrigue, and commerce among them. But Tupper’s men took the passion for politics, the fear of internal disunity one step further. They pledged to stand “nobly together” in defense of their state and the jeremiad which shaped it. Or so bold words promised.

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108 The ironic outcome of the convention’s activities is well examined in Laura A. White, “The Fate of Calhoun’s Sovereign Convention in South Carolina,” American Historical Review, 34 (1928-29): 757-771.

109 William J. Hardee, Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics; for the Exercise and Manoeuvres of Troops when Acting as Light Infantry or Riflemen (Philadelphia, 1855).

110 Charleston Mercury, November 27, 1860.
CHAPTER NINE:
THE BOARD AND MEN

With a name as prestigious as his, Charles Elliott Rowand Drayton should have been an aristocratic planter or a powerful politician like his forebears, not a common merchant and auctioneer. But by 1860 money counted as much in Charleston as blue blood, and Drayton’s status derived first from bourgeois standing and respectable connections. The city was full of such convoluted, contentious identities. On September 11, his name headed four advertisements in the *Courier*, marking him as one of the most active and successful traders in the city. Three notices were new and promised quick returns: the “very likely” slave Moses, age thirteen; the small farm on the Charleston Neck, waiting to be split into building lots; the steam boiler, fire brick, and wrought iron at the Railroad Accommodation Wharf, ready to rear another foundry above Calhoun Street. Wealth and trade of all sorts flowed through Drayton’s lightly grasping fingers.¹

Merchants were foxy, pliant fellows, many believed, forever marginal and mediating. In Charleston, slaves, lands, and machines served admirably both to focus and disguise the warring relations between men in the marketplace. Karl Marx called that exchange-based displacement of social power the “fetishism of commodities.”² But there were other ways by which Charlestonians triangulated personal standing through object relations. There was, for example, chess.

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Or, at least, there had been. The fourth item Drayton offered that day seemed vexingly trivial, less ad than admission of failure. Ten “sets of CHESS-MEN, with TABLES and BOARDS attached,” plus two oil paintings, were not easy to sell; not any more. These were the “remainder of those used by the Charleston Chess Club,” his notice explained. With that group’s sudden demise, its equipment “of the most approved pattern” went on the block, to be “disposed of at a very low price.” Drayton had no choice: had local interest remained strong, the club he served as secretary would not have folded in the first place. The value of things, he hinted, rested finally on the political and social relations of men--and those were in desperate flux. Bidders came forth, we may surmise, since his ad disappeared on September 15. But who they were, what their purposes, and how Drayton closed the sale remains unknown. Who could bother with games when the country itself was breaking up?

Searching for significance in the sale of chess sets on the eve of war, or looking for links between chess and secession may seem odd and contrived. Yet in the late 1850s chess became a central element in the symbolic world of white Charlestonians. Indeed, from the autumn of 1857 to the spring of 1860, the city seemed gripped by a perfect “chess-mania.” The whole country was. At a time when social and political tensions between North and South strained to the breaking point, the exploits of the New Orleans prodigy Paul Morphy made “the noble game” a national craze. Could chess-play checkmate sectional strife? Certainly the “extraordinary interest” chess aroused “throughout the whole Continent” was “a subject of wonder.” Why did men flock to one cause or another, to chess, or secession, or anything else?

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3 Charleston Courier, September 8-13, 1860. The decline of chess in Charleston was a decidedly local phenomenon. Clubs in Camden, South Carolina and other southern centers apparently went along as usual despite the onset of disunionism. Charleston Courier, February 26, March 19, May 12, 1859. Indeed, at the end of August, a new club organized in Savannah with fifty members. Charleston Mercury, September 1, 1860.

4 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, May 5, 1859; Charleston Courier, September 12, 1860; New York Times, November 23, 1858. Morphy scholars have considered his prodigy and ability, not social meaning. Ernest L. Jones,
Across the antebellum era, Victorians became increasingly aware of the power of fashion to shape social relations and political destiny. Scots economist Charles Mackay’s 1841 volume, *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, told how “millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first.” Men “think in herds” and “go mad in herds,” he argued, launching witch-hunts, economic bubbles, and popular crazes of all sorts, too often ending in “rivers of blood.” Had Mackay written two decades later, he might well have included chess-play—and disunion—as worthy examples of the irrationalism of modern life.

By 1860, America had undergone “a great revolution,” establishing chess as the national pastime. Asking, “Do you play chess?” became a ubiquitous and discriminating method of evaluating new acquaintances, weighing the cultural capital they possessed, and gauging their position in broader class terms. But chess-mania hit Charleston especially hard. Formerly, chess had been “confined to persons of antiquarian tendencies,” one annoyed housewife noted, “generally of wealth and leisure.” By 1859, all that had changed.

Now, everybody talks learnedly of its mysteries, and everyone plays, from Paul Morphy down to the junior clerk of a dry goods store. Until recently, I never heard of chess more than a half dozen times in my life, and always supposed it was confined to members of historical and zoological societies; but for the past year I have heard of nothing but chess. We have eaten chess, drank chess, and dream of it when we sleep.

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What accounts for this odd fascination—in Charleston, of all places? And why did interest in chess unravel so suddenly on the eve of Lincoln’s election? Did secession fever simply supplant “chess fever?” That political crisis left no time for games seems obvious. Yet, as microanalysis of the politics of secession shows, play was at the heart of the revolutionary process. And chess is nothing, psychoanalyst Ernest Jones reminds us, but “a play-substitute for war.”

Understanding why Charlestonians were drawn so magnetically toward chess-play, then just as swiftly repelled, helps explain both the attraction of disunion as political strategy in 1860 and the complex motivations of radical Minute Men. Charles Drayton, for instance, was not only a member of Charleston’s merchant class and a leader of its chess community. Like many fellow players, he was also a private in the Vigilant Rifles. Aggressively masculine, at once bourgeois and aristocratic, part sport, part social ritual, chess concentrated elements of play, theatre, commerce and subversion in the same way Charleston politics did, enacting the values, aspirations, fantasies and fears of its practitioners with melodramatic clarity. The exchanges men made across the game board here seemed just as socially meaningful—and, eventually, as alarming—as those of shape-shifting commercial trade or politics. That Drayton and his fellows transferred the triangulations they plotted between manhood, commerce, duplicity, and war from chess-play to secession suggests much about what it meant to be a Minute Man in Charleston on the eve of disunion.

Shortly before his death in 1835, the British chess champion Alexander McDonnell explained the attraction and repulsion of the game with a crack doubly wise. The only things

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wrong with chess, he declared, “were the board and men.” The same could have been said of the political game Walter Steele described. The men who met across the board in Charleston especially, as adversaries, brothers, and more, discovered in chess a mode of re-creation of the truest and most menacing sort.

Like politics, chess in Charleston came to focus on a deceitful theatre of self-portrayal, a playful commerce of status-seeking. It need not have. Virtually no one at mid-century saw any vital connection between chess and politics, the board and men. Genteel society considered the game one of the social graces any man of merit should know, like dancing or polite conversation, a charming admixture of ritual, recreation, and aptitude. Facility at chess aided those making the “Grand Tour” of Europe, the final examination of young manhood among the elite. Thus the Bostonian who wrote *Etiquette* and *Conversation* followed up those advice manuals in 1844 with *The Chess-Player’s Hand-Book*. Showing “the best mode of playing” the game, his guide went through new editions in 1849 and 1850. By that date, though, Americans played chess neither very much, very well, nor very seriously. In an age of fads, it was not even second-rate.11

Antebellum Americans felt the need for diversion keenly. Yet, for most, the distinction between labor and leisure remained too imprecise for sport as a mode of passing the time to attain the force of custom. The worlds of work and play interpenetrated everywhere except among those wealthy or powerful enough to escape toil, or too lazy to earn their keep.12 Artisans labored at an uneven, indulgent pace, taking their leisure as the mood struck them, defending

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11 *The Chess-Player’s Hand-Book; Containing a Full Account of the Game of Chess, and the Best Mode of Playing It* (Boston, 1844); Alfred C. Klahre, *Early Chess in America* (Middletown, 1934); Horatio Smith, *Festivals, Games, and Amusements, Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1833).

traditional caps on production regardless of dexterity and skill. Common workers toiled when need and opportunity crossed paths and not often otherwise.\(^\text{13}\) So, too, the farmer sick of hoeing corn in the summer sun seldom hesitated to rest in the shade, tip a jug with his neighbor, or ride into town to see what was doing. “Fish I must & will have,” one upcountry farmer told his journal in 1859, dropping work for three days in mid-season to go angling for bream. “I know that [I] can make more by staying at home and attending to my farm. But I have an inclination to go and am too apt to give way to it.” It was a healthy if undisciplined attitude which died hard in the market towns and mill villages springing up along the Atlantic seaboard in these years.

Whether in a public tavern or a private club, as the owner of the fastest horse in the county, or as captain of the local baseball team, Americans shaped visions of personal and social identity through play, ascribing fictive kinships, imagining alternative histories, embracing surrogate tribes. In a society inured to hard labor and sudden mortality, this was the better part of life.\(^\text{14}\)

By mid-century, though, sport and games were held in disdain by many Americans, particularly the rising middle class. Traditionally, it had been the publican or professional gambler who got up contests for private profit, or more dissolute members of the elite—“the fancy”—eager to demonstrate wealth and status.\(^\text{15}\) Under the ethos of capitalist accumulation, time passed too easily became time wasted—or worse, as Marx memorably explained.


Self-renunciation, the renunciation of life and of all human needs, is [capitalism’s] principal thesis. The less you eat, drink and buy books; the less you go to the theater, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital.¹⁶

From the pleasures of hoisting a pint to the running of footraces, sport and recreation were chided as fruitless and harmful.¹⁷ Advocates replied that play bolstered health and profits both. “Exercise & recreation are actually necessary,” one Carolinian explained, for a young man to be vigorous and successful “in whatever employment he may be engaged.”¹⁸ In Charleston and elsewhere, such views nurtured the wave of voluntary association which circumscribed and transfigured male leisure activities. Even devoted hunters like Maxcy Gregg viewed play through the prism of accumulation, keeping careful tallies of the number and type of animals they shot—which were often quite astonishing. “I have Kilt more Deer and turkeys this year than four families could make us[e] of,” another midlands marksman crowed. So, too, the seacoast’s most famous sportsman, William Elliott, showed little interest in hunting and fishing for their own sake. Exciting though the chase scenes in the memoirs he published always were, their meaning emerged only as the melodramatic victory of man over beast and the chance to boast of honor affirmed.¹⁹


Reformers rejected honor, melodrama, and more, chastising sport for creating destructive imbalances between mind and body. Evangelicals used this theme to castigate “vain amusements and carnal pleasures,” sailing far beyond the Protestant ethic. They thumped their Bibles against boxing and cock-fighting for the bloodlust they inspired, horse-racing and card play as pretenses for gambling, dancing and gymnastics for sensuality and lack of restraint. At South Carolina College, cricket and cards stood only slightly up the scale from drinking and whoring among proscribed amusements. Sports of all kinds ranked as theatre of the lowest sort, unfettered by meaning or moral.\(^{20}\)

Even chess, thought Virginian George Fitzhugh, “should be carefully avoided,” like other “merely intellectual amusements.” Improving “neither mind nor body,” the game enacted an unmanly “throwing away” of time and effort.\(^{21}\) There was, in fact, nothing like a leisure activity that respectable men could enjoy—until Paul Morphy came along. In late 1857, Americans united in self-praise for their special talent at the Royal Game, transforming chess into the first national sporting craze. Less than three years later, sectional conflict and the perversely polymorphous politics of their obsession sent them spinning away from play. Again, it need not have been so. Why did Paul Morphy’s perversity so shatter Charleston’s chess community?

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Representative of opinion in South Carolina is *Charleston Courier*, August 27, September 9, 1842; “Cock-Fighting,” *Southern Light*, 1 (1856): 200; Henry W. Hilliard to James H. Hammond, June 21, 1827, James Henry Hammond Papers, SCL. What constituted a sport in the antebellum era was wide open to debate in popular culture and at law. An Ohio court, for example, considered billiards a legitimate form of “athletic exercise,” raising the question whether checkers or even poker might not stake a similar claim. (Charleston) *Southern Patriot*, October 27, 1843.

\(^{21}\) George Fitzhugh, “Love of Danger and of War,” *De Bow’s Review*, 28 (1860): 302. That view was not unusual. As late as 1855, West Point cadets were forbidden to play chess. *Charleston Courier*, November 2, 1855. For similar criticisms, see *Charleston Courier*, September 29, 1857, March 22, 1859.
Across ten centuries, the chessboard has been *tabula rasa*, awaiting the significations culture inscribes upon it.\(^\text{22}\) There is no special quiddity to the game. Chess consists of a checkered board, a set of “men” of various sorts, a list of rules to govern play: nothing more. The goal is to “capture” one opposing piece, denoted as the King. Mastery is reckoned in terms of skill in achieving this purpose; there is no other objective measure of the quality of play.\(^\text{23}\) Chess does not aim to rank or reflect the moral, emotional, physical, or intellectual attributes of players. Nor was it made to comment on social relations or political events. And though the “man” or “piece” denoted as the Queen radiates mobility and striking power far beyond other tokens—while the King seems stunningly slow and weak—this irony implies no necessary opinion on the status of women and men, real or ideal. From the Middle Ages onward, though, observers and antagonists have projected meanings and qualities of wide variety on chess and chess players both, revealing in miniature central strategies of social behavior and individual deportment. Above all, the board taught men, in disparate ways, how to be men: members of a successful, self-governing elite. Until Paul Morphy confounded all.\(^\text{24}\)

Apart from the game’s simple ingenuity, medieval elites enjoyed the chance for bloodless self-assertion chess offered, performing playful combats against rivals and friends they would never oppose directly. Considered one of the seven knightly virtues, skill at chess-play also served as a coded scale of social definition, setting off the tip-top from the *hoi polloi*. William

\(^{22}\) On the structural analysis of games, see especially Roger Callois, *Man, Play, and Games* (New York, 1958).


Caxton’s *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (1474)—just the second book printed in English—took familiarity with the game for granted, using chess play as allegory for political conflict whereby citizens of various ranks each contributed to the common good. Aptitude here signaled gentility in the same fetishized way facility at dancing, command of servants, or possession of a tea set later would, obviating the need for bolder shows of prowess. Honor’s subtle gestures displaced chivalry’s brave deeds.\(^{25}\)

Shakespeare’s *Tempest* illustrates how elites embraced that new ethic of sublimated conflict, social harmony, and “fair play” within their ranks. The comedy’s climax discovers the son of Alonzo, shipwrecked King of Naples, and the daughter of Prospero, deposed Duke of Milan, vying at chess. But this battle of the sexes is all sweetness: their *tableau vivante* presents intrigue transcended and conflict resolved.\(^{26}\) Presenting politics, chess, and gender as full of gambits and deception, mastered only by shrewd triangulation and cunning, it offered a lesson pleasing and profitable.\(^{27}\) Small wonder Raleigh and Richelieu were devotees.


\(^{27}\) Shenk, *Immortal Game*, 65-75. See also G. B[lochimo], *Ludus Scacchiae: Chesse-play. A Game both Pleasant, Wittie, and Politicke. With Certain Brief Instructions Thereunto Belonging.... Containing also Therein a Prety and
With the spread of rationalism, chess shifted from an exercise of craft to an expression of reason, serving, in Goethe’s phrase, as “the touchstone of the intellect.” Minds clashed across the board, in this view, and minds met. In the coffeehouses of London where radical ideas flowed freely, and Britain’s first chess club formed in 1772, gentlemen recognized each other by their demeanor at play, the Indian or Chinese-crafted sets they used, and the leisure they shared. So, too, for French enthusiasts like Voltaire, Diderot, and Rousseau, the game gave practical proof of reason’s triumph.

Others took meritocracy’s logic a step further still. It may be unsurprising that Robespierre embraced a game whose object was king-killing, that Napoleon, like Frederick the Great and others, saw chess as a test of military skill and a measure of genius. Just as Clausewitz formulated new laws of military success in these years, so the first chess masters developed sequences of moves based on principles of warfare, hoping to ensure victory in “the battle of chess.” The successful player, declared one handbook,

must be able equally to arrange the plan of preliminary operations—to act at once and with decision in cases of the most pressing emergency, and on the occurrence of the most unforeseen events—to judge of the importance of a position and of the strength of an intrenchment—to discover from the slightest indications the designs of the enemy, while his own are impenetrable—and at the same time to

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Pleasant Poem of a Whole Game Played at Chesse (London, 1810? [1597]); [William Cartwright], The Game at Chesse: a Metaphorical Discourse Shewing the Present Estate of this Kingdom; the Kings, the Queens, the Bishops, the Knights, the Rooks, the Pawns; the Knights Signifie the High Court of Parliament; the Rookes, the Cavaleers (London, 1643); T. H. Howard-Hill, “Introduction,” in Thomas Middleton, A Game at Chess (Manchester, 1993): 33.


preside with unshaken self-possession over the tumult of the battle-field, and the raging fury of an assault.  

Play and political slaughter here converged on the terrain of melodrama.

With the advent of capitalism, chess shifted from “the image of human life, and particularly of war” to a less-than-playful site of social commerce. It became a game of profit, worthy of Poor Richard himself. Appropriately, Ben Franklin’s 1779 essay, “The Morals of Chess,” distilled that new meaning. The board presented neither metaphor nor meta-reality, the canny philosopher asserted. As life itself had become “a kind of chess,” playing was now “not merely innocent, but advantageous,” teaching practical lessons in moderation, foresight, caution, and perseverance.

Winning the game was beside the point. It was what took place at, not on the board that mattered. Social capital was there to be seized, Franklin argued. So his essay offered a primer in respectability, providing hints for players “to pass the time agreeably.” No “action or word that is unfair, disrespectful,” or gave cause for unease should intrude. No deceit could be countenanced. “You should not sing,” he explained, “nor whistle, nor look at your watch, nor take up a book to read, nor make a tapping with your feet on the floor, or with your fingers on the table, nor do anything that may disturb [your opponent’s] attention.” Nor, as in other modes of exchange, should prudent players “show too much pleasure” in their success. “[C]onsole your


adversary” in defeat, Franklin counseled. That was sound advice in politics or commerce, though it did little to advance chess as an enjoyable diversion. However pragmatic, such mannered maxims made the game deadly dull.32

Like emerging market society, Franklin’s genteel code hardly went unopposed. Victorian enthusiasm for high ideals and Romantic aspiration to personal nobility pushed back hard against the calculating purposes of policy. As men searched for ways to disclose their best selves, rejecting material interest in pursuit of worthier passions, they turned toward play with a new sense of purpose and sincerity.33 “Quackery and dupery do abound,” Thomas Carlyle warned. They were the source of Victorians’ greatest fears, the heart of melodrama’s heuristic design—and the creative fun at the core of the games they played. “Alas, in all of us this charlatan-element exists” alongside the too-trusting nature of the dupe. Yet Carlyle held out hope. There were great men still—true heroes—whose masculine earnestness was unalloyed and unassailable, clear-sightedness triumphing over falsehood and cant. “Such things,” bad and good, “were and are in man,” he promised; “in all men; in us too.”34

And yet, all understood, Franklin’s philosophy of crafty conformity must shade—if not trump—sincerity in the public sphere. Were men to parade the dreamy heroism they so admired in the course of daily life, “their virtues would be as fatal to any imaginable condition of society as their vices.” Antebellum Americans spoke of living intrepid lives of realism and candor, yet

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33 In South Carolina, even temperance advocates feared the presence of “Benedict Arnolds” in their midst—seeking popularity and “self interest” above fraternal unity—“ever ready to trim their sales [sic] for the popular breeze.” George Allen, Anniversary Address. Delivered before the Abbeville Division Sons of Temperance, No. 27..., on the 11th of July, 1849. Being their First Celebration (Charleston, 1849), 17-18.

34 Thomas Carlyle, On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History (Berkeley, 1993), 5-6, 207. The appeal of Carlyle’s argument to Victorian chess players is explained in George A. MacDonnell, Chess Life-Pictures, Containing Biographical Sketches, Caisiana, and Character-Sketches (London, 1883), 146-149.
most felt thwarted from achieving those identities. Some stretched their hands toward a
vanishing frontier. Thoreau went off to live in a hut. Others learned to play out their dreams on
the chessboard. In South Carolina, the fortunes of chess were said to be “vastly on the increase”
by 1850, though votaries remained few.  

By that date in that place, chess mastery connoted little of the attributes of gender, class,
and power men would seek to portray a few years further on. Indeed, socially speaking, most
wondered whether the game was worth the candle. Even the “best chess-player in Christendom,”
sneered Edgar Allan Poe, was “little more than the best player of chess.” And that was nothing
at all. Chess taught concentration, but none of the detective science of reading clues so essential
to success in everyday life. Cards or checkers were more analytic, he argued, more socially
useful—more fun, too. Those who thought of chess at all in these years wavered uneasily
between Franklin’s notions of a dull but respectable recreation and bolder promises of a heroic,
sensational sport, testing manhood and identity itself. A wooden Turk, a dead Irishman, and an
imperious Briton focused that battle of tuts, thrills and yawns.

The Turk summed up the ambiguous nature of chess in the early republic and Americans’
conflicted response to sports and games in general. Originally built as a toy for Catherine the
Great, it was labeled an “automaton,” machinery fashioned in the likeness of an Oriental
prince. It deceived none and confused all. Impassive, unerring, the Turk taught not just chess


but heroic manhood to its adversaries. It clattered and whirred, yet moved uncannily. It seemed
to gaze and think, but never spoke or smiled. It played like a man, without the weaknesses of
man. Delighted crowds asked how. Under the guidance of showman Johann Maelzel, the Turk
toured the east coast between 1826 and 1836 with a small, skilful player hidden behind fake
gears. In Charleston, curious locals flocked to challenge the contraption and puzzle out its
secret. Was this Franklin’s half-human chess-player come to life, something more, or less? “If
man can do this,” William Brisbane marveled, “what a God he is that made man.”

The automaton’s attraction lay exactly in its bamboozling identity. All knew the con was
on: a machine decked out like a man must surely be guided by a man, and one with a gift for
chess play, too, since the Turk so rarely lost. But who could read the clues and unravel the
mystery? Maelzel’s machine gained fame just as rationalism seemed most needing recalculation,
as invisible powers like electromagnetism stood forth, and mesmerism pointed toward odd,
hidden realities. The chance to fathom its secrets kept crowds coming, transforming audiences
from spectators to detectives to accomplices. That became the real game here, far deeper than
chess, more charming and more worrisome, too. All thought they knew whether the Turk was

W. Cook, The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum (Cambridge, 2001), 30-72; Tom
Standage, The Turk: the Life and Times of the Famous Eighteenth-Century Chess-Playing Machine (New York,

38 (Charleston) City Gazette, May 27, 1819, June 25, 1821, January 10, 1823; January 12, 1831; Charleston Daily
Courier, December 1-2, 1834; Entry of December 27, 1834, William Henry Brisbane Diary, SHSW (quote). By
1832, Charleston was playing host to W. C. Houghton, “the American Fire King,” who claimed to have built an
automaton of his own, and was eager to reveal Maelzel’s secret. Charleston Courier, February 14, 1832;
(Charleston) Southern Patriot, February 14, 1832. For the European background and intellectual context of
Maelzel’s machine, see Paul Metzner, Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris
during the Age of Revolution (Berkeley, 1998), 183-188.

39 Jeffrey Sconce, Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television (Durham, 2000); Robert S.
Cox, Body and Soul: A Sympathetic History of American Spiritualism (Charlottesville, 2003); Michael B. Schiffer,
Draw the Lightning Down: Benjamin Franklin and Electrical Technology in the Age of Enlightenment (Berkeley,
2006).
human, yet felt splendidly baffled as play ended and the trick went unrevealed. Indeed, patrons lined up just for the transgressive pleasure of conniving in the automaton’s ambiguity.\textsuperscript{40}

When spoilsports like Poe tried to ruin the fun by exposing the mock robot as human, Americans ignored him. He understood the machine in a rough way, but missed the game altogether. Chess here served as a pretext for sleuthing the identity and character of the players themselves, yet also allowed men and women to shift shape temporarily into winking, willing confederates in the humbuggery of “passing.”\textsuperscript{41} Where melodrama educated audiences to portray virtue and decode danger, the Turk taught the same lessons in reverse, muddying all. Careful masking and a bluff performance might shroud self-contradiction in secrecy. Too-clever snoops might be thwarted, snared, tripped up by flawed gambits. At that uproarious moment, the upshot of downfall averted was delighted, child-like applause.

Across the Atlantic, at just this time, the story of Alexander McDonnell unleashed the same response, albeit in a minor key. Intelligence, discipline, daring, coolness: at the dawn of the Victorian era, those qualities summed up “the best player to whom Great Britain ever gave birth.” Famous for offering long odds—even playing blindfold—McDonnell would take on “any man, at any time; there was no dodge, no humbug about reputation, no nonsense about him.” In 1834, he captured the world’s attention by fighting the French master Charles de la Bourdonnais

\textsuperscript{40} [Philip Thicknesse], \textit{The Speaking Figure, and the Automaton Chess-Player, Exposed and Detected} (London, 1784); \textit{The History and Analysis of the Supposed Automaton Chess Player, of M. De Kempelen, Now Exhibiting in this Country, by Mr. Maelzel; with Lithographic Figures, Illustrative of the Probable Method by which its Motions are Directed} (Boston, 1826); “Automaton Chess Player,” \textit{North American. Or, Weekly Journal of Politics, Science, and Literature}, May 19, 1827; Cook, \textit{Arts of Deception}, 30-72.


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in a chess duel for European supremacy. With victory going to the winner of fifty games, the contest’s terms were especially grueling for McDonnell, not nearly the paladin he seemed.42

Few knew that Bright’s Disease was killing Lochinvar’s kidneys, and anxiety did the rest. Outwardly as imperturbable as the Turk himself, McDonnell agonized over every move, “walking his room the greater part of the night in a dreadful state of excitement.” La Bourdonnais’ “railroad speed” and carefree manner strained McDonnell physically and emotionally, yet he stood to his task, masking pain. “Dry,” conservative ploys to eke out a point, he rejected at the outset. A hero won by genius, strength and courage, not narrow calculation. Onlookers thought La Bourdonnais “a species of chess-automaton, wound up to meet all conceivable cases with mathematical accuracy.” McDonnell sat sideways, feigning nonchalance, yet seeming as though “his whole success in life, if not his soul’s fate, actually depended upon the result of the contest.” Playing almost constantly between June and October, he won twenty-seven games, lost forty-five, and drew thirteen. His unyielding spirit daunted the French man-machine: even at the moment of mate, McDonnell “could smile!” Abruptly, the Parisian broke off play, pleading the press of business. McDonnell was near broken, but La Bourdonnais was broke. The match never resumed. Within months, McDonnell was dead at age thirty-seven, a fallen hero indeed.43

42 Walker, Chess and Chess-Players, 130. On the cultural context of the match, see Metzner, Crescendo of the Virtuoso, 17-53, esp. 45-46. An earlier contest between London and Edinburgh clubs also drew Charlestonians’ interest. (Charleston) City Gazette, September 11, 1824.

43 MacDonnell, Chess Life-Pictures, 201; Walker, Chess and Chess-Players, 130-131, 179-180, 373; William G. Walker, ed., A Selection of Games at Chess, Actually played in London, by the Late Alexander McDonnell, the best English Player, with his Principal Contemporaries; Including the Whole of the Games Played by Mons. de La Bourdonnais and Mr. McDonnell; With an Appendix Containing Three Games played by Mons. Des Chapelles and Mr. Lewis, in 1821 (London, 1836); Cary Utterberg, De La Bourdonnais versus McDonnell, 1834: the Eighty-Five Games of their Six Chess-Matches; with Excerpts from Additional Games against Other Opponents (Jefferson, N.C., 2005); Metzner, Crescendo of the Virtuoso, 48; David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld, The Oxford Companion to Chess (New York, 1992), 240. See also “The Beauties of McDonnell,” Chess Monthly, 3 (1859): 73-77.
Heroic, but not for chess alone. McDonnell had been well-known in English public life for a decade before his death, noted and hated for his jousting in politics and commerce both. Born to a Belfast physician anxious to see his son prosper, he was “bred to a mercantile life” and shipped off to the Caribbean in his teens. In the 1820s, McDonnell established himself as a Demerara trader, building wealth and name on the exchange of rum, sugar, and slaves. Nor was his pugnacity limited to the marketplace proper. Clever and conservative, he stood squarely in the path of the two leading achievements of early Victorian economy: the shift from mercantilism to free trade, and the abolition of colonial slavery. Self-taught in political economy, McDonnell fought both reforms tooth and nail.44

There was no segment of British society in these years so besieged as the colonial merchant class. Its profits turned on a system of chattel bondage and preferential tariffs enemies deemed unfeeling and unfair. With Parliament, press, and pulpit ranked in opposition, the die was cast.45 Most traders chose to carry on quietly and close up shop when the time came. Not McDonnell. In a series of books and pamphlets “distinguished for their originality of thought and depth of research,” he championed the interests of Caribbean planters and their backers in mother England.46 Long before he sat down to play La Bourdonnais, McDonnell had endured


46 Alexander McDonnell, The West-India Legislatures Vindicated from the Charge of Having Resisted the Call of the Mother Country for the Amelioration of Slavery (London, 1826); idem., Colonial Commerce; Comprising an
years of toil at the political chessboard, manfully fighting one losing battle after another. Across the 1820s, his proslavery essays offered a feast of social and economic arguments southerners would later echo, rousing liberal outrage.47 By 1830, he had moved to London, addressed both Houses of Parliament, and lobbied for the Committee of West Indies Merchants. From his window on Tavistock Square, McDonnell espied a city of filth and splendor, riot and repression, which dared call him barbarous. That reputation only added to the excitement of his match with the French master. 48

It was natural for McDonnell to take up chess: he was single, haunting London’s clubs for business and pleasure both. They gave the chance to buttonhole public servants and enjoy the company of men of similar station and breeding. That political, homosocial impulse must have been strong for one so determined to fix the eyes of others upon him and subjugate their will to his own. McDonnell took chess lessons from London’s leading master, and helped found the Westminster Chess Club in 1833.49 Even as the bondage and tariffs he defended were beaten

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47 Alexander McDonnell, Considerations on Negro Slavery. With Authentic Reports, Illustrative of the Actual Condition of the Negroes in Demerara. Also, an Examination into the Propriety and Efficacy of the Regulations Contained in the Late Order in Council Now in Operation in Trinidad. To Which Are Added, Suggestions on the Proper Mode of Ameliorating the Condition of the Slaves (London, 1824); idem., A Letter to Thomas Fowell Buxton, in Refutation of his Allegations Respecting the Decrease of the Slaves in the British West India Colonies (London, 1833).

48 Alexander McDonnell, An Address to the Members of Both Houses of Parliament on the West India Question (London, 1830). Cf., Emilia Viotti da Costa, Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood: The Demerara Slave Rebellion of 1823 (New York, 1997), 34-37, 95; Hall, Brief History of the West India Committee. Was it accidental that proslavery McDonnell was drawn toward symbolic combat with a man whose mistranslated surname punned on unfree labor? English-speaking contemporaries, unaware of his family’s roots in the Picardian commune of Bourdon, called him “Labourdonnais.”

by a brash set who called him queer and provincial, he defeated all comers on a different battleground. At the chessboard, men admitted, the Irishman knew no equal.

McDonnell’s games with La Bourdonnais were lauded as the greatest ever played, arousing interest across Europe. In the end, it hardly mattered that no man won. “All the real benefits of Chess are secured by the defeated,” one veteran explained, “equally with the winning party.” Just as honor was shared among the honorable, so players and observers focused on enjoying a “good” game. Parading one’s abilities was not enough: they had to be resisted by a worthy opponent. Aficionados most admired the man who played “well” or “with spirit,” if not always victoriously. It was the give-and-take of combat, not the finality of checkmate which provided the attraction and pleasure of play.50 The “quiet game”—Giuoco piano—belonged to the Baroque; in the Romantic era, chess became a bloodbath of gambits, sacrifices, and heart-stopping assaults. Worthies were heroic in a sense Carlyle—or Napoleon—would have hailed: planning silently, attacking in brilliant combinations, winning with a masterstroke of insight and self-revelation.

A generation after Waterloo, the symbolism of a French champion battling a talented Anglo-Irish challenger was doubly thrilling. Consider the famous fiftieth game: McDonnell, playing black, sacrificed his Queen on the thirteenth move, and for the next twenty-three turns simply outwitted his opponent. Despite material advantage, La Bourdonnais could never gain the initiative, fending off one rapier thrust after another. Finally, on move thirty-seven, he resigned: the next word was mate. Chess here became a clash of titans, the flow of reason

50 (Charleston) City Gazette, September 11, 1824; “What Constitutes Chess?” Chess Monthly, 4 (1860): 36; MacDonnell, Chess Life-Pictures, 171-174, 177-185, 219-221. That said, it may be that La Bourdonnais broke off play because the side bets he depended on increasingly went wrong.
shattered by a bolt of genius. It called for planning, prudence, and nerves of steel—a merchant’s qualities, Franklin would have said—along with a hero’s vision and the willingness to risk all.\(^5^1\)

In Charleston, the Turk had offered only brief amusement. The tragic arc of McDonnell’s exploits went almost unnoticed. There is no sign that southern planters ever read his proslavery pamphlets. At mid-century, Maelzel’s bones rested at sea just beyond the harbor’s mouth (where he succumbed to yellow fever in 1836), his nicked-up automaton gathered dust in a Yankee museum, and the glory of British chess moldered in a London churchyard. Yet memories of the Turk carried on past the fire which consumed it in 1854, and McDonnell’s epic battle helped define Victorian sport as melodrama, the athlete as hero and idol\(^5^2\).

All could read the code of broad gestures enacted upon the stage; their display was deliberate. At chess, the same patterns appeared in infinitely subtler form. Playing too quickly, too hesitantly, or with a flush of excitement on one’s face was not just bad manners. It was bad tactics, alerting enemies to dangers and opportunities. Emotional control and repression by force of will were crucial to success, as was the ability to read the chessboard and the plans betrayed by an opponent’s demeanor. Carefully cultivated, those skills promised victory at play and in everyday life. In that sense, the flawed chivalry of Will Taber and the selfish calculation of Ker Boyce taught Charlestonians equally valuable lessons.

Long before men sat down at the board, Victorians knew the need to enact successful selves. Especially for the urban middle class, status depended on portraying social virtues deftly and measuring others accurately. In the 1850s that proved central to the emergence of chess as a

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popular sport. Respectability’s imperatives meshed with melodrama’s methods: if outward appearances signified inner worthiness, to appear genteel was key to being seen as such. There were imposters, of course, but the only safety lay in reading others closely and not tipping one’s hand too soon. Inevitably, fakers would be found out.

That was the lesson of Poe’s “Tell-Tale Heart” and Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, the twist in Oliver Twist, and a dozen other novels of social reversal. It was also the moral of chess for the rising bourgeoisie. Theirs was an ethic appropriated and transmuted from the mortally wounded world of honor the regime of clerks and merchants supplanted. Formerly, leisure had offered young bachelors and rakes of the “sporting fraternity” room to run in establishing position and enhancing reputation. Now, those avenues narrowed steadily. Urban workers, too, had little chance of asserting masculinity or negotiating precedence as of old. Sports became more orderly and decorous, scaled down and confined within designated spaces, with strict boundaries between participants and observers. Or they were put beyond the pale by clergy, bosses, and reformers. Recreation became democratized, too, as men of differing classes and ethnicities competed in greater numbers. Increasingly, sports served as a means of proving character, not just earning reputation or claiming the victor’s laurels. Despite scrutiny and criticism and, indeed, just because of their trivialization, the popularity of sports and games in the Victorian era soared.53

Melodrama being the lingua franca of the age, the most demonstrative, outré amusements led the way. Today, games such as musical chairs, blind man’s bluff, statues, and snap are reserved for children—very young children—who are simply and easily amused. Before 1860, though, adults played these games for entertainment and education besides. What seems

tediously simple to modern minds was once enjoyed for its clarity and straightforwardness.

Victorian games offered humorous opportunities for concealment, revelation, and manipulation of character. They invited transgressive, silly performances full of action: talking, singing, moaning and shouting, jumping, running, changing places, stopping and starting. Players abandoned the rational for the active, momentarily disregarding the inherently false, janus-faced character of all acting. There was just no time for reflection in the course of play. All gave themselves up to the fun of the game.54

These were, nonetheless, purposeful contests, and though they took on a great variety of forms, central aims seldom differed. Gazing upon a roomful of middle-class men and women sitting stone-faced while one glided round, sobbing, “Poor Pussy!” to make another laugh, we might well ask what was at stake.55 These were not the gambling games of honor earlier generations enjoyed, turning on the outcome of a single, risky event. Victorian parlor games had winners and losers, but only nominally so. The real payoff here was the chance to reveal—or cloak--character and to hone one’s skills in divining the identity of others. A win for one, some, or all players was possible, and need not come at the expense of any, except in unusual cases.

The homely account one college boy gave of a Saturday night “out among the girls” in the Carolina midlands demonstrates these themes well. While others chatted merrily, Bill Whetstone “sot down in a corner by my self.” Soon enough, one belle “that I was not acquainted with befour... shot a chinkerpin after me.” Whetstone answered the flirtatious chestnut with a guessing game,

then I drawed my ugly old self up to her and she sed love in my hand and we plade that awhile and then drew hankerchiefs a while and then it was moved by

54 Patrick Beaver, comp., Victorian Parlour Games (Leicester, 1995).
the other croud that I and her to start a play and so we did and Jim I tel you I dun the ting up Brown.

Once games broke the ice, men and women might play for higher stakes. Another beau described a typical parlor scene late of an evening: some gentlemen “throwing their admiration by pailfulls on the girl of their affection, others... sitting up to their chosen like a sick kitten to a warm smoothing iron.” Eventually, of course, someone noted the hour, the contestants rose, bid adieu, and stepped back uncertainly across the boundary of performance. Beyond each game’s nominal purposes, all aimed at social confirmation of non-ludic identity and the entrenchment of boundaries dividing the realm of play from that of “real life”—however delightful temporarily subverting such limits may have been.

Chess offered a bridge between honor’s ethos and that middle-class sensibility of play. Its form appealed to the pre-capitalist sporting fraternity and the cult of honor, yet its nature seemed plainly Victorian. In England, the excitement surrounding McDonnell’s match drew young clerks and bachelors who might otherwise have devoted leisure hours to prize fights and drink—or temperance and evangelism—onto a pleasant middle path, at once manly and respectable. They packed into new clubs and swelled the throng at venues like the Chess Divan, playing out claims to manhood and reputation within a circle of like-minded peers. Honor found in microcosm a new urban niche.

In truth, too, honor was all there was to be won at chess. Gentlemen might wager in a friendly way, someone might “send the hat round” for a prize, but even this was an honorarium.

56 William C. Whetstone to James W. Pitts, September 1849, Wilkin Gunter to Nathan C. Whetstone, July 19, 1849, both in Whetstone Family Papers, SCL.

In that sense, respectability was the price of admission, honor the stakes of play. Devotees shunned gamblers as pariahs, disgracing themselves and debasing the game. At mid-century, the connection between hats and chess was not very strong, but honor permitted some to be more high-hatted than others. The beauty of chess, Victorians came to understand, was that it was both inclusive and hierarchical. It offered each an equal chance to contend at the board and, within that fraternity, steadily, relentlessly, put men in their places.

Chess is a zero-sum game. No matter the abstract quality of play, its trajectory is pitched toward objective determination of victor and vanquished. That is undeniably part of its thrill. Where Franklin aimed at passing time agreeably, Victorian chess--like most modern sports in the capitalist West--was predicated on ranking and setting measurable records of play. Men might share a game, yet that experience remained necessarily adversarial, in contrast to even such violent but conciliatory aspects of honor as dueling. The “affair of honor” aimed at bringing men together, overcoming friction. Chess set men apart, ranking contestants within the meta-culture it created. Though multiple and personalized readings of the course of play were possible, those resolved inevitably in a single path of action, hurtling toward an objective outcome. “No one can lose a game of chess,” allowed Confessions of a Gamester,

without perceiving the wrong move or moves, which lead to that termination; his loss is the effect of his own misconduct, which might have been avoided, had he adopted a different course, and which he was at full liberty to have done; he can blame no one but himself; he feels no angry, envious or malicious passion excited; he cannot embroil himself in any quarrel with his friend, because at starting they possessed equal advantages. 58

No luck retrieved tangled purposes here. The crowd might groan or murmur, but it could not make the tide of play flow backward. Victorian chess seemed both heroic and Romantic, yet

Gradgrindian, modern, final. It achieved this double-minded stress only in this place and time: it was finally a matter of perspective.

A sour Englishman and the fate that befell him placed chess on this equivocal footing. Howard Staunton was the sum of the driving tendencies of his age, just the jumped-up, self-admiring sort McDonnell’s Tory set despised. Before him, no one had lived so exclusively or so well as an exponent of chess, and none assumed so high-toned—high-handed—a stance toward the game and its practitioners. Born illegitimate, reared in rural poverty, graced with little education, Staunton raised himself by main effort, goaded by all the instincts of a shivering outsider gazing on a cozy soirée. He came to London, took up acting, and later claimed to have trod the boards with the great Edmund Kean. But when or where this happened, no one has told. Likewise, he later made much of his time at Oxford, though he took no degree, and left no trace of having studied there. On maturing in 1831, he did take several thousand pounds from the Earl of Carlisle, his putative father, running through that treasure fast in the clubs and restaurants of the capital. The sum was not all squandered, though: in shaping an identity for himself and a character not to be questioned among the society of the Strand, Staunton learned to play chess. He seized on the game as a route to respectability and social prominence, joining McDonnell’s tony Westminster group. Success came only gradually, but by 1850, Staunton was seen as the strongest European player, thanks not least to his talent for self-promotion.59

Or perhaps it was otherwise. Virtually all we know of Staunton’s life down to 1840—illegitimacy, youthful poverty, struggles, and so on—came out of his own confabulating mouth.

59 David N. Levy, *Howard Staunton* (Nottingham, 1975), 7-8; R. D. Keene and R. N. Coles, *Howard Staunton: The English World Chess Champion* (St. Leonards on Sea, UK, 1975), 6. Even at the time, though, such “extravagant” claims were “much censured by the judicious.” Thomas Beeby, *An Account of the Late Chess Match between Mr. Howard Staunton and Mr. Lowe* (London, 1848), esp. 4. In his prime, though, Staunton was formidable. Carl Meier and Philip Stamma, *Der Schachkampf in Paris, im November und December 1843, zwischen Mr. Staunton und M. de St.-Amant* (Zurich, 1844).
Those who trace his record back wind up with question marks. Did Staunton change his name? Live a double life? How could a man who strutted like “a king… an autocrat… a tyrant” in London society leave no clue to his early existence which others might recognize, unless he aimed to avoid some shameful unmasking? Why, when the Westminster Club collapsed under his leadership in 1839, was he blackballed from joining the St. George’s Club (as most of his fellows had done), until they needed a talented “prize-fighter” three years later? What was it that contemporaries knew—or thought—about this man, but never quite said on the printed page? We know Staunton no better than Victorians knew the Turk, or La Bourdonnais understood McDonnell, but similar signs of confused, conflicted identity are everywhere.60

Theatrical skill served Staunton at the chessboard, but his genius was organization. In 1840, he founded the Chess Player’s Chronicle, the first English-language serial devoted to the game. Four years later, he took over the chess column of the Illustrated London News. From these pulpits he belittled rivals real and potential, trumpeting hindsight as insight. Against the risky, slashing style of the day, Staunton played like an accountant, blocking up lines of attack, muddling positions, nursing tiny advantage to eventual victory. Driven to climb to the top of the heap in social as well as chess circles, his true contribution lay in wrestling chess from a dabbling gentry and marketing it to the rising middle class. Men read his columns exactly because they were bullying and judgmental. His Chess Players’ Handbook (1847) succeeded both by its simplicity and its authoritative tone. Here and in two subsequent texts, Staunton browbeat a

bourgeois audience eager for specialized knowledge of the genteel game. Eager to transform their identities through recreation, readers learned to play the correct way, the Staunton way.  

Like Franklin, Staunton counseled patience, caution, calculation at the board, but with a deeper sense of purpose. There was no substitute, in his view, for continuous hard practice, no virtue in a good game lost. Losers should replay games “in private… to discover where… your opponent gained his first advantage,” striving in future to eliminate such slips. Here the joy of play came from beating ever better foes. Even Franklin’s etiquette was martyred to that neurotic end: bad manners might make good tactics. In his columns and guides, the master promoted not only a method but an ethics of chess, focused ever on gaining checkmate.  

Staunton’s books drilled a legion of disciples. More than this, they promoted inter-club play, backed the first telegraph chess match, masterminded the Great Exhibition tournament of 1851. By that stage, he was semi-retired, wed to a wealthy widow and busy editing Shakespeare. Still he remained the *doyen* of chess, lending his name to the game pieces his brother-in-law marketed—still the global standard—and promoting a uniform set of rules. Where Franklin had offered morals, Staunton handed down commandments. There are today, too, little-used openings which bear his name, though (like Staunton chess sets) these were the innovations of others. Regardless, almost single-handedly Staunton made chess a touchstone of Victorian culture, masculine recreation, bourgeois respectability. And it was his non-encounter with a very

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61 Staunton, *Chess-Player’s Hand-Book*; idem., *The Chess-Player’s Companion; Comprising a New Treatise on Odds, and a Collection of Games Contested by the Author with Various Distinguished Players during the Last Ten Years; Including the Great French Match with Mons. St. Amant; to which are Added a Selection of New and Instructive Problems* (London, 1849); idem, *Chess Praxis. A Supplement to the Chess Player’s Handbook, Containing All the Most Important Modern Improvements in the Openings, Illustrated by Actual Games; A Revised Code of Chess Laws; and a Collection of Mr. Morphy’s Matches, &c., in England and France* (London, 1860). This “closed” style of play came to prominence only with the rise of William Steinitz, “the man who took the fun out of chess,” but in truth that title belongs to Staunton.


different actor that unleashed chess fever on America in the late 1850s. For us, Paul Morphy’s only half-playful odyssey darts from New Orleans to Broadway to London and Paris, then back to the streets of Charleston. There men took up chess to emulate their hero, before spurning the game and their idol abruptly. Who he was unlocks what they did.

The success of the 1851 tournament—the first multi-national match in any major sport—sparked calls for a similar contest in America. “The spirit of chess and a love for it seems to be rapidly extending among our countrymen,” the Chess Monthly boasted. In 1857, the new magazine proposed a “Chess Congress” to launch a national association, establish uniform rules of play, and hold a grand tournament. Conflict over the board would benefit the Union, editor Daniel Fiske declared, proving the preeminence of American culture and easing sectional strife. Melodrama won out again in his absurdly heroic explanation of the players’ mission: “Athens had no chess club, and Athens fell.”

Fiske’s plan attracted enthusiastic support, and in early October, sixteen players vied for mastery in Manhattan. The crowd was small when the National Congress and Grand Tournament opened at Descombe’s Rooms, with Judge Alexander B. Meek of Alabama in the chair. Once games got underway, though, dignitaries and society notables crammed the hall, from Mayor Fernando Wood on down. Newspapers admired the scene: twenty-six tables and chess-sets, banners of the great chess-playing nations and portraits of chess luminaries adorning the walls, a bust of Franklin presiding over all. Matthew Brady coaxed contenders to sit for pictures in his studio nearby, singly, in pairs, en masse.

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65 Daniel W. Fiske, The Book of the First American Chess Congress: Containing the Proceedings of that Celebrated Assemblage, Held in New York, in the Year 1857, with the Papers Read in its Sessions, the Games Played in the
The crowds came expecting rare “feats” from the players, competing for a purse plus the “honor of victory,” the “real prize for which every true chess mancombats.” The contenders were middle class and locals mostly: Fiske and James Thompson, a restaurateur who organized the New York club back in 1839, three merchants, a Princeton language professor, two bankers. Stronger players hailed from further afield. Besides Meek, there were doctors from Philadelphia and Kentucky, a Minnesota merchant, a Chicago lawyer, an Iowa grain trader. The fading star Charles Stanley was there, too, living by his wits and deep in his cups. Oddest of all, ranged among these genteel giants was a diminutive David, fresh out of college and quite unknown beyond his home in New Orleans’ French Quarter. He swiftly transformed Fiske’s two-bit tournament into “the Morphy Congress,” a national sensation.

In mid-autumn of 1857, the news from New York was of fires, fraud, riot—and chess. Tournament organizers used every gimmick to gain attention: blindfold exhibitions, multiple games, a North-South consultation match, the promised appearance of a female chess champion. She never materialized, but not even gender-bending women could have topped the show the Creole put on. Meek had long known Morphy’s family, and trumpeted the boy’s talents to all who would listen: at nine, he had matched wits with General Winfield Scott; four years later, he beat the German master Lowenthal. But those were off-hand games, and whipping locals in Louisiana was no proof of eminence. Scoffers chalked up claims of genius to southern brag.

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66 Lawson, Paul Morphy, 48, 80; [Edge], Paul Morphy, the Chess Champion, 8-9; New York Tribune, October 7, 9, 10, 24, 1857; New York Times, October 7, 1857; New Orleans Picayune, October 15, 1857. Stanley attracted little support here, since he was judged “a Canadian.” “Dispatches from the St. George’s Chess Club,” Living Age, 58 (1858): 765.

67 Lawson, Paul Morphy, 13, 24-28; [Edge], Paul Morphy, the Chess Champion, 6-7; New York Tribune, October 9, 12, 16, 21, 24, November 9, 1857; New Orleans Picayune, October 31, 1857; (Macon, GA) Macon Telegraph, May
How wrong they were. How thrilling the revelation: Morphy was the Turk made flesh. McDonnell redoubled in strength and fight. The speed, daring, and ease with which he swept the field in New York captivated spectators and astonished experts. The key to his success, all soon saw, was vision: he espied multiple paths to checkmate where his victims perceived nothing. After one sacrifice in the final round, Stanley declared that the upstart “ought to be put in the lunatic asylum,” but Morphy went on to win the game, the tournament, and then a series against the croaker himself, in devastating fashion. He offered to play all comers at odds, play whole teams of opponents. By the time he returned to New Orleans at year’s end, Morphy had sat down to nearly one hundred post-tournament games at even odds, losing just four times. “No other player in any country can show such a high percentage of successes,” the New York Tribune marveled, “and yet he is but 20 years of age.” Morphy had become the new Automaton, the unbeatable hero whose secret none could divine.68

Instantly, the southern schoolboy became a national symbol, signifying the rising power and superiority of all things American. The next step seemed obvious. The “Young Philidor of America” must take on the Old World’s best to crown a global champion. Said Philidor was keen. In his teens, Morphy had studied the book of the Great Exhibition carefully, tweaking Staunton as the author of “some devilish bad games.” At last he could call the Briton out. Through his chess column, though, Staunton surprisingly announced that the new American


Chess Association would soon challenge “any” European player to defeat Morphy for the unheard-of sum of two to five thousand dollars.⁶⁹

Money was too tight in 1857 to give that claim credence. And no one wanted Morphy to trounce just any player: the best, by his own account, was Staunton. Yet his article seemed calculated to dodge the test. In February, 1858, southerners called Staunton’s bluff. The New Orleans club wrote him directly, proposing a match in their city for $5,000, plus $1,000 expenses if he lost. There was “no valid reason why an exercise so intellectual and ennobling as chess, should be excluded from the generous rivalry which exists between the Old and the New World,” they taunted. Morphy’s advent made it now “a matter of general desire to fix, by actual contest with the best European amateurs, the rank which American players shall hold in the hierarchy of chess.” For contemporary Englishmen and southerners, the language of the “challenge” was precise: a “chivalrous game” would ritualistically determine rank in the cultural hierarchy.

Staunton had been summoned to a chess-duel.⁷⁰

It never came off. Staunton deflected the challenge with typical hauteur, applauding the “extreme courtesy” and “extreme liberality” of the “défi,” but declaring it “positively impracticable” for him to “cast aside all engagements” and travel to America for a mere “chess-encounter.” Only a boy without duties or—far worse—a professional sportsman could so play at life. If Morphy wished “to win his spurs among the chess chivalry of Europe,” Staunton advised,

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⁷⁰ Charleston Courier, March 9, 1858; “Proposed Chess Match between England and America for One Thousand Dollars A Side,” Illustrated London News, April 3, 1858; [Frederick M. Edge], The Exploits and Triumphs, in Europe, of Paul Morphy; Including an Historical Account of Clubs, Biographical Sketches of Famous Players, and Various Information and Anecdotes Relating to the Noble Game of Chess (New York, 1859), 17. On March 8, 1858, the Mercury reported that the match was to transpire in London.
he should meet the “many champions” on their own ground, “ready to test and do honor to his prowess.” Conspicuously absent from this put-down was any promise that Staunton would play him, then or ever. Yet Morphy took the gambit, all but leaping aboard a steamship bound for England. Biographers have put that decision down to youthful impetuosity. But, as at the board itself, deciphering the meaning of his move here demands closer scrutiny.

Newspapers and magazines on both sides of the Atlantic followed Morphy’s progress avidly, yet the account which bears most weight as history, myth, and propaganda comes from the obscure, well-travelled pen of Frederick Milns Edge. He attended the Chess Congress as correspondent for the New York Tribune, serving as one of four assistant secretaries. He contributed much to Fiske’s memoir of the event and arranged Brady’s photo sessions. Though Edge has faded from the historical record, his words reveal a young Englishman of background and ambitions not unlike Staunton: a would-be “gentleman of intelligence,” skilled in self-promotion, eager to win a place in polite circles.22

Somehow he failed. Born the second son of a respectable gas-fitter, Edge gained entry to King’s College, London, at the late age of twenty, then promptly flunked out. He claimed to be “known and esteemed by many of [England’s] best citizens,” and “personally acquainted with many of the leaders of opinion in the American Republic,” yet he appears nowhere in their memoirs. Fiske snubbed him. Brady forgot favors owed. Britons one and all turned a cold shoulder. Edge had all the talent necessary for success in bourgeois society, it seems, but none

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71 “Proposed Chess Match between England and America for One Thousand Dollars a Side,” Illustrated London News, April 3, 1858; [Edge], Exploits and Triumphs... of Paul Morphy, 22.

of the caution or self-restraint. He pleads his case as a worthy man, yet comes across consistently as a little too louche. By 1857, he was still a pitiable creature of Grub Street, twenty-seven years old, a hack writer with few roots or connections. He survived by crisscrossing the Atlantic, neglecting a wife and child, writing for papers in New York and London and hawking a range of pamphlets and polemics across the 1860s. He hailed Florence Nightingale, wrote a withering antislavery tract, chronicled the \textit{Alabama} dispute between Britain and America during the Civil War, seizing on any issue which might raise his prospects.

“Prompted solely by convictions of duty and patriotism,” Edge nobly declared, his pen strove to shape public opinion.\textsuperscript{73} But that weapon won neither wealth nor position. He drifted into dissolution, dying in 1882, long past his prime.

Edge’s great moment came decades earlier, when Morphy marched down a gangplank into his arms. The physical details of their relation are beyond knowing, but the scribbler had been smitten from the moment he met the boy champion. Morphy was modest, cultured, and attractive; Edge was older, worldly, and seemingly wise. They fell in together easily. In after years, Edge remembered Morphy precisely: “five feet four inches in height, of slim figure, and face like a young girl in her teens.” A college performance of \textit{The Merchant of Venice} had cast him as Portia.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{73} Frederick M. Edge, \textit{Slavery Doomed: Or, the Contest Between Free and Slave Labour in the United States} (London, 1860), vii; \textit{A Woman's Example: and a Nation's Work. A Tribute to Florence Nightingale} (London, 1864); \textit{England's Danger and Her Safety. A Letter to Earl Russell} (London, 1864); \textit{An Englishman's View of the Battle between the Alabama and the Kearsarge}; \textit{America Yesterday and Today. The United States Prior to the Rebellion; and the Prospects of Reconstruction of the South} (London, 186\textsuperscript{9}). See also, \textit{England's Danger and Her Safety. A Letter to Earl Russell} (London, 1864); \textit{President Lincoln's Successor} (London, 1864); \textit{Major-General McClellan and the Campaign on the Yorktown Peninsula} (New York, 1865); Frederick M. Edge, \textit{The Destruction of the American Carrying Trade. A Letter to Earl Russell, K. G.} (London, 1863), 4; Winter, “Edge, Morphy, and Staunton.”

Close and tender friendships were common among men in Victorian culture, particularly during the long years of schooling and establishing oneself in a profession. But here passion and interest mingled to create something more, drawing Edge to the chess champion and propelling Morphy toward Staunton. At tournament’s end in 1857, Edge had returned to England singing his hero’s praises and setting himself up as his new friend’s “avant-courier.” Morphy’s name proved a “passport of general interest,” opening doors and giving Edge cachet in respectable society. Almost certainly the pair corresponded.

Then Morphy moved up plans for a European tour by almost two years, seizing on the slim hope Staunton’s letter offered. Shall we believe that he set sail at the drop of a hat, traveling quite alone, without itinerary, contacts, or lodging plans, much less any scheme to realize his chess-dreams? Or did the game he so excelled at—and dismissed quite casually—serve simply as pretext for questing after other vague and unspeakably subversive fantasies? Was leaping at the hint of a match with Staunton a gambit to fall into a different sort of match with Edge, one at which no one could ever hint? Contemporaries and historians have wondered, and bitten their tongues. This much we know: when the southern Galahad landed in Liverpool, his ink-stained partner was waiting to greet him.


76 Lawson, Paul Morphy, 94. Cf. Jones, “The Problem of Paul Morphy,” 182-184, which reduces these choices to the most mechanically Oedipal urges.

77 Morphy left New York on June 9, aboard the Africa, in company with “a whole drift of Charlestonians.” Charleston Courier, June 15, 1858. According to one family narrative, Morphy simply “responded to duty’s call” in dashing off for England. Edge here is reduced to the role of “secretary,” and all arrangements between the two men are obscured. Regina Morphy-Voitier, Life of Paul Morphy in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans and Abroad (New Orleans, 1926), 15-21. Edge disappears entirely in C. A. Buck, Paul Morphy: His Later Life (Newport, 1902).
Morphy supplied the spark, Edge built the legend. He admitted his infatuation with Morphy nowhere in his memoir of their adventures, yet it shines from every page. His narrative is essentially a chivalrous love story, its tone adoring, its perspective romantic. He insists that the world pay attention to the young man he found so fascinating. In the end, that insistence made all the difference. Edge’s contribution lay in transforming a trivial sporting event into a heroic drama of international importance. There were other talented athletes making a name for themselves at this time, but they had no Edge to promote their efforts. He molded Morphy’s quest as melodrama and broadcast it far and wide. By focusing relentlessly on hopes for a match with Staunton, Edge tapped a deep well of contrast: Old World versus New, champion versus novice, youth versus age, pride versus modesty, unheralded hero versus hated heel. Melodramatic convention ensured that everyone knew who to cheer in the coming conflict, and why the outcome mattered so much. Play became theatre and theatre commerce.

The outcome mattered much to Staunton, certainly, who balked at becoming the American’s conquest. The British Chess Association urged both men to play in its international tournament at Birmingham, shifting dates to fit their schedules. There Morphy could face Staunton, organizers promised, plus the best players Europe offered. But could was not would, Edge warned. Attending Morphy “constantly,” Edge kept his protégé pointed at Staunton alone, redoubling the bond between player and manager. Acting as “secretary,” Edge handled Morphy’s business affairs, answered his correspondence, and squired him around town. For his part, Morphy personified languor and played chess on command. The turning point came when Edge introduced him to Staunton at the St. George’s Club, requesting an off-hand game. The

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79 New York Times, July 20, 1858; Charleston Courier, June 28, 1858; [Edge], Exploits and Triumphs... of Paul Morphy, 72, 87.
champ begged off, “and would never consent to a contest of the most friendly description.” Morphy was willing to let the matter drop, “but the enraged Edge would have none of it,” taking Staunton’s demurral as a calculated snub. Only a direct confrontation could redress the slight.

Denied the match he hoped for, Morphy set to beating everyone else in sight. In June and July he worked his way through London’s clubs, defeating all comers in lopsided fashion. By the time he got to Birmingham, Edge had talked him into declining the tournament proper. Instead Morphy played eight blindfold games simultaneously, losing only one and rising unfatigued. The trick was a provocation, overshadowing the match, and making calls for a contest with Staunton “the first, the principal topic” everywhere. All “but the date,” Edge recorded, was considered settled.

The date, alas, was everything. By Edge’s account, Staunton agreed to a match “viva voce” while Morphy was decimating London. That had shaped the challenger’s decision to sit out Birmingham. But the heralded contest never came off. First, Staunton begged time to brush up. Next he pleaded the press of business. Then he agreed to meet in November, omitting to say just where or when. Finally, the Illustrated London News declared the whole thing “bunkum,” claiming that Morphy had no money to fund the £1,000 stakes. When Edge argued otherwise, Staunton threw up his hands: poor health, redoubled by harassment, made any encounter

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81 Hooper and Whyld, Oxford Companion to Chess, 119. If snub it was, did Staunton aim at effeminate Morphy, manipulative Edge, or the relationship between the two?

“impossible.” Morphy was meanly seeking to “gratify [his] ambition” against the overburdened champion, others charged.83

Edge squelched those claims: Morphy had asked for a match; Staunton had waffled and whined and retreated, till at last his excuses faced checkmate. The responsibility for “the whole matter” was Staunton’s. Almost as one, other players agreed, filling English sporting magazines with denunciations of his excuses. Lord Lyttelton, head of the British Chess Association, apologized for Staunton’s conduct. Though he never faced his nemesis (chess was pushed aside here by all to play a deeper game), Morphy’s triumph was complete. Even worse, in the rhetorical game we might call “Edge’s Gambit Declined,” Morphy’s paladin had unhorsed “Koward Staunton” as the voice of British chess. Svengali made the most of it, shaping the narrative as chess crusade.84

Beyond Birmingham, Morphy’s tour became a triumphal fête, courtesy of his ardent pal. Still, the matches he played seemed anticlimactic after the duel denied. While the Staunton affair still churned, Edge moved his knight on to Paris, beating all comers once again. Just seventeen astonishing turns defeated the Duke of Brunswick and Count Isouard at the Paris Opera. While The Barber of Seville rang out behind him, Morphy offered up a knight, a rook, and a bishop in casual sacrifice. One move after donating his queen, Morphy delivered the coup de grace. Rossini’s masterpiece paled by comparison.85

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83 [Edge], Exploits and Triumphs... of Paul Morphy, 87, 93, 99, 104. Other accounts flattered Staunton even less. Charleston Courier, September 6, 1858.

84 [Edge], Exploits and Triumphs... of Paul Morphy, 112-115; “Paul Morphy, the Chess Champion,” Living Age, 62 (1859): 552; “Have We a Traitor Among Us?” Spirit of the Times, June 30, 1860. For a more measured account, see Lawson, Paul Morphy, 139-156.

85 Eduard Lasker, Chess Strategy (New York, 1915), 23-26; Fiske, Book of the First American Chess Congress, 521-530; Charleston Courier, September 8, November 5, 1858, April 4, 1859; Charleston Mercury, October 11, 1858. Chess scholars have not quite understood that Morphy was being used here to settle a score between the Duke and critics who complained about his habit of playing chess at the opera. Charleston Courier, February 5, 1858.
By late autumn there was “scarcely anybody left to engage,” the *New York Times* marveled. Morphy longed for home, yet the bond with his infatuated, secretary twisted everything. Edge called him helpless and lazy. A later memoir described Morphy as “shocked and disgusted at the sordid conventionalities of Chess practice,” though it was “not Chess that he grew to dislike, but the practice of it by those who would make a living by it.” Clearly, that meant Edge, who pushed him to play in unplayful circumstances. Morphy sank into depression. Edge kept the good times rolling. He held Morphy “in my arms,” coaxed him to the board, and plotted a series of matches lasting into 1859. The “invincible Achilles of Chess” was routing opponents once more when Morphy’s brother-in-law swooped in to take him back to America. Edge never saw his beloved again. “I have been a lover, a brother, a mother to you,” he protested privately; “I have made you an idol, a god.” All of it was true. Surely others had noticed. Perhaps word had filtered as far as New Orleans. Morphy dared not look back.

A final, ragged performance in London told Edge what his absence meant: without his hand-holding, Morphy “lost all… relish” for play. The impresario bade his pet farewell and sat down to write their adventures. “Achilles should not be his own Homer,” Edge explained. The story sold well on both sides of the Atlantic. In less than a year, Morphy had played 263 games, losing just twenty-nine, becoming *Chess Champion* of the world. More than that, Edge declared, “Paul Morphy’s name will be as a ‘Household Word,’ and his deeds be held in lasting memory.” Whose win that truly was, the lovelorn author did not say.

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After Edge, Morphy’s life was all downhill. Plagued by lethargy and paranoia, he never settled down to a profession or a family, dying in his bathtub in 1884. But long before Edge’s books broadcast Morphy’s legend, chess had come to signify something to Americans which it had not when he first set out for Europe. Indeed, a “chess epidemic” erupted in the summer of 1858, as Americans tracked his progress with growing fascination and joy. “The extraordinary interest which the game of Chess has, of late, attained in our midst,” thought the New York Times, “and, in fact, throughout the whole Continent, is a subject of wonder.” When Morphy stepped back on his native soil in May 1859, chess mania was in full swing. Instead of catching a steamer for New Orleans, he was shuttled up and down the coast from one celebration to another. New York bestowed a silver wreath of laurel, a gold watch, and a gilt chess-set with pearl-inlaid board, plus all the tributes he could stomach. In Boston, Morphy dined with Emerson and the fellows of Harvard College. The poet James Russell Lowell toasted him. Oliver Wendell Holmes declared that “[h]is youthful triumphs have added a new clause to the Declaration of Independence.” Morphy sat for statues, portraits, and daguerreotypes, a model hero for Americans to emulate.89

Emulate they did: a “chess panic” erupted across the nation. Chess clubs and periodicals multiplied from Maine to California. Telegraph chess matches flew over the wires. A new Chess Handbook was hurried into press, prominently featuring Morphy’s games. Others quickly followed.90 Artists and photographers portrayed respectable Americans poring over their next

88 Lawson, Paul Morphy, 179; Charleston Courier, May 6, 1859; [Edge], Paul Morphy, the Chess Champion, 186. Yet Edge might be Homer and Patroclus both. Morphy-Voitier, Life of Paul Morphy, 16. Critics called his work vulgar, boastful, and far too intimate. Littell’s Living Age, 62 (1859): 812.

move. Chess-sets adorned Victorian parlors. Ministers, improbably, preached the gospel through the game. Newspapers teemed with chronicles of new clubs springing up “in nearly every city, town and hamlet in the land.” By the time Morphy finally reached New Orleans, the country blazed with chess fever.

The champion portrayed bewilderment, as well we might. “Chess never has been and never can be aught but a recreation,” he cautioned.

It should not be indulged in to the detriment of other and more serious avocations—should not absorb the mind or engross the thoughts of those who worship at its shrine; but should be kept in the background and restrained within its proper province. As a mere game, a relaxation from the severer pursuits of life, it is… not only the most delightful and scientific, but the most moral of amusements. Unlike other games in which lucre is the end and aim of the contestants… its mimic battles are fought for no prize but honor.

But Morphy was mistaken: his triumph had made the “philosopher’s game” the American game.

What accounts for this metamorphosis? And why did Americans invest so much in their new “King of Chess”? Morphy hardly looked or acted like anyone’s idea of a hero. While his games were masterpieces of bold strokes and fierce attacks, the man who played them showed only “a perfect motionless and inscrutable impassibility, a gazing calmly and steadfastly onwards

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90 New York Times, November 23, 1858, March 17, 1860; Charleston Courier, September 3, 1858, January 4, February 15, March 14, 18, 24, April 2, 4, 6, 9, 18 (quote), 25, May 13, 25, 1859; An Amateur, The Chess Handbook: Teaching the Rudiments of the Game and Giving an Analysis of all the Recognized Openings, Exemplified by Appropriate Games Actually Played by Morphy, Harrwitz, Anderssen, Staunton, Paulsen, Montgomery, Meek and Many Others (Philadelphia, 1859); Charleston Courier, February 19, 1859.


to the end in view.” There was no melodrama about this protagonist, no “sparkle of triumph in his eyes.” He seemed too “juvenile,” weak, soft, modest—and feminine—to be a nation’s champion. Men at dockside would have whispered “foo-foo.”

“I was never more astonished by the appearance of anyone,” agreed the president of Birmingham’s chess club.

Having formed my opinion of the man by the strength of his chess, I expected to see a tall, broad-shouldered individual, with a big beard and a ferocious expression. And there turned out to be a slight, beardless stripling youth in a broad-brimmed straw hat, a black tie and a meek and mild manner. I took him at once to be the photographer.

“His slight, even boyish frame,” the Critic agreed, “his puny little limbs, small face… the almost infantine expression of his features rendered it difficult of belief that this was the great mental phenomenon of whom… all were marveling.” Others mentioned his girlish hair, wispy voice and shy demeanor—unfailing signs of caricatured homosexuality. Yet Americans ignored these unmanly oddities for a time, embracing Morphy as the hero of his country, inaugurating a unifying national pastime. Chess mania’s course in South Carolina helps explain why.

The craze struck Charleston especially hard. Morphy’s father and uncle had lived in the Queen City at the start of the century, and in some accounts the champion was christened a Charlestonian. Where else would the “chivalrous Bayard of chess” hail from? Before the New

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96 Charleston Courier, May 12, 1858; May 28, 30, 1859; “Paul Morphy, Biography and Phrenological Character,” 22; [Edge], Paul Morphy, the Chess Champion, 1-2, 147; Lawson, Paul Morphy, 8, 10; Levy and O’Connell, eds., Oxford Encyclopedia of Chess Games, 1: 69. Though he left South Carolina in his youth, Judge Meek, too,
York tournament, Charleston had boasted “numerous and excellent players,” though the impact of the game on the city’s wider culture was slight. As word of Morphy’s exploits filtered back to America, a “deliberate and well considered movement of some young citizens” created the Charleston Chess Club. They took rooms at 221 King Street, over Van Schaak and Grierson’s drug store, between the photographic studio of Osborn and Durbec and Charlton Bird’s store, where the blue cockade would soon be sold, four doors down from Walter Steele’s hat shop. In counting houses along the East Bay and in the lobby of the Mills House, at militia meetings and in fire halls, men squared off over checkered boards. Here, perhaps more than anywhere, Morphy and Edge had unleashed a chess “revolution.”

Revolution? Revelation of hidden identities was the melodramatic heart of recreation in Victorian culture. Silly, sportive, alternative, sometimes truer selves came briefly to the fore, and that was the fun of the game. In this sense, the simplest charades or guessing games contained a revolutionary element, abruptly subverting cultural imperatives of self-discipline and emotional restraint. Just so, conversely, disunionist serenades, speechifying, and parades by groups like the Young Men’s Secessionist Association were at heart partial and playful steps toward revolution. Yet there were boundaries even those games balked at crossing, identities they feared to perform. In Charleston, chess—the great game of perception—plunged onward, silently but directly linking play and transgressive masculinity as no other pastime dared. In a


community threatened both by the advent of an emasculating capitalism and a feminizing wave of reform, the royal game became far more than a pleasant, idle pastime. On the liminal space of a very small board, chess put men back in the saddle.

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CHAPTER TEN:
THE SOUL OF CHIVALRY

Galloping horsemen, gleaming armor, a pale moon rising over a distant castle: such symbols fit the midlands of Arthurian England better than those of antebellum South Carolina. But when “Black Hawk,” “Grey Eagle,” “Red Rover,” “Blue Ranger,” “Thundergust,” and “Wildfire” welcomed friends to a Christmas gathering of the “Nighthawks of the Congaree” at their “Hole in the Wall” haunt in 1847, this was the imagery they adopted.¹ The Nighthawks promised carnival—“The first shall be last, and the last shall be first!”—but whether these one-night revolutionaries were rollicking college students or rural planters’ sons, a regular club where men might drink and carouse apart from disapproving women and clerics, or simply a set of playful fellows out to advertise a holiday dance, we cannot say. Were they an unlucky slave patrol, comically escalating the duty to ride the roads during the season of celebration into a dream of ancient chivalry? Or did they actually play out fantasy just as their invitation depicted, donning armor, mounting thoroughbreds, and jousting under the stars? Certainly others did, across the state and further afield during the decade and a half before secession. Myths of moonlight and magnolias flourished from such weird and twisted roots, and more dangerous dreams besides.

That is one reason “chess mania” never seemed so odd to Charlestonians: talk of castles and kings, knights and tournaments already abounded in South Carolina, describing a far more extravagant sort of spectacle. In Morphy and his followers, the Chess Monthly declared, “the romance, the chivalry, the daring” of “the old knights, with their courteous courage and high sense of honor, live again.” But so they did among the gallants who strode Charleston’s streets

¹ “Nighthawks of the Congaree” Invitation, December 24, 18[47?], Glass Family Papers, SCL.
and ruled vast plantations as a self-described southern chivalry. Indeed, in South Carolina, the chess craze and the chivalry cult sprang from similar impulses: the desire to share social intimacy with worthy peers, the drive to raise status through self-assertion, the need to affirm masculine prowess before those whose approval mattered most. More than this, chess and chivalry both permitted men to try on astounding alternative identities, performing fantasies of selfhood that might have drawn rebuke—or bloodshed—if enacted on other terrain. Badly battered by the outcry Will Taber’s death unleashed in 1856, men of honor fell back on portraying a noble masculinity’s highest virtues: integrity, courtesy, forbearance, valor. *Nolens volens*, votaries followed the reckless lead of the *Mercury* set, resurrecting the best of chivalry’s bygone world against the Yankeeified individualism, materialism, and respectability they despised. The consonant imperatives of melodrama and the South Carolina jeremiad scripted performances here. And though critics might mock “the chiväl'ry (do not pronounce *chiv'alry*; no one here says so, and surely we must know; who else should?) of South Caarol-i-nar,” few doubted the sincerity of would-be Galahads, any more than they worried over their peers playing chess.² At least, not at the start.

For many southerners, chivalry was pure pretend: a fashionable style, a Romantic conceit, well deserving the derision outsiders heaped upon it. Though some might play at dressing up and impersonating imagined heroes of yore, there was something essentially childish—not to say unwittingly self-mocking—about the whole business. “The age of Chivalry is gone,” most admitted, and “whin[ing] over the want of Knights, and tournaments, and of

² “Paul Morphy,” *Chess Monthly*, 3 (1859): 194; Thomas S. Perry, *The Life and Letters of Francis Lieber* (Boston, 1882), 254. It is striking how much of chivalry’s appeal in Charleston may be put down to the antagonism of the young toward the censorious respectability of their elders. Central to this was the conflict between Robert Barnwell Rhett and his sons and their set. See, e.g., William C. Davis, *Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater* (Columbia, 2001), 253-260, 325, 346-348.
scarfs waved by ladies’ fair hands” and all other such “tomfooleries” was simply sentimentality.3 Why bother?

To northerners, it seemed “inexplicable” that “men, grown men… should make such Jack Puddings of themselves” as did Arkansas’ “knights of the coonskin cap,” Virginia’s “Baron de Corncob,” and the “Champion of Skunk’s Misery,” decked out in “pasteboard bucklers and helmets,” pretending to a nobility of the most ludicrous sort. Jousting was just “an expensive, dangerous amusement which the masses cannot imitate, and in which they cannot participate,” the Boston Investigator charged, a symbol of the “barbaric pride, venality, and ignorance” that typified southern culture. Circuses mocked that strife. Poets parodied it. Knightly self-portrayal became the acme of ridiculous self-importance, or worse. “O his armour is bright, his steed is strong / And his housings are rich and rare,” sneered abolitionist Jane Swisshelm, “He sold a baby to buy him his horse / And another his trappings fair.”4

“The age of chivalry indeed is past,” lisped Virginian Beverly Tucker, “but does not the spirit of chivalry still live?” Elite Carolinians refused to content themselves with such vague, effeminate hopes. In enclaves across the lowcountry, the midlands, and even in Charleston, men declared the best times not yet over. The splendid seed of a slaveholding aristocracy rooted in knightly tradition, they imagined themselves true heroes-in-the-making, destined to transform the


world. Astonishingly, sincerely, they sought to seize that masculine birthright, and improve upon it, too.⁵ Through such endeavors of re-creation, historian Ted Ownby reminds us, “people express not only who they are, but, very often, who they are not.”⁶ Thoroughly modern in so many ways, Carolinians adamantly rejected capitalist modernity, especially the valuation of human relations according to market price and the self-destructive *sine qua non* of “making money to make more money.” Increasingly appalled by the brutal age of iron and steam in which they lived, disgusted by the market-driven values of Victorian culture, outraged by the feminized social ideals they were supposed to choke down, South Carolina’s gentry embraced a different code, pursued a different future. They played out chivalry’s rituals with deep earnestness in feast and dance, race and joust. They admired the history of noble deeds, cultivated the manners of courtliness, aspired to embody gallantry in daily life. In times past, they knew, “[a]n Edward, a Du Guesclin, a Bayard, a Sidney would rise up in the midst of corrupted times, and shame the vices of the day by still showing one more true knight.” So might it be again. They ached to personify that knight, to model chivalric perfection for their fellows, leading them in battle against the evils which compassed round about. None could imagine where that charge might lead. Regardless, chivalry’s devotees in South Carolina trumpeted the same faithful fantasies that inspired congressman Laurence Keitt to declare in 1857 that beset slaveholders would defend honor, heritage, hierarchy, and households at sword’s point against lowborn Yankees: “lance couched, helmet on, visor down!”⁷ It was a date with doom.

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Knightly reverie meshed seamlessly for southerners in these years with come-what-may political bombast, but historians have mostly minimized its importance, trivializing talk of chivalric war as hyperbolic metaphor, dismissing the tournaments, feasts, and balls planters recreated as quaint, failed, silly—or ignoring them altogether. But Keitt and his kind weren’t kidding. However absurd, quixotic, suicidal their plans and professions must seem today, a growing, dynamic, articulate set of young Carolinians in the late 1850s came to see capitalist modernity as their deadly foe and dreamed of waging war upon it. Across the decade, South Carolina teemed with self-consciously chivalric performances, growing in size, popularity and power. They exerted a strong, symbiotic effect on the chess fever which gripped the state as the clock ticked toward disunion. Once the tilting stopped, the shooting started.

We must take such performances as seriously as contemporaries did, then, and dissect them more carefully still. The past has its own logic, Michael O’Brien reminds us, and “it is the historian’s business to understand that logic.” As Johann Huizinga warned a century ago, “even political history… under penalty of neglecting actual facts, is bound to take illusions, vanities, follies, into account.” Especially in South Carolina, “[t]here is no more dangerous tendency… than that of representing the past, as if it were a rational whole and dictated by clearly defined interests.” However deluded, vain, foolish, and dangerous these men were, they deserve the

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7 Fox-Genovese and Genovese, Mind of the Master Class, 312; George P. R. James, The History of Chivalry (New York, 1839), 52; John H. Merchant, Jr., “Lawrence M. Keitt: South Carolina Fire-eater” (Ph. D. diss.: University of Virginia, 1976), 209.

respect of close analysis. What, when they mocked and mounted up, did they think they were doing?\(^9\)

For elite Carolinians, chivalry was no charade. Though politicians spoke of social order resting on labor’s stinking mudsill, though reformers focused on the warmth of the family circle, gallants knew better. In claiming the name of gentleman, strong, principled fellows established ties of mutuality and courtesy, upholding a respectful code of conduct, balancing claims of rank and merit, vivifying a rigorous masculine ideal. That manly bond was the true social bedrock. Decent standards of behavior, defined by custom, force, faith, and blood, rose upon it, prescribed, displayed, enforced.\(^10\) Not that chivalry’s advocates aimed to recreate a lost world of knights and castles, as European eccentrics hoped.\(^11\) Arthurian England was too bleak, divided and unstable to go questing after, a world too much like their own. They aimed higher than that.

Even at its most fanciful, chivalry’s performances in South Carolina demonstrated the deep play of political conservatism. Consider the great tournament held in April, 1851 at Pineville, the lowcountry elite’s summer residence amid the rice swamp of St. Stephen’s Parish. Commanded by a King at Arms, Master of Horse, and various Heralds, attended by appropriately decked-out “Moors,” and watched by dozens of fair damsels hoping to be crowned the Queen of Love, twenty-one knights and a sultan named Augustin Taveau showed their skill in “running at

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the rings”: approaching a wooden frame at a gallop and snaring a dangling hoop with the tip of their lance. Honor itself was at stake here. “You must brave danger,” one elder warned, “but also fear shame!” Since tourists at the Virginia springs had gotten up the first southern tournament ten years before, not much in the way of danger had befallen any rider; still there was the worry that one might be outclassed or unhorsed entirely. Upper South spectacles were never more than mock-serious, dress-up affairs. In South Carolina, though, theatre became ritual, demonstrating an earnestness and social ambition other contests lacked. “Of noble name and knightly,” the Courier declared, “they burn to claim the gilded spurs.” Burn they must have, sweating in the Carolina sun in the fancy garb of the Knight of This and the Lady of That, portraying imagined kinship of emotional and political import. What accounts for such adamancy?  


14 Charleston Courier, April 25, 1851. The quotation paraphrases Sir Walter Scott, Marmion; A Tale of Flodden Field (Edinburgh, 1808), 28-29.
“[T]he Chivalry of Charleston,” declared one gallant in 1846, “is rapidly improving.”

Determined not merely to defend paternalist ideals but to attain them fully, they paraded a masculinity of personal integrity, deep learning, spotless morals, impeccable manners. Ready to risk all for honor’s sake, they mourned men like Taber who came up short in the noble quest. Their grail was a slave-based Eden, “bright and pure and free from sin,” proving plantation society’s superiority to a world gone wrong. Without irony, their tournaments looked to portray chivalry’s aggressive ideal “in the truest import of the term.”

Still more than this, Palmetto knights would succeed where wobbly Britons had failed. In 1839, Archibald Montgomerie, the Thirteenth Earl of Eglinton, had invited England’s aristocracy to his lowland Scottish estate to partake in a grand chivalric tournament. Eglinton staged the strange spectacle not merely to win social influence and turn a tidy profit. He planned the display of prowess and bearing to revive the fortunes of Britain’s marginalized landed elite. Shunted aside as a moral force and political class by the rude dynamism of a rising bourgeoisie, thoroughly undermined by its cultural excesses and intellectual torpor, the gentry would ride back to prominence and power, Eglinton hoped, by reprising ancient deeds and chivalric qualities that gave titled claims to national leadership undeniable substance. Here were the sons

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15 Henry W. Wienges to Peter Della Torre, November 29, 1846, Peter Della Torre Papers, SCL. By 1860, notably, the would-be knight Wienges was still a mere salesclerk, without family or property.

of the knights who made England great. This was the class that would see her greatness shine forth once again. 17

In the event, alas, conservative pomp went comically wrong. Train and carriage schedules got botched. Unanticipated crowds went unsheltered, unfed. Pelting rain turned the field of honor into a sea of mud, slathering onlookers and participants in unchivalric shades of brown. Strong winds swept down from the highlands, carrying off bunting, tents, banners, hats. Just about anything that might take flight, did. Denuded of medieval fantasy, Eglinton’s tournament wound up decidedly Victorian, soggy, and disappointing.

The earl was ruined and so, it seemed, was his conservative vision: if squires could so badly bungle a playful festival, who dared pass the reins of power back into their hands? Across the 1840s, the liberal sentiment of Dickens displaced the reactionary romance of Sir Walter Scott, demands for a Great Charter drowned out calls for government by bluebloods, and cotton mills, imperial profits, and technological prowess ushered Eglinton’s set—ignominiously dubbed the “Eglinton Patent Emasculated Mopstick Middle Age Recovery Society”—steadily toward oblivion. A generation later, a well-heeled folk not gentle but genteel would recast medievalism as dreamy nostalgia and rural fashion, attractively unthreatening to a class that had made its money and longed now desperately to deny grubby origins. 18


18 Boston Courier, October 24, 1839. Compounding the mockery, by 1842, rubberized raincoats were being marketed in a popular “Tournament” style. New York Herald, December 17, 1842; Girouard, The Return to Camelot. For other samples of the humiliation chivalry’s proponents in Victorian Britain endured, see (Philadelphia) North American, October 23, 1839; (Philadelphia) Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette, May 15, 1843; The Comic Almanack: An Ephemeris in Jest and Earnest, Containing Merry Tales, Humorous Poetry, Quips, and Oddities, 2 vols. (London, n. d. [1854?]).
That is one way, too, of understanding why chivalry arose so swiftly in the South, and most earnestly in South Carolina, in the years after Eglinton’s fiasco. For the English journalist William Howard Russell, Carolinians’ “profession of faith in the cavaliers and their cause,” their “agricultural faith and the belief of a landed gentry” was simply a matter of fashion and baseless snobbery. Russell had witnessed the Charge of the Light Brigade, and thought he knew chivalry’s dreadful ironies when he saw them. “I see no trace of cavalier descent in the names of Huger, Rose, Manning, Chesnut, Pickens,” he huffed.\textsuperscript{19} But that view misread the central aim of the earl’s ambitions, and elite Carolinians’ bold, disastrous course, too. These men were not looking for the alibi later Victorians sought, seeking to shape sensibility for defensive purposes, or whistling past the graveyard. From the beginning, Eglinton’s plan had been politically aggressive, as it was for jousting planters who improved upon his unfortunate example.

It was, moreover, hardly the brutal, factionalized, impoverished, priest-ridden world of the Middle Ages English Tories hoped to reanimate in the early days of Victoria’s reign. Who would have imagined that the elbows-out elite surrounding the young queen would have countenanced that goal?\textsuperscript{20} Rather, it was the imagined rebirth of medieval chivalry they longed to reclaim—all the heraldry and self-aggrandizement without the intramural bloodshed and pious dogma, of just the sort that had flourished in the Elizabethan age.\textsuperscript{21} That last great queen had unified and magnified the nation’s power, launching a truly great Britain on a proud course of empire. Celebrations of feast and joust, the knightings of slave traders and entrepreneurs, nouveau heraldry and castle building, and the transmutation of chivalry to a code of honor had


\textsuperscript{20} For examples of these attitudes, see David Newsome, \textit{The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change} (New Brunswick, NJ, 1997); Christopher L. Brown, \textit{Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism} (Chapel Hill, 2006).

\textsuperscript{21} Cf. Fox-Genovese and Genovese, \textit{The Mind of the Master Class}, 332, \textit{et seq.}
been part and parcel of her achievement. Now, with noble, tried, conservative hands steadying the helm, Victoria might claim legitimate political descent from the triumphantly illegitimate virgin Elizabeth—miraculous alchemy—leading England to greater heights still.

Though British Romantics spurned Eglinton’s idyll for the carping of Thomas Carlyle, Carolinians eagerly took up the quest. Thoroughly steeped in British culture (or keen imitations of it), many came to see Elizabethan recreations of medieval social relations as the sum of all their hopes. Initially they swooned over the novels of Scott and his acolytes, as others did, comingling the rugged twelfth and rosy sixteenth centuries shamelessly. But some dug deeper, ransacking history and literature for themes, qualities, and heroic examples to link their lives with the knightly world that made their blood race.

Key to that quest was English novelist Charlotte Yonge’s 1853 best-seller, The Heir of Redclyffe, a Tractarian sob story that “left Dickens and Thackeray far behind” in terms of broad popularity. All but forgotten today, it offered the perfect conservative response to that other great tear-jerker of the moment, Uncle Tom’s Cabin. From South Carolina to the Crimea, male readers ate up the plot and itched to emulate its doomed protagonist, Sir Guy Morville, a man resolved to live chivalry’s code in the modern world. The Mercury pronounced it a finer work than Jane Eyre, admiring how Yonge exposed “those self-delusions in social life, where, under

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the guise of the sternest virtue, lurk vanity and pride, and jealousy and other evil passions.”

Suicidal self-pity mingled here with iron-willed determination to act and feel as a true gentleman should, trusting in right’s inevitable victory. Small wonder that James Hammond, that most double-minded of Carolina planter-politicians, christened the mansion he built in 1859 “Redcliffe.”

Ultimately, in South Carolina, it was not some legendary Galahad, Norman invader, or Christian crusader chivalry’s advocates focused on, but a small set of early modern soldier-scholars at the heart of medievalism’s revival. Lancelot was too remote, flawed, and ungoverned for planter-paladins to admire, noble Roland only slightly less so. But a Drake or Hawkins, charming the queen with gentle manners and terrifying England’s foes with daring deeds, was worth emulating. In Essex, Raleigh, Walsingham and their circles, the code of honor seemed to reach its acme. Those heroes had built the first plantations, made their nation a world power, and left a rich legacy of letters besides.

More satisfying still, Pierre Terrail, the French chevalier de Bayard, showed that a man might hold fast to chivalry’s tenets, fighting “sans peur et sans reproche,” while others went chasing after money, fame, and power. Carolina ideologues from Taber to Simms sang his praises. Best of all for planters seeking a role model was that “flower of English manhood,”


26 Sean R. Busick, *A Sober Desire for History: William Gilmore Simms as Historian* (Columbia, 2005), 42-45. In private correspondence, Charlestonians frequently ascribed chivalrous titles to members of their circles, especially
Sir Philip Sidney: devout, cultured, brave, honorable, self-sacrificing. To liberal Victorians, Sidney was nobody, the dilettante who missed his chance to make his mark. To chivalry’s admirers, he personified all a true man once was, and yet might be again.

For a gentleman is not an idler, a trifler, a dandy; he is not a scholar only, a soldier, a mechanic, a merchant; he is the flower of men, in whom the accomplishment of the soldier, the skill of the mechanic, the sagacity of the merchant, all have their part and appreciation. A sense of duty is his main-spring, and like a watch crusted with precious stones, his function is not to look prettily, but to tell the time of day. Philip Sidney was not a gentleman because his grandfather was the Duke of Northumberland and his father lord-deputy of Ireland, but because he was himself generous, simple, truthful, noble, refined.

For Carolinians coming of age in the late 1840s, Sidney epitomized the masculine values drummed into them since birth: intellectual strength and moral virtue galvanized by the will to act. No one drank deeper from the cup Sidney’s ghost proffered than Taber, the cavalier reborn, misapprehended, and tragically slain. Taber dead made chivalry alive—immortal, some said—in the South’s Holy City. As tributes to his memory poured in after the disastrous duel that laid him low, men linked chivalry and secession more closely than any propaganda could have done. Taber defended civilization, one mourner declared, as all true men must.

He believed that the continuance of the race of gentlemen (in the Bayard, Roland, or Philip Sidney meaning of the word) was more important than the existence of the Union, and he labored with pen and tongue to hedge South Carolina with barriers against the terrible invasion of Northern vulgarity, which has done so

James Hamilton, Jr., “the Bayard of the South, the soul of honor, the mirror of chivalry.” See, e.g., Mitchell King to Hugh S. Legare, May 5, 1833, Mitchell King Papers, SCL; [Leon Cruger], A Brief Notice of the Death and Character of Gov. Hamilton of South Carolina (Washington, 1857); 7; Robert Tinkler, James Hamilton of South Carolina (Baton Rouge, 2004), 251.

On Sidney, see especially H. R. Fox Bourne, Sir Philip Sidney: Type of English Chivalry in the Elizabethan Age (New York, 1891); Alan Stewart, Philip Sidney: A Double Life (London, 2000).

much to debauch our press and disgrace our people. This was a noble mission, well understood and manfully worked out to the close.

In case anyone missed the meaning of this political parable, short days after Taber went to earth, the *Mercury* mourned the loss of “so fine a flower / Untimely cropt” with the poem, *A Lament for Sir Philip Sidney*.\(^2^9\)

Taber’s death not only sparked a popular campaign against the usages of honor. It also provoked a contrary outcry which asserted chivalry’s social merits. When the Rhett clan laid her husband to rest without a monument in St. Philip’s churchyard, Taber’s widow and friends raised the largest, most prominent column in Magnolia Cemetery to his memory.\(^3^0\) However flawed, chivalry would not be easily dismissed. By the early 1850s, to call oneself a gentleman, unqualified by position or profession, had become almost an admission of uselessness. Market society measured men by what they had, what they did, not by how they bore themselves personally. Chivalry reasserted an older style of social ranking, rooting its claims ultimately in questions of taste—which is to say, power, dolled up. To be considered a gentleman once more became a worthy distinction, splitting a culturally competent elite off from the hoi polloi. Men like Keitt and Taber, J. J. Pettigrew, William Henry Trescot, and William Porcher Miles not only wrote and spoke of the need for southerners to defend the values Renaissance knights embraced. They styled their mustaches, beards, hair, and equally extravagant manners after courtly heroes. It was only a matter of time before they made deeds comport with speech, mounted up and began jousting.

Merit mattered most, yet Carolina aspirants to nobility were hardly shy about trooping the

\(^{29}\) “W. R. Taber,” *New Orleans Delta*, undated clipping (1856), J. Ward Hopkins Scrapbook, SCL; *Charleston Mercury*, October 11, 1856. Two years later, Sam Courtenay’s bookstore was still promoting a biography of Sidney’s life and times far above the works of Poe, Kingsley, or Carlyle. *Charleston Courier*, January 6, 1858.

\(^{30}\) For aid in unraveling the story of Taber’s column, I owe thanks to Kathleen Hilliard, St. Philip’s Episcopal Church, and the staff of the Magnolia Cemetery Trust, especially Marcia Becznski.
family colors. After all, as sociologist Pierre Bourdieu notes, “the true basis of differences found in the area of consumption, and far beyond it, is the opposition between the tastes of luxury (or freedom) and the tastes of necessity.” 31 A gentleman without wealth was unlucky, but one who had never known wealth, indulged those “tastes of luxury,” and the possibilities of deportment that went along with them, was a contradiction in terms. With the most unthinking sleight-of-hand, chivalry’s pedigree came back to family and property. 32 That is hardly surprising. By the year of secession, many lowcountry families had held their estates for nearly two centuries, and some could trace lineages much farther to Britain or France in the late Middle Ages. Trace they did—and do—with remarkable ingenuity, discovering lofty kin ties and forgotten exploits, reclaiming lost coats of arms or conjuring crests where none could be found. And certainly there was no hint of mendacity in this course: the validity of any claim of honor rested upon public acknowledgment of that claim, regardless of reality. Chivalry was a social fact, not a variable outcome. Its function “is not to win; it is to go exactly through the motions which are expected.” 33 In South Carolina, its enactment was finally a ritual performance—a recreation—not a sport or game like chess.

Under chivalry’s sway, state history too came to focus planters’ attention. In 1840, William Gilmore Simms wrote South Carolina’s first popular history, followed by a flood of poems and biographies celebrating heroism and knightly gallantry. A generation later, a fragment of Charleston’s elite formed the South Carolina Historical Society, dedicated to


preserving the names and achievements of their forebears as a class. That most pedigrees were short, most family chronicles undistinguished mattered little. For the parvenu aristocracy, embroidering a heraldic past, imagining itself the culmination of centuries of noble lineage was less important than slyly pushing away more proximate origins of lesser palatability. The genealogies some dreamed up might seem shaky, but they comforted the sons of schoolteachers and dirt farmers latterly raised by main effort. Perceptive as they were, too, South Carolina’s chivalry understood that they fit the bill about as well as the free-booting knights of old ever had: the Middle Ages knew more of rapine than of Lochinvar.

Carolinians not only portrayed their claims to chivalry. They inscribed them on their environment in a variety of melodramatic gestures. They renamed plantations in the fine style of Elizabethan manor houses and medievalist imagination: Bolan Hall and Castle Hill, Richmond, Kensington, Twickenham Place, Windsor Castle, Bonny Doone, Rosdhu, Waverly. They built overwrought homes with outlandish great halls, echoing the grandeur of baronial estates. Augustin Taveau’s slaves surrounded his mansion with something approximating a moat. In Charleston, the state’s military academy, dubbed the Citadel, resembled nothing so much as a storybook castle. And anyone passing the thick stone walls and turrets of the German Artillery Hall on Wentworth Street might well have listened for the clank of armor. Indeed, crenellation

34 William G. Simms, The History of South Carolina, from its First European Discovery to its Erection into a Republic: with a Supplementary Chronicle of Events to the Present Time (Charleston, 1840); Busick, A Sober Desire for History, Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society, 1 (1857): v-vi.

35 “Untitled Thoughts,” n. d., James Henry Hammond Papers, SCL; Henry E. Ravenel, Ravenel Records: A History and Genealogy of the Huguenot Family of Ravenel, of South Carolina; with some Incidental Account of the Parish of St. John’s Berkeley, which was their Principal Location (Atlanta, 1898), esp. 26-27; J. Milton Mackie, From Cape Cod to Dixie and the Tropics (New York, 1864), 112.

etched the most unmilitary of buildings, from the Marine Hospital to the city workhouse.
Likewise, in the 1840s and ’50s, a wave of church building in the ecclesiological gothic style swept over the state, elongated spires mirroring perfectionist hopes. But not only planters’ mansions, public buildings, and churches hearkened back to Elizabethan-medieval themes. Barns, icehouses, even slave cabins celebrated the Gothic Revival. In South Carolina, whether master or slave, a man’s home looked evermore like his castle.

More commonly, men of means sought to enact chivalric virtues without so much hammering and subterfuge, dealing justly and generously with neighbors, raising sons in the paths of duty, maintaining a proper pose of independence, and leaving others to draw knightly comparisons. Who would call John Townsend self-interested or narrow when each year he crowned the seaside feast he held with a dish of palmetto cabbage, one for each of his honored guests? The boiled sprout was not so tasty, but all knew that each portion meant killing a tree on Townsend’s plantation, slow-growing and essential to long-term economic success—a deliberate act of self-destructive largesse on a soil easily ruined by wind and tide. When a hurricane finally washed away Townsend’s world a generation after Appomattox—house, island, and all went beneath the waves—none could have been surprised. Nor, by that stage, did it matter much by his own lights: the old man’s memory would live on regardless, like the rumbling of ancient chariot wheels.


Most masters contented themselves with ladling out brandy and barbecue at banquets. The point was that a chivalrous man, whatever his means, did not stint guests. That hail-fellow-well-met spirit carried over when the elite went to town, most notably in militia companies or the peripatetic supper clubs gentlemen organized. It found outlets in other recreations, too, notably hunting and horse racing. Within the horse culture of Kershaw and lower Richland Districts, paintings of the fastest Hampton or Singleton mares reflected greatness on their owners and their kin. Such men saw little purpose in chess-play: there were kings, queens, and knights on display all around them.40

In the 1850s, such melodramatic acts of self-portrayal escalated into full-blown chivalric tournaments, jousts, and tilting matches. Sometimes these were linked to the annual festivities of clubs or volunteer militia companies, but more often well-heeled planters organized them for the local community. Across the lowcountry from Beaufort to Georgetown Districts, in the midlands near Augusta, Camden, and Columbia, and less frequently above the fall line, such celebrations became annual events. By 1859, even Charleston boasted a tilting club that attracted would-be knights of mixed pedigree and prospects. “[P]erfectly free from those evils which would render it expensive,” the group enlisted clerks and bank tellers, storekeepers and wharfingers as scions of chivalry.41 However odd the players, their aim was sincere, and their performances won applause.

Why “the inspiriting sport of this gay hour?—these knightly and gallant darings?” One supporter explained tilting’s attraction to Charleston’s youth: beyond perfecting skill in the rites

40 See, e.g., Rules and History of the Hot and Hot Fish Club of All Saints Parish, South Carolina (Charleston, 1860); Anna W. Rutledge, Artists in the Life of Charleston: Through Colony and State, from Restoration to Reconstruction (Columbia, 1980).

41 Charleston Courier, September 17-18, October 4, 12, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, June 9, 1860; Charleston Mercury, September 18, November 23, 1860.
of chivalry, club members relished the chance to present manly character in its “truest and happiest light.” Sporting success reflected competitors’ “virtues as men,” promoting the goal of “true social and virtuous intercourse.” Having demonstrated the “purity of [their] entire lives” and dedication to the cause “of right, of justice, of virtue, and of honour,” tilters were ready at last for “an ordeal before [the] battery of beauty,” and its male relatives, too.\footnote{Charleston Courier, October 12, 1860.} Could facing cannon at Balaclava have been more daunting than sallying forth among Charleston’s belles?


Chivalry’s advocates thought the answer plain. “There are some wrongs,” said Brooks’ accomplice, Laurence Keitt, “for the redress of which no appeal can be made to a human tribunal.”

Wounded honor can never be redeemed by an attorney, nor can a manly pride be weighed in legal scales. My colleague redressed a wrong to his blood and his
state, and he did it in a fair and manly way. Sir, in the feudal code of chivalry—the only code the wit of man has ever constructed—the churl was never touched with the knight’s sword; his person was mulcted by the quarter-staff. 44

Reckless Sumner had slandered Brooks’ aged kinsman in the course of a shocking antislavery speech. Senator Andrew Pickens Butler, the Yankee taunted, read too many Romantic novels, à là Don Quixote, and now fancied himself a chivalrous knight. In truth, Sumner sneered, he was a pompous, slobbering, doddering fool, a debauched slave-driver stroking the “harlot, Slavery” like the fairest maid. Such insolence needed thrashing, Carolinians agreed. How else could Brooks act the part of honor? Sir Preston was above suing; churlish Charles was below duelling. “The rapier or pistol for gentlemen,” one gallant explained, “& the cudgel for dogs.” 45

The trouble was, the beating Brooks laid on went far beyond reason. He dithered for days over just what to tell Sumner, how to strike and escape being pummeled by his hulking foe. In the end, Brooks blurted out only the start of a splendid speech before raining blows like a madman. Chivalry here came unhinged, its champion instantly tarnished as “Bully Brooks,” an unmanly “Monster” who died of shame—and bronchitis—within a year. Worse still, Carolinians knew, the charges of cowardice and dishonor Yankees hurled were the same slurs they had whispered about Brooks among themselves for nearly a decade. 46 Honor’s mask slipped badly. Worst of all, though less obvious to outsiders, was the way tournaments laid cavaliers and their cult open to accusations of sissified manhood and too-dainty display. Though followers in

44 Alleged Assault Upon Senator Sumner, 34 Congress, 1 Session, House Report No. 182 (Washington, 1856), 33-34.


South Carolina saw tilting matches as the apogee of chivalry configured as play and theatre, others dismissed them as “miserable & expensive farces.” “Never before has such a spectacle been witnessed in America,” one hooted of the great Pineville joust. “[A] tournament in the nineteenth century, and in the wild woods of Carolina” was “an affair that would surely astonish our sober, though no less chivalrous, ancestors.” The competition was as odd for its comic eclectic ism and overwrought style as for the skill of the “knight s.” Twenty-six sons of the local gentry, dressed in velvets, feathers, and antique armor took turns “running at the ring,” eschewing the dangers of jousting proper.47

From the arrival of valiants on the field, incongruity ruled the day. Carolina’s chivalry had little idea how Elizabethan versions of knights and ladies ought to look and act in re-creation. More ridiculous was the clash of these performances with modern gestures or touches of local color. At Pineville, one spectator noted dryly, as gallants rode up to the stands, “the Band struck up ‘Yankee Doodle’ of all things for this anti-Yankee state.” So, too, though their titles suggested nobility of place or national origin—the Knight of Eutaw, the Knight of Santee, the Hibernian Knight—most looked like anything but medieval or Tudor warriors. Fustians and broad-brimmed hats, not chainmail and helmets predominated. There was more than a hint of effeminacy to the whole proceeding. How stalwart the Knight of Erin must have appeared, “dressed in green velvet with gold shamrocks on his hat which was a French affair with plumes and on his coat a scarf on which was embroidered the Harp &c. of Ireland.” Describing that gallant, Mrs. Charles Sinkler could muster no better than that “his dress was very expensive and critical.” William Mazyck Porcher, tournament organizer and self-appointed King-at-Arms, came decked out in the fancy lace and hose of Sir Walter Raleigh. At tourney’s end, the Knight

of Walworth, Julius Porcher, won a “rich azure scarf” for having the best costume, a full suit of armor, but that was an easy choice. Most participants looked more like fey cowboys than heroic cavaliers.\textsuperscript{48}

The tilting, too, steered melodrama toward mockery. In six rounds, no competitor gained a perfect score. Only timid Morton Waring attained five hits, winning the right to choose his “Queen of Love and Beauty” from among the assembled ladies. Alas, the “poor youth” proved no \textit{preu-dome}, mumbling out his choice “with great trepidation.” Others fumbled more stupidly still. The Knight of Berkeley lost control of his horse on his first trial and was thrown. Mounted on a more docile beast, Rene Ravenel returned with lowered lance, “without plume or spurs, and crave[d] the indulgence of the ladies for his disgrace.” Indulge they did. As the “handsome,” “pale and disconcerted” youth was escorted to sit with the women, showered with flowers and compliments, and hailed “quite as much a hero as the real victor,” only true disciples could miss the comedy of the scene.\textsuperscript{49} Eglinton would have winced. Aiming beyond reenactment, toward recreation of chivalry’s virtues, Carolinians’ leap here fell laughably short of the mark. At the supper and ball which rounded out the tournament, though, failures were forgotten. Theatrical form, not athletic achievement, was at stake on the tilting ground. He who blundered through ritual without flinching won pride of place.\textsuperscript{50}


In form and content, then, such jousts owed little to the aggressive sport of the Middle Ages. Their ceremonial aims and ritual structure closely resembled Elizabethan tournaments, though this very similarity opened the door to jeers of anachronism and effeminacy. An 1857 tilt near Columbia, intended “to excite improvement in the noble art of elegant horsemanship and the dextrous use of warlike implements,” attracted a typically overdressed squad of knights-errant worthy of *Punch* himself. Reporting for the Columbia *South Carolinian*, “Vesper Brackett” scoffed at the scene. Despite his “swart brow and thin nervous lip,” what could be made of the Knight of the Crescent, “in a becoming costume of crimson and silver, with the bright signet of his faith shining on his breast, the turban of blue and white, emblematic of the follower of the Faithful—the wide flowing trowsers, red slippers and variegated scarf,” or Cordova’s Knight, “with purple doublet of rich silk—blue small clothes, slashed at the sides—Andalusian sombrero, with gay streamers,” much less the “gay Knight of the Ocean,” in sailor costume? “In looking at them,” the correspondent admitted, “we were forced to exclaim,”

Oh mercy God! what masking stuff is here?
What’s this? a sleeve? ’tis like a demi-cunion:
What! up and down carved like an apple-tart?
Here’s snip and nip, and cut, and slish, and slash.

The effect was so strange “that we cannot write out the man-millinery of the scene.”51 The tilting was easier to describe: twenty of twenty-one contestants failed in the first round, the Knight of the Thistle—in full tartan—was victorious, and the evening ended with “the music, the

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banquet, and the wine." However sincere, hero-worship here came cheaper than Carlyle could have imagined.

Palmetto tournaments followed a familiar routine: some form of equestrian act (horse racing or showing), followed by tilting, then a feast, and often a ball. Though women attended, they were hardly the inspiration of prowess medieval counterparts had been. Instead, they played the more humble, modern role of appreciative audience, and even in this, often served primarily as props or animate devices by which men might construct relations and rankings with other men. The knights focused attention. In contemporary accounts, even the tilt took second place to elaborate descriptions of competitors’ costumes and personal demeanor. The biggest battle this chivalry faced was to look the part. It had to be so, Augustin Taveau stressed, in a world where “Candour’s cloak the Slanderer dares to use, / When Treachery’s purpose prompts her to abuse.” Only close scrutiny could keep sincerity safe from imposture. Melodramatic self-portrayal and strict adherence to the South Carolina jeremiad here sharpened men’s skill to discern true from false.

All of this suggests that enthusiasm for tournaments in South Carolina was more a celebration of such rituals of political insight than a type of game rooted in equestrian accomplishment. Elements of melodrama are evident in the theatrical costuming and stylized behavior of participants, the rigidity of narrative form, and the unimportance of scoring participants. Tilting was a game or sport only in that it partook of liminality, temporarily suspending rules of social reality. That escape into fantasy was all-important, and in this sense

52 Charleston Mercury, April 16, 1857; Brackett, “The Tournament.”

53 On the role of women at postbellum tournaments, see Ownby, Subduing Satan, 73.

54 Charleston Courier, May 2, 6, 1859; Entry of April 27, 1859, Thomas Porcher Ravenel Diary, SCHS; Entry of November 6, 1860, Catherine Louisa McLaurin Diary, SCL; Alton [Augustin L. Taveau], The Magic Word (Boston, 1855), 128.
the tournament is best understood as a ritual invocation, an opportunity for celebrants to be released from the mask of everyday existence, standing forth as the chivalrous heroes they aimed to emulate. Within that charmed circle of blood, taste, and merit where men had the wit to see, interpret, and mirror each other’s honorable behavior, status was claimed and mutually affirmed. Those beyond were consigned to a lower level. How well a man rode, whether he hit his target was almost irrelevant to the story participants enacted in the course of play.55 Tournaments functioned as a melodramatic tale Carolinians told about who they were—or might become—and what values truly mattered in their world. By linking a lost dream of Elizabethan chivalry to their besieged, slave-based honor culture, they sought to realize an ethos of revolutionary power: a paternalist utopia where the liberal excesses of Victorian reform might be rolled back, the degrading folly of capitalist exploitation denied, the planters’ conservatism affirmed, purified, and celebrated.56

Realizing those world-changing ambitions, though, meant balancing Tudor and Victorian ideals more perfectly than any mortal could have hoped. The fortunes of the Charleston Tilting Club display that difficulty in microcosm. Elsewhere it was the confluence (not to say confusion) of chivalry and paternalism that attracted supporters. Here, respectable meetings and a sober constitution replaced gay costumes and courtly bearing. Riders actually practiced tilting, and in bland blue uniforms, no less. Predictably, membership never exceeded twenty knights. In 1860, as laborious ritual displaced melodramatic play, the club was barely struggling along. Most men

55 Barthes made this point about professional wrestling: “The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so…. [W]hat is expected is the intelligible representation of moral situations which are usually private.” Roland Barthes, Mythologies (New York, 1972), 15, 18.

confined themselves to “intellectual jousts” to affirm manhood and fend off the South’s foes. They had long since turned to chess.

Contemporary descriptions of Paul Morphy’s exploits and of chess play generally leaned hard on the language of chivalry. “He has transformed the romance, the chivalry, the daring of the sixteenth century to the nineteenth,” declared the *Chess Monthly*. “In him Bayard and the old knights, with their courteous courage and high sense of honor, live again.” And in those who imitated him: whatever their class or pedigree, players of “the noble game” threw down the gauntlet, issued bold challenges, and took part in tournaments. Opponents paraded a heroic masculinity, behaving like “gallant Knights” performing “chivalric acts,” hoping to “win [their] spurs” against worthy foes. They thrust and parried, jousted and “did honor” in mimic combat. They portrayed the soul of chivalry without all the dandified horsiness of tilting. “Does not all the enchantment of chivalry craze your brain as you look” upon the chessboard, one writer asked.

Do you not see, as you move out into the front of battle, all the brave Knights of St. John storming the rocky fortress of Acre? And when you win at last by their aid, do you not rest from your trial with the same glad rejoicing as the gallant Norman noblemen displayed after the battle of Hastings? If you manoeuvre your Queen’s Knight so skillfully as to capture two or three of your foemen, what is he but another Ivanhoe in a second Tournament of Ashby-de-la-Zouche?

Such rhetoric sounds quaint and overblown to modern ears, but in the age of melodrama it carried persuasive power. And there may have been deeper resonances still. In many ways,

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57 *Charleston Mercury*, April 16, 1857; *Charleston Courier*, September 18, 1860; Robert B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., undated letter [1846], Robert Barnwell Rhett MSS, SCL.


Morphy’s triumph recapitulated the David/Arthur myth in Victorian form: the unheralded boy who vanquishes opponents and unites his people in spite of lowly standing, ascending to leadership through merit and magical powers. That tale of honor wrongly discounted, heroism hidden in plain sight, had broad appeal to Carolinians. Where else had cultural self-perception been so drastically and errantly undervalued by outsiders? “Shew those Yankees what a Southern Gentleman of real Character really is,” more than one planter urged his sons across the antebellum era--without giving much hint of how to accomplish the task practically. Now chess seemed to supply an answer, Morphy an example worth emulating.60

Strikingly, though, chess play in South Carolina attracted a constituency almost wholly separate from--and rival to--that drawn to tilting and tournaments. Carlyle would not have seen these fellows as terribly heroic, but one had to start somewhere. Although chess clubs formed in 1858-60 from Greenville to Edgefield to Columbia, they rallied uniformly in courthouse towns, gaining little support from the hinterland.61 And in Charleston the seeds of chess mania--planted long before Morphy’s European triumphs, the American Chess Congress, or even Eglinton’s fiasco--proved remarkably slow to sprout. When at last the fever came on, there seemed something peculiarly local about its origins and trajectory: as nowhere else in America, Charlestonians embraced the game as a weapon of class struggle.

The quest for status, the desire for manly leisure, the joy of assuming alternate identities, and the pressing needs of mercantile commerce conspired in the Queen City to keep interest in the game alive—if just barely--across the antebellum era. Among the various émigrés, sojourners, and marginal men who piled up in Federalist Charleston—French colonial refugees,

60 “Knightly Chess,” Chess Monthly, 2 (1858), 99; Robert B. Rhett to Robert B. Rhett, Jr., [n. d.], 1846, Robert Barnwell Rhett MSS, SCL.

61 Charleston Courier, November 25, 1858, May 12, 1859; Charleston Mercury, May 12, 1859, October 12, 1860.
transient Spanish, British, and northern merchants and diplomats, Sephardic Jews—chess provided a point of social contact and a quietly masculine sanctuary both. From the 1790s to the early 1850s, bookstores sold various guides to the game, as local newspapers regularly advertised, and jewelers, stationers, and general merchants sold assorted chess sets. There is no sign that these were ever in high demand at all--the expensive styles many shops stocked put them “beyond the reach of any but very long and very full purses”--yet merchants and editors flogged them year in, year out. So, too, though McDonnell’s match with La Bourdonnais escaped notice in Charleston until years later, the city was home to Maelzel’s Turk in his last years, stirring broader interest in chess for a moment in the 1830s. The flame flickered.

By 1845, the Southern Patriot was trumpeting the distinctively male friendship of chess players, a brotherhood so strong that “a man will do that which he would refuse his father and mother.” The claim that “breathing the same air and looking at the same chessboard” made men closer in spirit than Damon and Pythias seems overblown—and perhaps deliberately imprecise--yet certainly some Charlestonians, few and isolated, were finding new intimacy and unity across the board. Chess clubs flourished in England, France, Italy, and Spain during this period, and Americans yearned to cultivate that same level of cultural refinement, the product of “the habitual exercise of powers of combining and calculating to as great a degree as in the study of mathematics.” Chess seemed well suited to the army of unmarried young clerks and

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62 See, e.g., (Charleston) City Gazette, October 19, 1802, September 7, 1803, May 28, 1821; Charleston Times, May 6, 1818; Charleston Courier, February 5, 1803, June 4, 1834, March 6, 1841; October 27, 1852; Charleston Mercury, January 18, 1858.

bookkeepers multiplying across the city. It offered a fraternal haven, too, for elite members of the “bachelor species” visiting the rural resorts of Carolina, Virginia and the North: though women tried their hand at bowling and billiards, they seemed to shun the royal game. Or were shunned by its devotees. Maybe that was just why the number of chess players grew.

At mid-century, Charlestonians were still “very sorry players” of chess, seldom practicing and knowing too little about the game, whether from apathy, ignorance, or by virtue of being “harassed… with the ordinary problems of daily life.” And yet chess crept into social consciousness through a stream of newspaper stories describing the growth of clubs elsewhere and the exploits of great men across the board. In Charleston, it was said, there were “many hundreds” longing to learn the hidden secrets of skilful play. A new “Economic Chess Board”—a pocket-sized set—allowed men to set up a game “on your knee,” whether traveling by train or steamship, or crammed into a corner of a downtown coffee house. Gamers today would recognize the attraction. By 1844, too, clubs in various cities had gotten up competitions which focused civic interest by linking telegraphic dispatch with typographic display. As with politics, newspapers galvanized and organized individual interests here, deploying opportunities for interaction and self-portrayal, preparing the soil for radical change. Within months of the

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64 “Chess-Clubs, and Chess-Players, British and Foreign,” The Albion 22 (1833): 170; (Charleston) Southern Patriot, July 30, 1845. Two weeks later, the Patriot article was reprinted nationally. “Friendship of Chess-Players,” Littell’s Living Age, 6 (1845): 312-313.

65 (Charleston) Southern Patriot, August 18, 1845; Charleston Courier, July 12, 1851. Young William P. Jacobs “decidedly” did not like the prospect of dancing with women: “It is against my grit,” he explained, and wished no girls would be present. But an evening of chess with the fellows delighted him. Thornwell Jacobs, ed., Diary of William Plumer Jacobs (Atlanta, 1937), 18, 21.

66 (Charleston) Southern Patriot, July 6, 1843, November 25, 1844, October 12, November 26, 1846; Charleston Courier, September 5, 1843; Spirit of the Times, March 1, 1845, December 22, 1855.
1851 international tournament in London, a chess club had formed in Charleston and was holding regular meetings.\textsuperscript{67}

Virtually all information about this group has disappeared except for the name of its secretary. Charles Day Belcher was a Charleston-born outsider, raised in the North, who came home no later than 1845, and began offering private classes in “English, Classical, and Mathematical Education” three years later. Between 1849 and 1852, he rose from teaching evening classes to “Young Men” in “Arithmetic and Book-keeping” to the post of principal of the Apprentices Library Society School. For fellows looking to get a start in life through a clerkship or a place behind the counter in some King Street shop, Belcher was a self-made man good to know and cultivate. A “large and fashionable audience” attended the astronomy and telegraphy lectures he presented, simplified to “the youngest capacity.” Not a few of these, we may suppose, sat down with him across the chessboard.\textsuperscript{68}

By 1854, though, the junior scientist’s calculations had all gone wrong. “Destined to battle against a stream of obstacles and discouragements,” Belcher was “unable to develop those elements within him, which, under happier circumstances, would have led him on to distinction and renown.” Somehow, a flaw of character made him a loser. More precisely, he failed to attract reliable peers or patrons. He was fired from his principalship, climbed aboard the Southern Quarterly Review just in time to see it sink, found no purchase for his “opinionated” views. He tried tinkering with machines, surely “destined to effect a revolution in the economical condition of mankind,” if anyone could make them run.\textsuperscript{69} Whether the chess club

\textsuperscript{67} Fiske, \textit{Book of the First American Chess Congress}, 533; \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 21, 1844; (Charleston) \textit{Southern Patriot}, February 8, 1847; \textit{Charleston Courier}, February 19, 1847, June 11, August 17, 19, 1852.

\textsuperscript{68} (Charleston) \textit{Southern Patriot}, June 2, 1845; \textit{Charleston Courier}, December 29, 1848; May 19, 1849, March 30, 1852; November 30, December 3, 1853.
flopped along with Belcher’s collapse, or faltered in response to his failings, we cannot say. Its minutes are lost—if Belcher kept them at all. So, too, whether local interest in chess collapsed suddenly when he died in 1857, or ebbed with his fading fortunes remains unclear. Regardless of setbacks, newspaper ads suggest that interest in chess play plugged along within a narrow, well-defined set: young bachelors, toiling in Charleston’s shops and clerkships, looking to become solid men. More than this, hob-knobbing was finally paying off: Charleston “boast[s] of numerous and excellent players,” New York’s Chess Monthly declared at the hour of Belcher’s death.70 What it lacked most was steady leadership or direction.

Perhaps the chess club which incorporated in 1859 was a reconfiguration of this earlier group. Doubtless it drew upon an established chess-playing fraternity. But, when at last it appeared, the new club demonstrated a vigor older associations had conspicuously lacked. Across the mid-1850s, northern publications such as William T. Porter’s Spirit of the Times noted the ups and downs of chess in Charleston. The annual transit of traders, clerks, and skilled workers passing through the port encouraged the game’s growth. When the call for a national chess congress came in 1857, the Courier crowed that “eminent players” would represent “every state in the Union.” Yet no Carolinian attended. Likewise, when Morphy sailed for Europe the following spring, “a whole drift of Charlestonians” were his fellow passengers, but none of these elite Porchers, Blakes, Wagners, and Stoneys showed the least interest in chess, then or thereafter. And though southern communities from Natchez to Richmond had organized clubs in the months

69 Charleston Courier, June 19, 1857; Washington Sentinel, March 11, 1854. Tellingly, Belcher’s eulogy was delivered by Samuel Gilman, the teetotaling, Massachusetts-born Unitarian minister, just barely tolerated in Charleston society. Even marginalized Gilman hinted that Belcher was a fellow drifting further out on the fringes.

70 “American Chess as it is To-day,” Chess Monthly, 1 (1857): 30. Belcher traveled to Philadelphia in 1856, but there is no sign that he met Daniel W. Fiske, who offered this opinion. Charleston Mercury, August 25, 1856.
after Morphy’s victory, Charleston did nothing. Why such lethargy, the Courier asked? Not until October was there “some talk” of forming a club.\footnote{Charleston Courier, August 19, November 4, 1857, March 27, June 15, August 7, 18, September 3, October 25, 1858; Charleston Mercury, March 30, 1858.}

When at last Charlestonians acted, they did so with a will. Perhaps Charles Belcher’s spirit lingered, inspiring those who took up his love for chess. This much is true: Belcher was a young man, cut down at thirty-five, trying hard to do his duty as it confronted him. Returned to Charleston with few resources on the edge of adulthood, he strove to make his mark in a range of reputable pursuits, and to draw others up the ladder of success he knew through study and emulation. He sought, relentlessly if increasingly unsuccessfully, to perform the part of perfect son and respectable man, the scion who gladly bore expectations placed upon him—and strove desperately to attain those goals.\footnote{That same unending desire to “try to be better” runs all through the diary of William P. Jacobs, co-founder of the Charleston Junior Chess Club and editor of the Philidorian in 1858-59. Thornwell Jacobs, The Life of William Plumer Jacobs (New York, 1918), 26; Jacobs, ed., Diary of William Plumer Jacobs. Cf., John E. Pachankis and Mark L. Hatzenbuehler, “The Social Development of Contingent Self-Worth in Sexual Minority Young Men: An Empirical Investigation of the ‘Best Little Boy in the World’ Hypothesis,” Basic and Applied Social Psychology, 35 (2013): 176-190.} In Charleston in the late 1850s, there were many such thwarted fellows, searching for some path that might show their broader strivings soon, somehow, gloriously paying off.

That admixture of desperation and romanticism intersected well with the growing popularity of a chess puzzle that drew in casual players and spit out chess fiends. Popularized mid-decade by a precocious New York teenager, these “compositions” invited Americans to gaze upon a board short steps before the moment of mate, tracing the tricky path to gain that goal.\footnote{Alain C. White, Sam Loyd and His Chess Problems (New York, 1962). Charlestonians puzzled over chess problems long before Loyd. Charleston Courier, March 26, 1845.} Sam Loyd’s chess problems enthralled because they bamboozled, questioning the rules of visuality’s regime. As with melodrama, Loyd’s compositions tested one’s ability to perceive
details and relations crucial to success. By the look of things, neither side was bound to win or lose in short order—often not the side Loyd made to seem superior. In each case, though, men of diligence and insight might puzzle out solutions unfolding in surprising, elegant patterns, astonishing in the way particular choices provoked necessitous, doomed responses. Chess problems fascinated, attracted, and seemed to hoodwink in the same way electromagnetism, Maelzel’s Turk, or the ritual of dueling signaled a system of deeper dynamics. Even when all looked lost, Loyd’s problems proved, better men might still prevail. When players pierced bafflement, discovering hidden patterns of logic and power leading toward ludic success, the upshot was laughter, amazement, and delight. Master those lessons of patience, discrimination, self-restraint, and bold action, apply them to the world beyond the chessboard, and what prize might not be won?

By the spring of 1858, chess problems of variant difficulty appeared in a host of national and regional newspapers, thanks first to the purchase of typographical symbols permitting the display in text of a chessboard in the full variety of possible combinations of pieces. Charlestonians stood near the front of this fascination with chess as hidden logic, keen to demonstrate their skill at making crooked ways straight. In that pursuit, men put aside considerations of blood, family, or place, wealth, ethnicity, or profession: chess problems allowed marginalized white southerners to claim kinship with—and superiority over—local elites, knightly jousters, or the high and mighty from far away who aimed at slavery’s end.

74 Belcher tangled with the New Jersey polymath Eugene B. Cook in 1852 about what constituted a proper problem. At that time, his reliance upon an en passant capture to gain victory was rejected as boundary bending—like too much of what he did. Charleston Courier, August 17, 1852.

75 Chess problems soon inspired amative parodies, following the lead of painters and illustrators of generations past. See, e.g., Charleston Courier, October 4, 1858; “Chess Blindfold,” Punch, or the London Charivari, 34 (1858): 156.
No wonder, then, when chess fever finally flowered in the city in the fall of 1858, it focused on the Courier, the staid sheet that served as mouthpiece for the Broad Street Clique. Emilio A. Balaguer, a teenage clerk and promising chess compositor, had signed on as “Chess Editor” there—an extraordinary title outside the nation’s largest periodicals—and soon turned that paper into a regional hub of chess mania. At the end of October, the Mercury announced, “lovers of the noble game” had formed a club “which is only awaiting the securing of a suitable room for the meeting.” Thereafter, “able champions” might hobnob with “gentlemen of high esteem and character in their private and business capacities.” That was just the tie between men of attainment and youngsters seeking attainment that earlier advocates of chess play had failed to effect. After Morphy’s triumph, chess in Charleston came to be seen as a way of enacting status, the luxury of leisure, the discrimination of fashion. Chess players were among the most cosmopolitan of local men, relishing the chance to demonstrate cleverness, parade personal leisure, and revel in a social intimacy both competitive and fraternal.76 The same tale would be told of the Vigilant Rifles two years hence.

The chess club gathered first in the offices of the Firemen’s Insurance Company on Broad Street, thanks to the efforts of club member Charles D. Barbot, who put in a word with his boss, Sam Tupper. There is no sign that Tupper played chess, though as chairman of the Board of Fire Masters and president of the Vigilant Fire Engine Company, he surely saw many members playing, and knew that firehalls around the city often had a game going. A week later, the club had moved to more comfortable quarters at 221 King Street, at the Bend—a prime commercial location for a game of strong commercial import, upstairs from Van Schaak and

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76 Emilio A. Balaguer, 1840-1896. Editor of “Courier” (Charleston); 1840-1896; Chess Papers of Eugene B. Cook, Box 1, Folder 18; Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Firestone Library, Princeton University; Charleston Mercury, October 27, 1858. For other southern developments at this moment, see Charleston Courier, September 3, 1858.
Grierson’s drugstore. There, twenty-five men organized formally, enrolling as members and electing officers. Twenty more awaited scrutiny, including “some of our best players,” reporter-member Jimmy Budds declared, “and perhaps the best of our younger players.” With the conservative lawyer David Ramsay appointed president and Democratic Party stalwart Tommy Simons assisting, the group’s respectability—and political tenor—were well established.\footnote{77}{“American Matters,” \textit{Chess Monthly}, 2 (1858): 383; \textit{Charleston Courier}, October 28, November 10, 1858; \textit{Charleston Mercury}, November 2, 1858.}

After that, things went quickly. A constitution was written (modeled on the New York club’s rules), banning betting and liquor and creating a raft of committees to govern affairs. Within a month, a manuscript version had travelled far and wide: out to St. Louis, where it was chided for barring locals under twenty-one, and up to Columbia, where Ramsay presented it to the legislature, petitioning for incorporation.\footnote{78}{\textit{Charleston Courier}, November 29, December 1, 3, 1858. The House committee which recommended incorporation included the disunionist radical Alfred P. Aldrich and 1860 Association moderate John Townsend. \textit{Charleston Mercury}, December 3, 18, 1858.}

When the charter was published in February 1859—“done up in exquisite taste”—the club numbered forty-eight active players and many more hangers-on, including several underage youths “possess[ing] genius for the game.”\footnote{79}{\textit{Charleston Mercury}, February 9, 1859; \textit{Charleston Courier}, November 29, 1858; \textit{Constitution of the Charleston Chess Club, Adopted Dec. 1858—Incorporated 1858} (Charleston, 1859). Only a single copy of this document survives, in the National Library of the Netherlands. Hagedorn, \textit{Benjamin Franklin and Chess in Early America}, 74; \textit{Rules and Regulations of the New York Chess Club. Adopted June 10th, 1858} (New York, 1858).}

Members showed their own sense of permanence and respectability by setting up a reading room, conducting monthly meetings where “business of importance” was transacted, and opening their doors each day from 5 P.M. “to a convenient hour of closing.”\footnote{80}{\textit{Charleston Courier}, December 4, 1858; February 9, 1859.} Those steps transformed the club’s rooms, into a liminal space, where time was flexible, sobriety fudged, and unexpected contests turned into object lessons.
Soon all of Charleston gloated to hear how a pair of “metropolitan” players earned a come-uppance from talented locals. Stopping by the club’s rooms one winter evening, the New Yorkers deigned to teach its members, demolishing all opponents for a night or two. Finally, “a gentleman connected with the press of this city”—Courier editor William B. Carlisle—was invited to play “the weaker of the two.” He tried to beg off as an “unread amateur,” to no avail. Alas for the Yankees, who “could not have been more surprised”: the “Charleston tyro” thrashed them, to the delight of his fellows, winning five games and drawing a sixth. Southern honor was splendidly vindicated.81

The best of it was, Carlisle ranked nowhere near the top of the club’s players. Word of his casual triumph galvanized local interest, and by mid-summer, the group was in “a flourishing state,” grown to seventy-one members. They planned a civic “grand tournament,” among a host of other activities. Twice weekly, an extensive chess column dominated the front page of the Courier, publishing problems and answering correspondence from dozens of players within the city and across the nation. The Mercury and Evening News struggled to compete, complimenting the “gentility and refinement” of the club. Among teenagers, the monthly Philidorian passed hand to hand. Soon plans were afloat to host a great southern tournament.82

This local fascination reflected and catalyzed the “great revolution” going on all over America. “Unheard of players make their appearance,” the Chess Monthly wondered. A “gallant boldness” gripped the land. Editors and civic leaders praised the virtues of chess play for cultivating young men, and evangelicals chimed in, too. “[S]ome amusements young people

81 Charleston Mercury, December 29, 1858. This story, signed “B.,” was doubtless contributed by reporter James D. Budds, a club member. Recall that Carlisle became deputy leader of the Palmetto Minute Men in 1860, and a moderate candidate for the secession convention.

82 Charleston Mercury, February 9, 16, 1859; Charleston Courier, July 27, 1859; Philidorian, 1 (1858); “American Matters,” Chess Monthly, 2 (1858): 383.
will have and ought to have,” one preacher allowed. Chess was “the most innocent and most intellectual” of recreations, cultivating “mental discipline… patience, courtesy, and self-control.” More than this, men mad for chess forgot less wholesome pursuits: if a boy could not be shepherded toward church, J. J. Bowden insisted, get him into a chess club, away from the taverns and brothels that brought men like Will Taber to ruin. In Charleston, certainly, young men needed no prodding now. They played chess in lawyer’s offices, fraternal societies, and firehalls, in coffee houses, taverns, and hotels; they sat across boards in stores, print shops, and counting houses, in private rooms and public spaces, in Sam Courtenay’s bookstore, Steele’s Hat Hall, not least the Charleston Chess Club’s only nominally private rooms. Hundreds strolled past its door each day; a score or two walked in, from curiosity or invitation. Some who came to watch sat to play. Of these, a small segment signed its membership rolls. Who were they?

The club met in the heart of Charleston’s commercial district—not out on the East Bay or up past Calhoun Street—just a few doors down from Steele’s, because that is where its members belonged. Chess players came and went here, and others gravitated around other sites according to the dictates of age, fraternal ties, or social station. Perhaps the sprouts who spread the Philidorian congregated in some student haunt near the College of Charleston, or fought their battles in private digs nearby. Where respectable workingmen clustered, where printers or tradesmen’s apprentices flocked, perhaps was found a board or two. All kinds of people in Charleston caught chess fever, but it hit particular men especially hard. Formal membership in the chess club provides a good measure of those who fell hardest for the game.

Chess players were not at all like elite Carolinians who portrayed claims to honor melodramatically through tilting. They were not akin to those men’s poorer cousins, small planters and farmers too busy scrambling after the main chance to waste time on board games.

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Neither were they like those propertyless, country boys come to town one saw everywhere in the late 1850s, armed with a trade skill or a strong back and the goad of necessity driving them to make a way in the world, elbows out. Charleston’s chess players came from a range of ages and household types, worked a variety of jobs and displayed a distinct range of economic and social characteristics. But, one way or another, they were anxious, aggressive, ambiguous nobodies. Scanning over the seventy-one names of men we know belonged to the club in 1859, one is struck first by the absence of the sort of social leadership immediately obvious in considering volunteer militia or fire companies, or prominent social groups. That the big man was a comparatively little fellow like David Ramsay suggests that most of those he led were pitifully small fry indeed. Hardly a member could hint at planter ties, elite standing, or the sort of lineage which made a difference in daily life. There were no city council officials, members of the Board of Fire Masters, or local notables—save the inevitable “Tommy Skimmons.” Only elderly Loftus Clifford, an absentee slaveholder from St. Bartholomew’s Parish, called himself a planter. No one else had any direct relation to agriculture at all. Charles Drayton was an auctioneer, William Middleton a minor clerk, and that was the best of it, as far as family pedigrees went.

Their work befit the workers. As table 10.1 shows, virtually all chess club members were involved in commerce or the professions, clustering mostly at opposite ends of the occupational spectrum. Threadbare but ambitious fellows like Hiram Olney, Isaac Valentine, and John Humphries show up in abundance: fully one in four chess players were ordinary clerks, and once bookkeepers, accountants, tellers, and the like are added in, pen-pushers comprised more than forty percent of the club’s membership. At the other end of the scale was an almost identical number of self-employed men. Most of these were minor retailers like the hatter

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84 This list is compiled from Charleston Courier, July 27, 1859.
### TABLE 10.1

CHARLESTON CHESS CLUB MEMBER OCCUPATIONS, 1859-60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
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<td>15.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Retail Mercantile</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleman</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankrupt/unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database

### TABLE 10.2

CHARLESTON CHESS CLUB MEMBERS’ AGES, 1859-60

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>19-21</td>
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<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
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<td>22-25</td>
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<td>28.6</td>
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<td>26-29</td>
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<td>30-34</td>
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<td>75.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>91.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>95.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-63</td>
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<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>70</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database
Charles Innis or the grocer Jock Moore, whose shops stood short steps from the chess club’s rooms.

Others were professionals: a trio of lawyers, pairs of teachers, architects, and editors, a druggist. A handful of big businessmen and lesser lights were there as well: commission merchant Edward Lafitte, cotton factor Richard Screven, “capitalist” Cornelius Burckmyer. Wealthy commercial men like these—wholesale merchants, factors, brokers, and auctioneers—made up fifteen percent of the club. In truth, members understood, the professional identity of a man like Gus Tobias was more elaborate than he allowed: though calling himself a commission merchant, he was also president of a leading insurance company, and played a range of roles in civic organizations. There were a handful of other hybrids and outliers, too: old Josh Lazarus, the Jewish landlord who called himself a gentleman; Henry B. Latrobe, a budding industrialist come south from Baltimore; the unlucky merchant William Waties, ruined in the Panic of 1857. Potential patrons and clients mixed here complexly, men seeking a better job, a social tie, a second chance.

Gazing around the club’s rooms of an evening in late 1859, though, it was just as important to note the type of men who were not there. Apart from the young “mechanic” John Porteous Deveaux, craft workers or tradesmen were conspicuously absent. Less respectable laborers—dockside types or the men who toiled in the city’s factories, also stayed away. Neither did more marginal sorts of businessmen attend, such as hotel keepers or restaurateurs. Almost uniformly, club members were men of commerce or independent standing, solidly respectable or anxious to become so. Notably, too, their ranks included a range of ethnic and religious minorities—Cuban, French, Catholic, Jew, Yankee—pressed to the margins of public life,

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85 David H. Deveaux, a “scene painter,” hanged himself in the hall of the Hope Fire Engine Company in 1855. Did that fraught event prompt his younger brother to seek out fraternity through chess? Charleston Mercury, June 21, 1855.
hoping for more. Chess players were the sort of fellows who sought both distinction and the chance to blend in, the kind who might have joined the Young Men’s Secession Association procession in 1860, as marchers or audience, or hailed the flag-raising at the Charleston Hotel. The Dutch-born clerk E. P. de Monchy landed in New York in 1858, only reaching Charleston the week the chess club formed, yet he found a welcome within its circle. Men like Emilio Balaguer signed on, too, and proceeded a year later into the ranks of the Vigilant Rifles. Others, apparently, found the door shut in their faces: there were no black chess players here, not a single Irish or German immigrant. And in stark contrast to every chivalric tournament held in South Carolina, women found no place at all in chess club proceedings. We must wonder why.

Age as well as occupation set Charleston’s chess players apart from the jousting gentry of Pineville or the more diligent tilters of the city. Tournaments made room for men and women of all ages, even drawing in costumed slaves in bit parts, though roles were precisely segmented by age, race, and gender. Not so across the chessboard: although blacks and women were barred from membership (and, it seems, from crossing the club’s threshold), there was no impediment to white men of widely varying ages from competing with each other, so long as they conformed to expectations of respectable demeanor. That allowance makes the age range of club members doubly notable (see table 10.2).

This was a strikingly young set of fellows, mostly starting out in life. Of the seventy players for whom ages are known (98.5% of identified members), just one was younger than twenty—the precocious Balaguer—and he may have snuck in thanks to his position at the Courier—or his thick beard. Fewer than five percent of members were forty or older. Most clustered between twenty-two and twenty-nine, with thirty percent falling in their thirties. Clerical workers skewed young—four fifths were in their twenties. Commercial men were
mostly older—twenty-somethings made up just 36% of this group (see table 10.3). Half of chess-playing shopkeepers were twenty-ish, as were three-quarters of lawyers. The bankrupt Waties, the mechanic DeVeaux, and the budding industrialist Latrobe all fell into this group. Focusing on occupation, however, misleads us here. Within the club, there was a strong connection between youth and low social achievement on one side and maturity and attainment on the other. For manifold reasons, these two groups sought each other’s company.86 Chess club members came from a wide variety of family and household types, too. But most held low status. Notably, three-fifths of players were single men (see table 10.4). More than half of these clustered in clerical occupations, and three-quarters of all chess-playing clerical workers—including all bookkeepers—were bachelors (see table 10.5). Unsurprisingly, men in higher status occupations were also much more likely to be married, usually with children.

As these figures suggest, the typical player one faced across the board was a young, single male propertyless pen-pusher, renting a room somewhere nearby: the prototypical “gamer.” Certainly he was more than moderately fond of chess, but also he had a strong desire to find a place where he fit in, to demonstrate manly prowess, to get on in life as a respectable fellow. Still, there was also a distinct possibility that the man who sat down to play might be quite different: a snug shopkeeper, editor, or cotton factor in his thirties or beyond, married with children, a house, and money in the bank. For these, chess play must have seemed a celebration of masculine achievement, a chance to contend as made men among others so obviously hungry to gain social patronage, an opportunity to relive glory days in transmuted form. Strikingly, too, although the club divided almost equally into employees and employers, in no case did any member work for another. Two widely different factions, unevenly matched but quite

86 By contrast, at the Pineville tournament of 1849, Thomas Ravenel noted, it was “the young men [of] the Parish” who rode. Only two contestants were married men, and they competed “only to swell the numbers.” Entry of January 18, 1849, Thomas Porcher Ravenel Diary, SCHS.
TABLE 10.3
CHARLESTON CHESS CLUB MEMBERS (AGES 20-29) OCCUPATION TYPES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Type Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>54.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
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<td>Retail Mercantile</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.7</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
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<td>0.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industrial</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleman</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankrupt/unemployed</td>
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<td>2.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>50.0</td>
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<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>64.8</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database

TABLE 10.4
CHARLESTON CHESS CLUB MARITAL STATUS

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<th>Status</th>
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<tr>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>36.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Widowed</td>
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<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>71</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Type Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
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<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gentleman</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bankrupt/unemployed</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td>42</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database
independent—the past and the future, some must have thought—met to play the noble game. But perhaps both sides had deeper motives still.

Understanding what they did collectively makes clearer why members so loved to play. No sooner had Charleston’s chess club published its constitution than it sought out broader ties of fraternity and conflict. By March 1859, a challenge went out to the rival band in Augusta, Georgia, and a “telegraphic chess match” between five members from each city was in full swing, “exciting the enthusiasm of our public.” For weeks, “much excitement” built as the conflict raged, undeterred by bad weather, downed telegraph lines, the press of commercial business, and Sundays. As word of each move flashed across the wires, an “express pony” hastened it to the club’s rooms on King Street. A second runner took the news down to Courtenay’s bookstore on Broad, where “crowds congregate[d]” anxiously around a game board, tutting or cheering each choice. “[B]oards and bulletins, in various other places” across the city also replicated play, inspiring discussion, debate, and fellow-feeling. By April, tournament players had moved from King Street to club member Louis Barbot’s architecture office on Broad, speeding play but trebling the hubbub as messages flew from the board, to the telegraph office, the club’s rooms, Courtenay’s store, and all points beyond. Every evening, downtown Charleston was convulsed

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87 Why did others who fit this profile or had established ties with club members not join? The answer is complex. Sam Tupper was good friends with chess club members and belonged to other groups that club members joined. Perhaps he simply did not enjoy chess or could not find time to visit the club. The reason may be deeper, however. In 1849, Tupper’s father had been instrumental in excluding the father of Benjamin and Henry Neufville from the congregation of Charleston’s First Baptist Church “for licentious conduct and neglect of the church.” Tupper and the Neufvilles shared many friends, but apparently maintained no direct contact thereafter. The Neufvilles were charter members of the Chess Club. Entry of March 12, 1849, First Baptist Church, Charleston, Charleston County, Minutes and Register, SCL. Meanwhile, at the Vigilant Fire Company Hall, over which Tupper presided, members notoriously passed time in chess play.

88 Charleston Mercury, March 24, April 2, 1859; Charleston Courier, May 19, 1859. Reports of the match appear prominently on the front page of the Charleston Courier, March 23-June 9, 1859, and more intermittently on the second page of the Charleston Mercury, March 26-May 21, 1859.

89 Charleston Courier, March 16, 21, 24, April 2, 1859.
with speculation and gossip about each move. Locals’ triumph, slow but sure, over the exciting course of a memorable spring--at just the same moment Morphy was culminating his European campaign-- inspired inevitable comparison. No wonder the club solicited funds to honor his victory.90 Throughout 1859, there were hopes that the hero might return to his Charleston roots, if just for a day. Hailing Morphy’s skill slyly celebrated kinship with the chess king, collective identity, and mutual achievement, too.

The first game—a draw—ignited “great and general interest” throughout Charleston. The second, conducted more slowly and attracting less commentary, also stalemated. Then, in the decisive third game, Charleston forced Augusta with “a brilliant stroke” to resign just ten moves in. “One more move” and the Georgians would have won, but Charleston made the loss of the white queen inevitable, and so the game. From St. Louis to New Orleans, players were astonished.91 The club hailed its triumph, and members stuck out their chests until—confoundingly--the Courier declared that the match must resume. Augusta had pled the “English Rule”: as in McDonnell’s match with La Bourdonnais, draws should not count in the final score. Chivalrous as they saw themselves, the apparent champions refused to challenge their opponents’ honor in the matter. The Charleston club sent thanks to city telegraphers, along with “something more substantial—i.e., more liquid,” and the match went on. The club’s doors flew open to “visitors, and Chess amateurs,” and crowds surged in again.92 But the fourth game, dragging on

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90 Charleston Courier, March 25, 1859.

91 Charleston Courier, April 11, May 13, 24, 1859; Charleston Mercury, April 26, 1859.

92 Charleston Courier, May 4, 5, 10, 14, 1859; Charleston Mercury, May 4, 1859. Gossip said that Charleston had refused to play an extra game, but this was explicitly denied. Charleston Courier, May 13, 1859. Both clubs had agreed to play “according to the rules laid down in STAUNTON’s Chess Player’s Hand-book.” Charleston Mercury, March 21, 1859. The trouble was, Staunton’s book said nothing about tournament play. At the 1857 Chess Congress, however, draws were counted, as they are in modern play. It is hard to imagine that Charlestonians saw Augusta’s plea as anything more than whinging.
to late May, was finally lost. Then the fifth—and so the contest--mid-June. Crushed, the
*Courier* and the club made no further remark. The *Mercury*, silent on chess matters for almost a
month, now offered an honorific post-mortem. The match, one of the longest on record, had
demonstrated “that friendly and courteous bearing which characterizes gentlemen.” It was, in
the end, a restorative, conservative act—a duel—not a sport aimed at ranking men. Maybe so:
but at the end pitiful Augusta ranked above glorious Charleston, and defeat stung twice as bad.

By fall, club members had salved their wounds and were back at it, gingerly, celebrating
the group’s first anniversary, organizing matches between its best players, even projecting a
“grand tournament,” sure to “excite great interest” in the community. A junior chess club
sprouted, complete with officers, journal, and a lively tournament of its own. Who won or lost,
ultimately, did not matter, Charleston men insisted. But if that were true, why were Americans
at just this moment celebrating Morphy’s triumph so lustily? What did chess mean to Charleston
at all? The best answer to this puzzle, once again, comes by reading their choices through the
categories Walter Steele’s ad offers.

Most obviously, chess here was a game, a species of play. Club membership provided
men the opportunity to divest themselves of the cares of daily life and seek innocent amusement
among others somehow like themselves. Within the confines of modest club rooms, clerks and
lawyers and commission merchants could shuck off occupational identities for a few hours,
recasting themselves as gallant knights proving prowess against other worthies. “I gazed upon
the chessboard until its mimic combatants had become real,” one Charlestonian imagined. “The
pawn was transformed into a foot soldier, and I saw his scowl of defiance as he stepped forward

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93 *Charleston Mercury*, June 9, 1859.

94 *Charleston Mercury*, October 6, November 2, 1859; *Charleston Courier*, July 29, 1859.
to take the place of a fallen comrade.”

This was an effort of imagination, but as with the apparently absurd gravity of rural jousting, we should take it seriously. Melodramatic descriptions provide evidence of the process anthropologists call “flow,” when “the actor becomes the event.” This marginal state allows participants to “re-examine every normal constraint and meaning,” Victor Turner argues, “permitting (or requiring) the actor to encounter supremely existential interludes of power, danger, freedom, and creativity.” Traditional societies articulate this “liminal” state through ritual performances; modern cultures discover the “liminoid” through play. And it is precisely here that the meaning of tournaments and chess-play diverge. Winning and losing were almost irrelevant in the liminal performance of tournament ritual. At chess, it was just this element of strife which achieved the liminoid state. Violent conflict was the soul of chivalry at the chessboard.

But why joust or play chess? Such games, psychologists recognize, provide a vital middle ground “between individual play”—with hats, for example—“and the arena of politics in which human beings unite in communal interplay and establish rules for joining and for contesting with each other.” Among other reasons, people play games to examine personal or cultural ambivalences, whether to deny, explore, or resolve them. “[T]he pleasure of mastering toy things,” psychologist Erik Erikson explains, “becomes associated with the mastery of the traumata which were projected on them, and with the prestige gained through such mastery.” Different types of games address different conflicts. Tilting is a superb example of one mingling physical skill and chance, the sort of contest scholars have linked to traditional, rural societies

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95 B., “A Leaf from the Reminiscence of a Chess Player,” *Spirit of the Times*, 18 (June 17, 1848), 195. Was this “B.” Charles Belcher?

where anxiety over questions of reward, status, and achievement runs high. It is play fundamentally concerned with issues of honor and social revelation. Chess, by contrast, is a game—perhaps the game—of individuation and strategy. Such games, Erikson contends, reflect “an association with anxiety about non-performance of obedience.”

The players are presumably those who remain obedient to the social system but who relieve their ambivalence about it by displaced attack in the miniature social worlds of the strategy games.97

Chess offered a site for playful transgression, a mechanism for men to misbehave socially in ways they would never dream of acting elsewhere. It tested notions of personal worth and self-control, discharging tension and ambivalence. This made it an abundantly serious sport in the Queen City, helping men craft a narrative of respectability in the same way tilting offered an alibi for honor.

Simultaneously, chess allowed Charlestonians to demonstrate and build on skills they had honed in “the Game of Life”—self-control, diligence, foresight, attention to detail, circumspection—matching those qualities against other men in ways that would have been impossible or impermissible outside this sphere. In the world of work, these were simply preconditions of employment. In polite society, they were rudiments of respectability. Here they won high praise as attainments that brought victory.98 Chess play allowed—compelled—competitors to reveal and evaluate their inner selves as few other activities could, and permitted them to try on alternate personae as well. Like Morphy, seemingly mild-mannered men might turn tigers when they sat down to play. Others apparently talented and imaginative in their


management of affairs became muddled or lost their nerve once the contest began. Yet all might 
shrug off temporary transformations at the end of the evening: surely chess was just a game.

What made chess a game was the limits its rules put upon action in pursuit of its object. Mating the opposing king required a skilful, often byzantine combination of moves. Doubtless, the logical and mathematical qualities of chess appealed to the commercial and professional men who belonged to the club. Yet the fun of the game came from deft employment of its rules and limits, the calculated risks one took. “Part of the fascination of chess,” one scholar explains, “lies in the freedom of players to choose (and live with the consequences of) their own styles of play.” The adventure or “action” here derived not from the movement of pieces but from the ways men moved them, the risks they took, and the revelations of character various modes of play disclosed. “Without going so far as to assert that a man’s character may be ascertained from his chess play,” one devotee argued, “yet it is undoubtedly true that his mental traits are to a certain extent visible therein; and indeed, how can it be otherwise?” Men could be more fully themselves over the chessboard than in almost any other place in Charleston. Or they could do quite the opposite. It was just the integrity of claims about identity coded through play the game objectively tested. “A game of chess is essentially an argument,” H. A. Kennedy insisted, “the board and men are accessories to the argument, that is they are the outward symbols of the language in which it is carried on, but they are by no means necessary to it.” The root of the argument, Kennedy did not disclose, but others focused it clearly on central matters of power and identity: who was a man, and who would be mastered? “What Constitutes Chess?” one essayist asked. “War,” came the answer, “domination,” “death.”

This was deep play indeed. The limits the rules of chess impose require that tokens, not real men, be captured in the course of play; a wooden king-totem, not one’s real opponent is dispatched at checkmate. But the impulse is the same. Games like chess enable us “to express aggression without reality consequences,” psychoanalyst Karl Menninger explains: “we can hurt people without really hurting them; we can even kill them without really killing them.”

The play of chess, then, allowed members of the Charleston club to impose masculinity on other men in a highly charged, yet controlled, dispassionate, respectable manner, acting out impulses that would bring rebuke in any other setting. Within this tribe, masculine self-demonstration and bold aggression brought the highest honors.

Psychologists have often noted the sadistic and homosocial overtones of such play. The ambiguity of Morphy’s feminine appearance and masculine aggression underlines the importance of such themes in drawing men toward chess in Victorian America—and in repelling them, too. There was no other activity in antebellum Charleston which allowed white men to dominate and be dominated by other men so obviously and promiscuously or with such a degree of social approval. Winning was splendid, but even a lost position provoked warm fellow-feeling from one’s peers, soft words of consolation, and perhaps another game. One way or another, chess play promoted ties of attachment and identification between men which would have been barred in other settings.

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\(^{100}\) Karl A. Menninger, *Love Against Hate* (New York, 1942), 175.

Chess, then, offered a form of theater as well as a species of play. Protagonists taking turns as actor and audience; the dramatic trajectory of play; the scripted and improvisational qualities of performance; its intended reflection on the themes of life; each aspect of the game bespoke stagecraft. Club members not only enjoyed playing games: they relished replaying them, copying down the course of each performance for recreation and criticism. Players took vicarious pleasure in playing over the games of their heroes, as if in impersonation, and in presenting their own triumphs and tragedies before their peers. Charleston’s Courier and Mercury crammed their front pages with such combats. Chess here became a form of melodrama, requiring its audience to read the meaning of play by interpretation of a series of visual signs whose meaning was broadly understood. Men admired the wit and beauty of particular exchanges, and inevitably came to root for one side or the other. Here, too, such partisanship implied risk. “[A]t chess it is impossible to make the worse appear the better reason,” H. A. Kennedy noted. There was “no refuge whatever for wounded amour propre.”

The blow to self is complete, and the vanquished one has no option but either to confess himself fairly beaten, like a gentleman, or to convert himself into a snob by inventing transparent excuses, or it may be losing his temper outright.

One Charlestonian made the same point in a reverie about playing chess with the devil.

“Sensible, at length, that defeat was inevitable,” Satan “slowly raised his eyes, hitherto fixed upon the board, and they seemed to blaze in their sockets. It was a trick to disturb my self-possession; and baffled in his only expedient to avoid defeat, he overthrew the table, and disappeared in a confusion of sounds.”

In this liminal world, men were measured by merit alone—even the devil was bound by the rules—and, as in theater, rewards and punishments came swift and sure. He who saw deepest understood best, and usually won.

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In antebellum Charleston, such foresight was eminently marketable: the theater of chess honed valuable skills of emotional control and manipulation. The game not only permitted masking; it virtually required it. The nominal theme of play was the chivalry of actors who gave performances. Club members practiced the role of the bold but well-mannered paladin fully as much as they strove to master combinations of moves. Nor was this a private conceit. As Howard Staunton’s flawed performance against Morphy proved, it was possible to lose—and lose badly—without ever moving a pawn. Likewise, courtesy could make up for a host of technical sins, laying the basis for social bonding. Chess in Charleston was as much an exhibition of fraternity as a theater of war.\textsuperscript{103}

But a theater of war it surely was. Human conflict is inherently dramatic, though the line between war and play is seldom fixed or obvious. Children shift without warning from friendly roughhousing to the exchange of blows, and among adults the grim business of killing is overlaid with and sometimes displaced by elements of the theatrical.\textsuperscript{104} Campaign ribbons and medals, ceremonial bearskins and horsehair plumes, even the manual-at-arms seem to carry little clear military meaning in an age of nuclear destruction idling undersea and overhead, biological weapons, and cyber warfare. Just so, war and theatre blended in the 1950s when a group of Harvard anthropologists traveled to the southern highlands of Papua New Guinea to study two paleolithic communities perched on opposite sides of a valley.\textsuperscript{105} Each day, while the women worked the fields, Westerners watched the men cross the open space separating their villages to make war on each other. In this culture, conflict was not an irruption in the flow of life.

\textsuperscript{103}See, e.g., \textit{Charleston Mercury}, October 9, 1860.

\textsuperscript{104}Consider the insistence of the British hero “Bombo” Pollard that he was “a knight fighting for his lady” in the trenches of the Great War. A. O. Pollard, \textit{Fire-Eater: The Memoirs of a V. C.} (London, 1937), 113.

According to the homosocial worldview of participants, it was the flow of life proper. Across generations, distinctive rules of conduct had grown to govern the course of battle. Combat became stylized, as much a passionate performance as a murderous deed. Limited objects were set and deaths or serious injuries in battle few. A refined process for educating the young into warrior ways was cultivated and the notion of peace deplored. What was the purpose of life if there were no war to fight, no game to play?

Odd though this perspective may seem, many “civilized” cultures embrace it still. Its major characteristics fit nicely with the France of Louis XIV, or Hirohito’s Japan, or the Call of Duty tribe. Indeed, the boundary between theatrical play and warfare has blurred throughout history, often in far more barbarous (qua chivalrous) ways. Think of the British regiment that went to its death at the Somme kicking a soccer ball across No-Man’s Land. Consider twentieth-century bomber crews who dissolved the murder of civilians in a game of hitting a “bull’s eye,” or contemporary killing performed by soldiers scanning pixilated screens and guiding a joystick to rain down horror on people half a world away. The specter of death recedes when the mask of play is pulled down. The true meaning of soldiers’ actions is mitigated and distorted by all sorts of unmilitary amenities from pizza to air conditioning, mediated by robotics and racism, and ultimately suspended long enough for their grim tasks to be performed. Without such theater, the labor of killing and dying might break down altogether. The destruction of such illusions has been a central tenet of the theory of total war from William Tecumseh Sherman onward: knock away the prop of melodrama and resistance collapses.\(^\text{106}\)

Just as warfare strays into the realm of games and theater, men at play habitually cross

over the line which restrains homicidal impulses. Certainly that is a key component of the “quest for excellence” which sport represents. Before the modern era, men high and low thrilled to see blood and brutality packaged as recreation. Even now, boxers and football players strive to knock each other senseless as crowds cheer. Across a range of sports, play routinely spills over into violence, passing from athletes to spectators. The theatre of murder which structured the gladiatorial games of ancient Rome is casually deplored, but how often is a “gladiatorial spirit” deemed necessary to sporting—or business—excellence?107

Such ambivalence mirrors well the mindset of Charlestonians who sat down to play chess. War was the essence of the theater they performed, and within the club rooms, members of their tribe could imagine no purpose except to engage in battle over and over again. Their conduct had become ritualized, stylized, and shaped by rules and customs, but the chivalry they shouted was hardly more than a conceit. Chess-duels bestowed honor equally, regardless of the outcome. “It is a gallant fight!” the Yorkville Enquirer declared of one match. “Blood on both sides!” And yet outcomes which were objectively equal—stalemates—did not matter in the end. For the drama to be properly resolved, one man or the other would have to bleed out—or, better, be run through at a single stroke. The true theme of the theater chess players enacted was an homage to objectification, domination, and murder. That was why men so enjoyed watching as well as playing: they wanted to see war clearly, the domination of one man’s power over another. However cloaked in the erotic romance of chivalry, chess here offered the purest form of

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pornography—an apparently respectable status system of sexualized politics where women disappeared altogether.  

Homosocial transgression lurked just below the surface whenever men sat down to play, as contemporary descriptions of games point up clearly. With every turn, players alternated between activity and passivity, looking intently at each other and being looked at—through the position on the board—in a way that would have been impermissible anywhere else in Charleston. More than this, the character of their gaze shifted back and forth relentlessly across gender lines, turn by turn. Visual theorists argue that the “male gaze” denotes action upon the world, potential potency, and domination. The female gaze, conditioned by history, culture, and circumstance, is necessarily self-reflective, passive, and vulnerable. Worse still, it becomes implicated in the objectification of the self.  

Victorian parlor games often delighted in the gendered confusions of watching and being watched. Played in mixed company, the fun of exhibitionism and gender reversal became uproarious. But over the chessboard, as men intimately scrutinized each other in silence, flickering from masculine assertion to feminized admission, the stakes became deadly serious. Manhood itself was challenged, probed, and judged by one’s peers and patrons, conjuring a deeper, more complex camaraderie. No wonder men described their idol Morphy so adoringly, lingering over his soft features, girlish demeanor, and passive repose—plus the way he lashed out with a stroke of masculine self-revelation. Living sincerely meant resolving the tension between those dualities.


For Charleston men on the eve of disunion, there were other ways to bend gender’s bounds. But these ran atrocious risks. Consider the King Street clerk Charles Williams, arrested shortly after John Brown’s raid on a charge of “habitually appearing in the guise of a woman.” For more than a decade, it emerged, Williams had been “sailing under false colors” between Charleston, Augusta, and Savannah, “always passing as a female… without suspicion as to his sex.” Finally, “circumstances transpired” that unmasked him, caused arrest, and unleashed communal outrage.

For years past this individual has frequented our streets in broad daylight, habited and looked upon as a woman, and without a shadow of suspicion resting on the minds of anyone that he was a man in disguise. His voice, appearance and manner were all in perfect keeping with the character assumed, his face being as smooth as a woman’s, although he must be at least twenty-two years of age.

Williams had “regularly appeared in woman’s apparel since he was ten years old, but refused to give any reason for such strange and unaccountable conduct.” To some, the answer was obvious: he was “an Abolition emissary.”\(^{110}\) Most, fearing darker purposes still, kept silent. Before year’s end, the cross-dressing clerk had left for parts unknown.

Other men took a different tack. As this incident shows, sexuality and play were central axes of social interaction in Charleston, liminal spheres in which participants performed behaviors and disclosed identities that seemed strange, even disturbing on the wrong terrain. Within bounds, the rules differed, though there were rules just the same. Ludic and sexual identities are both culturally constructed, their central tendencies aiming at congruence with the standards of the cultures which embrace them.\(^{111}\) In antebellum Charleston, so drastically

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\(^{110}\) Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 19, 1859. Notably, Williams was the same age as Morphy. For a similar case in Philadelphia which left the “pretended lady” badly beaten, see Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette, August 12, 1842. More generally, see Marjorie Garber, Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (New York, 1992).

devaluing women’s contributions, male-centered, misogynistic sexuality was almost bound to become the norm.

But even though slave society was relentlessly hypermasculine and homosocial, there were limits beyond which that impulse dared not pass—openly, at least. Warm friendships were manly and admirable, but an intimacy too close became a bond dishonorable, unrespectable, unspeakable. Affectionate ties threatened to corrupt masculine identity itself, reversing gender roles and undermining social relations. Pushed beyond their proper bounds, homosocial relations seemed to unsex men, turning them back into boys, lacking judgment or self-control—or into girls.112 The problem was to find that perfect pitch of independence, a status white southerners worried over endlessly, which historians have misinterpreted along narrowly political lines. Independence mediated intimacy and antagonism between men, preventing destructive conflict on one hand and terrifying tenderness on the other.

An important part of the attraction of chess in Victorian America derived just from its efficacy in demonstrating that independence. Safely masked by metaphor, it allowed a tentative, transmuted, playful expression of forbidden sexuality. Chess was a sign to be read, no more. And, in truth, reading such signs today is far from easy. To modern ears, Edge’s amative words to Morphy immediately suggest homosexual contact. But regardless of what physical acts transpired between the champion and his secretary, they may reveal nothing about the sex roles


or identity either embraced.113 Certainly, gay identity as currently understood did not exist before the mid-nineteenth century in England and America. Many historians date its advent—along with a distinctive heterosexuality—decades later.114

Though homoeroticism flourished among young men in the Old South, homosexual self-identification must have been far less frequent. One reason scholars have turned up so little evidence of physical relations between southern men may simply be that there was less of it.115 The consequences of homosexual self-presentation were just too dire for most, especially in a port city where ships sailed daily to more freewheeling destinations. For the most part, homoerotic behavior in Charleston probably took the form of bawdy and exploratory talk, a form of verbal game playing where the rules were negotiated as the play went along, just as in heterosexual relations, or the casual tipping of hats. Such theatre allowed men to scout the bounds of gender identity without risking too great or degrading an intimacy.

Whatever Morphy’s sexual identity, that he was not demonized or shunned for effeminacy deserves notice, especially in a culture where appearances were so carefully calibrated and meticulously dissected. For his admirers, heroic behavior over the chessboard


canceled out rumors of unmanly behavior away from it. In this sense, chess offered a mechanism for “passing” in a culture of increasingly intransigent heterosexual masculinity, not unlike the uniform fashion or extravagant beards and mustaches men sported. More important, chess gave men a low-stakes setting in which to demonstrate emotional control toward other men, the key quality of masculine independence. By walking the tantalizing line between intimacy and antagonism, always drawing back from danger at the last moment, play affirmed manly identity as no other performance could.\footnote{Steven M. Stowe, \textit{Intimacy and Power in the Old South: Ritual in the Lives of the Planters} (Baltimore, 1987); Berry, \textit{All That Makes a Man}. High voices, lisps, and other “effeminate” characteristics shadowed the careers of such prominent southerners as Hugh S. Legare and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. Michael O’Brien, \textit{A Character of Hugh Legare} (Knoxville, 1985); Craig M. Simpson, \textit{A Good Southerner: the Life of Henry A. Wise of Virginia} (Chapel Hill, 1985), 87-88.}

But some played deeper, threatening to capsize all. Among the dozens of men from across the United States who corresponded with the \textit{Courier’s} chess column, signing their messages with aliases or initials, there was a single woman, “Coquette.”\footnote{The usage of this alias instantly brought to mind for Charlestonians William Randolph Barbee’s statue of the same name which caused a sensation when it was exhibited at the Hibernian Hall in the spring of 1858. \textit{Charleston Courier}, March 27, April 5, 1858.} Unraveling the identities of various correspondents is easy: non-Charlestonians usually signed their names or well-known initials; locals often followed suit. “JEPL” was Joshua E. P. Lazarus, “LA” was Lucius Avery, “FNE” was Edward N. Fuller, all members of the Charleston Chess Club. But other noms-de-guerre range from obscure to baffling. Figuring out that “Vatsug” was really “Gustav” is not difficult, but which Gustav, and from where? Who was “Old Uncle Ned”? Or “Eruditor,” “Denhirsk,” and “Humbug”? As beginners, players like “Inceptor” and “Novice” clearly prized their anonymity. Still other correspondents toyed with ambiguously gendered
aliases like “Blanche,” “Stella,” and “One of ’Em.” But none of these drew much notice, beyond an editorial “well done,” or an admonition to try again.118

The attention-seeking “Coquette” was different: she lived up to her name, writing humorously and flirtatiously, basking in the admiration she attracted. Her contributions were “welcomed in all the leading Chess columns of the country,” not least for the precocious way she blurred expected norms of gender behavior. It was one thing for a chess knight to dedicate a game or puzzle to his lady fair, but what were Charlestonians supposed to think when “Coquette” turned the tables, honoring chess club secretary Charles Drayton with a problem in a national magazine? The Courier’s chess editor (and doubtless its readers) delighted in teasing, guiding, and instructing her.119 But, strange to say, no one had ever met or played this young temptress. Then it began to dawn upon Charlestonians that the female Gamecock might well not be a hen at all. For whatever reason, a fellow in their midst had used the game (and the newspaper) as a means to portray himself as female, interacting with other men in ways that were too suggestive, intimate, and submissive for public consumption. To be sure, all the same sort of gender trouble lurked at the heart of any chess game, but respectable men did not write it down in their notes, or dress themselves up in coquettish frocks to mate their opponents. Chess in Charleston was a game teetering disastrously between concealment and self-revelation.

Most disastrous, of course, was the moral that “Coquette”—and Charles Williams—offered honorable and respectable male white Charlestonians: when confronted with the evidence of their senses, they proved woefully unable to tell men from women, to read sex and gender “correctly,” keeping their lusts and affections reliably on the right side. After “Coquette” came tamer missives from “Clothilde” and “Rosalie”—but how could anyone know whether

118 Charleston Courier, February 19, 23, March 2, 9, May 18, 25, June 1, 8, 1859.
119 Charleston Mercury, March 26, 1859; Charleston Courier, February 23, July 29, 1859.
these were in fact local women, men presenting themselves \textit{sub rosa}, or what the meaning of their gambit might be? Cultural code-switching, fictitious correspondents, and transgressive identities threatened the bounds of “chess-decency”—and social order, too.\textsuperscript{120}

To top it off, the “Coquette” problem only reprised the shocking interchange between “Nellie Noonday” and William J. A. Fuller, peripatetic chess editor of \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper} three years earlier. From the outset, careful readers might have known that “spunky” Nellie was not what she seemed, but the “charming” way she chided and the foolish way Fuller responded attracted frisky male subscribers keen on viewing chess as a battle of the sexes. “\textit{We would like to see a live female chess player},” Fuller announced, hoping for “the pleasure of breaking a lance with her.” Who was this minx? A week later, the feisty girl had dropped a veil, calling herself “Nellie M. C.,” of Syracuse, and modestly offering up a chess problem. Fuller, quite full of himself, took no special notice of it, then derided the second puzzle she sent, even as he encouraged her to contribute more. Summering in upstate New York, Daniel Fiske wrote warmly of Nellie’s talents, and Fuller struck up a correspondence game with her. Nellie warmly reciprocated the praise she received, declaring that “I wish I was your wife,” and longing to “play with you… albeit you are a great flirt.” She complained of Fuller’s attentions to “Annie,” an earlier correspondent: “you were far fonder of her than you even pretend to be of me.”\textsuperscript{121} And yet their letters went on. Perhaps Nellie and Annie (who jousted with the editor of the \textit{New York Clipper}) would vie for Fuller’s affections across the board in a public setting? Nellie’s letters were “bright and refreshing oases in the desert” to Fuller—he begged her to keep writing. But then he reversed course abruptly. Weeks went by without word from Nellie, and the editor

\textsuperscript{120} \textit{Charleston Courier}, April 6, 13, 1859; (New York) \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, September 13, 1856.

\textsuperscript{121} (New York) \textit{Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper}, August 16, 23, 1856, September 6, 13, 1856.
resigned his game with her after nine moves, conceding a victory not yet nearly won.122

The question of whether there ever had been an Annie or Nellie was obvious to all—once the string ran out. “Ladies jump at conclusions,” Fuller had argued early on, “never reaching them by any regular process of reasoning.” But how obviously did that remark undermine male claims to logic? Perhaps Miss “C.” had actually been Mr. C.—Universalist minister and chess whiz Sam Calthrop—a talented Briton recently relocated to Syracuse—or Fiske himself? Or perhaps one or both of these coquettes had been concocted simply to sell papers. At month’s end, Fuller cut off his correspondence, attacking Nellie as “of the epicene gender,” showing “no remarkable degree of femininity.” Five weeks later, printing another of Nellie’s problems, the chess column shut down altogether.123 Regardless of which direction the truth lay, the problem for Americans—Carolinians especially—remained the same: if men could not tell the difference between masculinity and femininity when presented with clear visual and textual examples, what must that failure say about southern manhood as a whole? There was no Nellie and only one “Coquette” Charlestonians encountered in print, but her example proved unsettling. How many more of that type passed a merry evening unsuspected among the club members who met at the Bend?

In class terms, too, chess’ potential for subversion held great fascination for young men of the petit bourgeoisie. According to the notions of the planter elite, chivalry was a set of qualities alien to commercial types and urban professionals. But chess proved them wrong, and it was just these men who flocked to the rooms on King Street. By demonstrating prowess over the checkered field, they laid claim to a share of knightly virtue and discounted the chivalry of rural Galahads. Though chess players never came near a charger, the contests they entered were

122 (New York) Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, September 20, 1856, October 4, 1856, November 1, 1856.
123 (New York) Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, August 16, November 29, 1856, January 3, 1857.
fully as grueling, testing skill, concentration, courage, and tenacity. Slower-paced, though equally self-important, their tournaments were less peculiar than spectacles of mock-medieval jousting, and their dress far less comical.

Chess club members’ behavior at play sought to shift the meaning of chivalry as well, meshing it with the attainments of respectability. Like the Young Men’s Secession Association parade, chess institutionalized ludic behavior, focusing attention on the players’ social personae. Whatever their individual qualities, participants refashioned themselves, at least temporarily, as bearers of the qualities they admired most. He who would enter the lists of “Royal Chess,” the Courier warned, need arm himself with more than lance and shield.

And with thee bring Attention’s eye,
And Caution’s hesitating hand;
Patience to sit phlegmatic by,
Forbidding haste with mild command;
And skilful Ingenuity;
With Perseverance strict and true;
Prophetic Judgment to foresee
Opposing plans, and break them too.

By this standard, Bayard would have made a fine accountant. Not only did chess possess “expulsive power against objectionable and injurious games and pastimes,” gateways to “objectionable adjuncts and incidents.” It also taught positive values which were the truest tests of manhood. “There is no game like it for disciplining the minds and tempers of young men,” the New York Courier asserted.

It calls out every faculty of the mind, just as gymnastics exert every muscle of the body. It demands concentration, thus strengthening the power of abstraction from surrounding objects. It requires foresight, for in fact success in it wholly lies in directing your own moves toward a definite object, and at the same time penetrating the intentions of your adversary. It imposes vigilance; the slightest oversight oft-times proves your ruin. It inculcates patience; restlessness is an unpardonable sin in the morals of Chess. It evokes the power of rapid and long-sighted combination… In fact, it would be hard to name a faculty or quality
which a man needs for practical success in life, that is not genially cherished by this noble game.

Chess provided a more exact, objective measure of manhood than tilting ever could.\textsuperscript{124}

It struck, too, at honor itself, which excluded from its front ranks virtually all such men as joined the chess club. Men of honor based their claims on unchallenged reputation, though there could be notorious frauds, all knew. Such deceits weakened the body of honor, encouraging mistrust, social disorder, and self-doubt. Chess proved once more the superiority of respectability in these areas, for there was no disguising a man’s true nature when he sat down to play. “No unlucky deal, or turn of the dice, can throw the chances against him,” declared the \textit{St. Louis Democrat}. “Hence a poor player can never hope to win of a better, unless through sheer carelessness.”\textsuperscript{125} Bravery or cowardice was clearly decided. Mental toughness, acuity, and a host of other traits were left in no doubt. A man’s ability to stand a test of fire, win or lose, with good grace and a sense of \textit{bonhomie} would be proved over and over in the course of a single evening’s play. The man of honor proved far less, at much greater risk, when he resorted to pistols. After William Taber’s death, public opinion closed that avenue to all but the most reckless duelists. That change reduced honor to brag, yet all the boasts in the world could not force checkmate, in play or in life. Chess in Charleston was a powerful weapon respectable men used to drive honorable adversaries from the field of social ethics.

Just as the royal game affirmed emerging middle-class consciousness in Charleston, it also promised to subvert existing social relations. Not only were clerks and traders present on the terrain of contest here. Chivalry’s self-appointed guardians, the planter class, were conspicuously absent. In political terms, the stakes were simply too high for them to play. Each

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Charleston Courier}, March 9, July 27, 1859; \textit{Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier}, March 24, 1859.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier}, March 26, 1859.
game of chess was a calculation of relative strength of play between two men in the most unquestionable terms and, worse, of the personal qualities upon which that strength rested. Ascribed status was discounted as soon as the game began—clerks played factors, lawyers jousted with bank tellers—and it would have been unchivalrous to refuse a game on account of economic standing. Acknowledging such types would have been anathema to the man of honor. Losing would have been worse. The best course was to stay away.

For factors, lawyers, and insurance company officials, then, chess provided a means of demonstrating gentility and merit in the course of a “chivalrous” pastime. It was a way of proving themselves as worthy of respect as any planter; more so! “[O]ne had rather be run through by Bayard, you know,” one competitor explained, “than spared by a pretender.” For the young clerks and bookkeepers who crowded in, too, chess provided similar opportunities for revaluation. Their cuffs might be frayed, their hair a little ragged, but with a friendly demeanor and skilful play they could show what they were truly made of, what they were destined for. “Take opportunity when you can to inveigle some celebrated player, Mr. Gambit Pawn, for instance, into an even game with you,” the Mercury counseled facetiously.

It is very likely that, being overweeningly conscious of his superiority… he will play carelessly—and you may win. If you do, take precious care not to play with him any more; but go up and down the town, proclaiming your achievement everywhere with trumpet tongue. Whenever Mr. Gambit Pawn’s name is afterwards mentioned… lose no time in making the company aware that you won every game you ever played with him…. Your reputation as a strong player will thus be honorably advanced, while your character for strict veracity remains unimpeached. Some clerks took pleasure from a chance to beat the boss, no doubt, but others probably saw the wisdom in playing manfully and conceding graciously. They won their point, after all, the

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127 *Charleston Mercury*, October 9, 1860.
moment they sat down to the game. In that instant, social identities were stripped away, the players ranked as equals, and the struggle begun. No wonder so many young men came back night after night.

Most important, the liminal experience chess created did not vanish once the pieces were put away. Antebellum culture, and especially the ethos of honor, taught Charlestonians to see the world in organic, tribal terms, to stand together against external threats for the good of the whole. That was the message the South Carolina jeremiad conveyed, the lesson abolitionist onslaughts enforced. Chess offered a darker, more dangerous moral. If chess reflected life, the world was an unforgiving, complex, confusing mass of adversarial relations of amative identification and attachment, where success depended on constantly ferreting out hidden perils.

A novice who played Morphy explained it best:

[T]he sensation is as queer as the first electric shock, or first love, chloroform, or any entirely novel experience. As you sit down at the board opposite him, a certain sheepishness steals over you, and you cannot rid yourself of an old fable in which a lion’s skin plays a part. Then you are sure you have the advantage; you seem to be secure—you get a rook—you are ahead two pieces! three!! Gently, as if wafted by a zephyr, the pieces glide about the board; and presently as you are about to win the game a soft voice in your ear kindly insinuates, Mate! You are speechless. Again and again you try; again and again you are sure you must win; again and again your prodigal antagonist leaves his pieces at your mercy; but his moves are as the steps of Fate. Then you are charmed all along, so bewitchingly are you beheaded.

It was this shock of sudden reversal—whether one’s opponent was Morphy or a junior clerk—which players especially delighted in. “Play can deceive, betray, beguile, delude, dupe, hoodwink, bamboozle, gull,” Victor Turner notes. As the play of Morphy, McDonnell, and their victims proved admirably, subversion lurked everywhere. Stable positions dissolved in a heartbeat. Apparent advantages transmuted into ensnaring gambits, benign combinations proved traps, devastating attacks came from nowhere. Danger lurked without and within. “[T]o the
difficult art of selecting and occupying a commanding position,” the *Courier* warned, “the successful Chess-player must add a thorough knowledge of stratagems and snares, which he is alternately called upon to invent and put into practice—to see through and defeat.” 128 Either a player stood on guard at every moment or he was lost.

The men of the blue cockade could not have put it better. That view meshed well with the commercial perspective many club members carried along with them, and with the increasingly xenophobic political outlook in Charleston at the end of the 1850s. It provided powerful affirmation, too, for the ideal of the self-made man respectability promoted, demanding that apparent strength and standing receive constant scrutiny and recalculation. Mastery of chess—and life—observers noted, required a riskier, more inquisitive way of seeing, an ability to read the flow of events more quickly and perceptively than one’s opponent.

This was a great attraction of Morphy’s play, so skilled at penetrating the hidden dynamics of any position, and of the blindfold exhibitions so popular at the time. It also helps explain the craze for solving chess problems newspapers promoted. The problem tournament the *Courier* sponsored in 1859 drew scores of entries from around the country, most flawed in one way or another. 129 Perceiving all the avenues of escape and closing them off, and formulating a workable plan of action proved a tricky task, directly applicable to the affairs of life. In both cases, success depended on one’s ability to read visual signs accurately and to triangulate between them.

There was no other safe way of understanding how the game of social relations stood at any moment, or in which directions play might flow. Identity itself was cast permanently into


129 *Charleston Courier*, July 25, August 17, 31, September 7, 1859.
doubt. For those who anchored their existence in ties of blood and tradition, that change was distressing indeed. Especially for the hungry young clerks and bookkeepers who crowded into the chess club’s rooms, though, it was the basis of all hope. However humbled in the game of life, chess promised that they might yet rise, Morphy-like, to attain the valuation they deserved. With diligence, courtesy, and a little craft, underdogs might become men of expectations, and see those expectations triumph.

As this point suggests, beyond all other reasons for its popularity, chess was a species of commerce in antebellum Charleston. Men were drawn to the chess club in many cases to hawk a particular image of themselves to peers, potential employers and patrons, and the community at large. Chess players were, by definition, men of leisure, but it was a respectable Golden Mean of leisure they pursued, even as they sought to enlarge the social capital with which they purchased entrance. They were not idle aristocrats—chess required too much diligence, calculation, and self-restraint for devotees to be criticized as lazy—nor were they wed to a life of unceasing toil. Workingmen lacked the time, the wit, and the standing to take up the game. Chess advertised its protagonists as solidly middle-class. That was one reason clerks and other underlings flocked to its ranks. Chess offered a level of interpersonal exchange across class lines rivaled by few other activities. A steady, clever, gregarious fellow could only see his fortunes prosper here. At a time when the chances for self-made men to improve their standing in commerce was shrinking, such opportunities were not to be missed.

Chess as trade spread more tangibly as well. Advertisements for chess sets, books and periodicals grew steadily across the 1850s. The explosive growth of chess columns in newspapers and magazines proved that chess sold. Morphy’s triumph promised an even greater commercial bonanza. To rival the “Staunton” chess sets all were purchasing, the enterprising
Yankee Thomas Frere marketed “Morphy Men” to accompany the chess books he churned out. These novel creations soon found their way to the rooms of the Charleston club. Serious players could use no other sort: “Those who wish Chess men for other purposes than to play with, either to please their fancy or to exhibit as curiosities, had better get the Chinese pattern,” one come-on declared. “The Morphy men are emphatically for use.”\textsuperscript{130} As with blue cockades, conspicuous consumption here signified taste, status, and sincerity.

Chess commerce did not stop here, of course:

Chess tables are in every cabinet-maker’s shop, and peddled about the streets. Tasteful amateurs will have the squares cut from splendid marble, or set in cornelian and agate. Patents are taken out for portable chess boards, and no traveling party is without them. Bone turners, ivory turners, box wood and ebony turners have increased employment for their lathes. Even the iron founder is at work casting chess men after the most approved models. The sheep that are driven along our streets have chess boards under their wool; they have only to pass through the hands of the skin dresser and the printer, while the bone turner is making queens and bishops out of their legs, and we have them on our tables for the second time.

Nor did the chess hero’s endorsement, witting or otherwise, need have any connection to chess at all to be effective. While the French put Morphy’s bust on public display in Paris, Americans plastered his image on cigar advertisements. When he arrived in France wearing a Southern-style slouch straw hat, shops on both sides of the Atlantic trumpeted the dashing new style of “Morphy Hats.”\textsuperscript{131} That product, and others like it, passed into obscurity, but by 1860 its lesson had not been lost on Walter Steele. There was no necessary connection between chess and hats,

\textsuperscript{130} Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, March 31, 1859.

\textsuperscript{131} See, e.g., Edgefield Advertiser, December 7, 1859; (Warren, OH) Western Reserve Chronicle, April 20, 1859; (Ottawa, IL) Ottawa Free Trader, April 30, 1859.
any more than there was between chess and politics or politics and hats, yet with a little effort a
link might be made. And that link might prove profitable.\textsuperscript{132}

In the fall of 1860, those affinities were firm and obvious. Charles Drayton sold off the
last of the defunct chess club’s property because Charlestonians had come to associate chess and
politics more fully than Steele ever hoped. The group’s fortunes had dwindled steadily that year
when a visit by Morphy miscarried and a local tournament failed to materialize. But ultimately it
was success itself which doomed the club: chess allowed its members to reveal themselves and
interact with others through play in a variety of exciting roles. It fulfilled those aims
frighteningly well. And though men drifted away from organized play, they did not lose interest
in the things chess represented to them.\textsuperscript{133}

Rather, they transferred allegiance to other vehicles which allowed them to pursue their
goals through the same categories of play, theater, subversion, and commerce. For men like
Hiram Olney, Emilio Balaguer, John Humphries, and Charles Drayton, that meant active
promotion of the secessionist cause. These and others like them moved straight from devotion to
chess to membership in the Vigilant Rifles. Though men continued to contest across the board
informally, sustaining a shadow network of common interest, in 1860 they focused on a new
kind of homosocial game by which to explore identity, perform and reshape masculinity, get a
leg up in the world. With the rise of disunionism, their passion for playing at war simply shifted
ground. The character of their activity changed not at all.\textsuperscript{134}

This time they were playing with fire. It was one thing to mimic the achievements of a

\textsuperscript{132} Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, March 17, 1859.

\textsuperscript{133} “Southern Chess Congress,” Chess Monthly, 3 (1859), 295.

members and the son of a third opted to join the Charleston Tilting Club in the spring of 1860. Charleston Courier,
March 28, May 14, 1860.
Morphy, quite another to craft a politics around such fantasies. Extricating himself again and again from apparently losing situations with a mixture of cunning, logic, and bravado, Morphy won by taking chess to a higher plane than his opponents. Where others relied on brief flurries of clever moves for success, he viewed the conflict of the chessboard more as modern players do—and as secessionist demonstrators saw their own drama—drawing out winning possibilities imbedded in apparently desperate situations. Where others saw only defeat, he discerned a path to victory.

“There is said to be no calculation in Morphy’s mind to guide his moves,” the Mercury declared; “he makes them by intuition.” If he seemed to hesitate, that was just “to deceive his adversary.” All Southrons could take heart at his craft and his triumphs, especially on the eve of the presidential election, as Black Republicans conspired to checkmate the White republic. Such matters doubtless meshed in the last days of Charleston’s chess club. The problem, Steele’s ad explained, was that the national canvass had become a “four-handed game of political chess” far different than that at which Morphy excelled. The “double center, counter gambit” of Lincoln, Breckenridge, Douglas, and Bell looked certain to succeed through the corruption of “wire-pullers,” not the genius of the people. ¹³⁵  But the southern position, disunionists promised, only looked lost. Pressing on, deeper into play, toward political independence, would bring victory quick and sharp.

Lincoln’s election cast a pall over the slaveholding states. But then came the counterstroke. “South Carolina says Check Mate!” the Mercury announced.¹³⁶ Unilateral secession was a bold move, a masterpiece of Morphy-like maneuvering. It rocked Washington back on its heels and set compromisers scrambling. Who knows what a little patience could

¹³⁵ Charleston Mercury, October 5, 12, 15, 1860, January 23, 1861.

¹³⁶ Charleston Mercury, November 10, 1860.
have won? Still there remained the question of the Federal fort in the mouth of Charleston harbor. Isolated, undermanned, Sumter was a piece ripe for the picking in the spring of 1861. If they had learned anything by their board-game combat, one would like to imagine that the chess players and their comrades in the Vigilant Rifles stationed out on Morris Island urged caution now.

But there is no evidence for that. Rage and lust will find release, defeating every wisdom. Chivalry demanded daring, soldiers shouted; the gambit could not be declined. The time for games was at an end. So the castle was taken and the trap sprung.
“Revolution!” cried the Mercury; “Revolution!” answered the Courier. In the fall of 1856, Charleston was convulsed by a “Complete Revolution in the Hat Business.” At the center of the storm stood Walter Steele. City-born and bred, the thirty-three year old merchant had risen through the ranks of clerkship, opened his own store in 1849, and never looked back.

“Steele has only to think once, and it is done,” his own ad copy marveled. And who could call that claim boasting? Had he not transformed the trade in hats and, thereby, a host of other goods besides, seizing the lion’s share of Charleston’s custom? Rallying under the banner of “One Price and No Abatement,” Steele had raised a tempest in the city’s commercial relations. How he must have laughed to see Charlestonians flee the liberal terms of credit other merchants offered, racing for the safe harbor of his King Street “Hat Hall,” where four-dollar beavers sold proudly, on “TERMS—CASH!”

Who could have seen sartorial revolution as key to the social crisis that brought on civil war?

Rather, the mad dash Steele’s ad provoked drew notice for the way it linked the comical and economical, replicating the ridiculous scramble any extraordinary breeze unleashed in the Queen City. There was nothing quite so humorous, men agreed, as the sight of a fellow chasing a wind-blown hat. Hats had so many obvious meanings—social, sexual, economic, political—that a topper tossed off suddenly into the gutter, whirled along with some poor fool tearing after it seemed irresistibly funny. But schadenfreude was no sort of strategy in finance, politics, or personal life, especially in tight times. Hats aloft and rolling meant honor unhinged, order

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1 Charleston Mercury, October 3, 1856; Charleston Courier, September 5, 1853, October 3, 1856.
overthrown, the properly private made rudely public, class unity in doubt.\(^2\) However fleeting, one fellow’s fashion crisis acted out broader fears of deeper flaws which threatened to fracture the state: men measured and found wanting. Revolution—in Charleston hats or politics—was an odd thing to celebrate.

Hats of all kinds went flying in the last years of the antebellum era in South Carolina, ruining some and panicking all.\(^3\) What had raised a wind so vexing and sudden? And how could men hope to fight its force, except by clutching wealth, power, status—and the hats which summed them up--doubly tight? Even the snuggest man’s hat covered a host of sins: economic mismanagement, political indecision, compromised masculinity. That was just what made Steele’s conservative course so radical—and made him wonderfully rich.\(^4\)

By the hour of Lincoln’s election, battered, bartered hats had come to measure men in a host of worrisome ways, and found too many wanting. As Charleston rallied on a range of radical flags, a fraction at the forefront traded honorable and respectable hats for the distinctive French caps of the Vigilant Rifles. True men did not haggle or seek discount. They stood, bare-headed, to account, when crisis came, or pulled their brims low. Either way, political hat-play meant abundant hat-pay for Steele, and that had been his game all along. No wonder the thought of revolution made him smile.


\(^4\) Even after the Confederacy’s fall, Steele’s firm was valuated at $140,000, ranking him among the most successful retail merchants in Charleston. Page 12, District 2 Assessment Lists, Monthly and Special Lists, August 1865-December 1866, Series 5.40: Records of Internal Revenue Collection Districts (South Carolina), RG 58: Records of the Internal Revenue Service, NA.
Commerce and revolution inevitably split a minority of winners from the mass who missed their chance. Eighteen fifty-nine had been a banner year for Walter Steele, who bought a grand house in charming Summerville, just north of Charleston, leaving day-to-day operations of the newly-formed “Steele and Co.” to his younger brothers John and William. The year was grand for cotton production, too, though far less cheering for planters mired in debt, utterly awful for merchants who gambled on good times coming.\(^5\) Just south of Steele’s shop, John S. Bird’s fancy goods store founedered, passing by legal alchemy into the hands of his son Charlton, able only to strive and save and hope that the past did not presage the future.\(^6\) Just north, another competitor’s collapse provided a more powerful warning still.

By any measure that mattered that spring, Alexander Ketcham had failed miserably. But, in contrast to Bird, his bankruptcy was more than financial. Ketcham had few social ties, no property not mortgaged to the hilt, and a patronym already tainted by commercial defeat. Young and ambitious, he had learned bookkeeping’s basics from his father, senior partner in a seemingly prosperous King Street dry goods shop. By the early 1850s, though, Ketcham and Taylor was overextended and aging. The cash basis of its custom only seemed to hamper trade. Father Ketcham cut prices, advertised steadily, strove to make shopping inviting. Nothing worked: by the end of 1856, he sold out to Andrew Browning, a chancer with deep pockets and


\(^6\) *Charleston Courier*, March 7, 1859.
bright ideas who shaped the store into Charleston’s grand commercial emporium.7

Browning kept old Ketcham on as glorified clerk, ceremonially greeting customers to deflect attention from his downfall, and from the crucial commercial shift Browning enacted. From 1857 on, the new boss silently dropped the conservative requirement of cash from his sales pitch.8 Business boomed and Browning became a power in Charleston’s retail establishment, betting strong that cotton profits would drive shopkeepers’ fortunes upward. But bubbles burst, and secession wrecked his schemes.

As for Alex, he enacted the same tale in miniature, risking all to grab Bob Hawley’s sinking hat shop in 1856, borrowing boldly from local lawyers like Ben Pressley to make the rescue. Who could have known that—just this moment—war in the Crimea, sudden storms, and demand for capital to build railroads in Latin America would squeeze local lenders till they squeaked, sending friendless borrowers to the wall?9 A. H. Ketcham’s shop paraded as a “favorite resort” for anyone searching out “first quality” five-dollar men’s hats, but a “Premium Hat Store” demanding cash was almost bound to fail when its neighbor twenty paces south offered a twenty-percent discount on price, and no haggling. The irony was that Steele’s Hat Hall now stood on the very site where Walter had pushed a pen and served the public meekly for eleven years—under Ketcham and Taylor. Quite inadvertently, Father Ketcham’s training (and,


8 Charleston Courier, January 3, 1857. Browning stands as alter-ego to Steele’s “cash only” strategy. Only very optimistic merchants with long lines of credit dared take this course.

eventually, his partner’s backing) had transformed their threadbare clerk into the high
cockalorum of King Street, driving his own son to bankruptcy.\(^\text{10}\)

Young Ketcham tried to dodge, vying for the market in “boy’s and youth’s caps”—traffic
quite different from the hat trade proper—but even here Steele cut in. High above the newspaper
fold, far beyond where Ketcham advertised, Steele insisted on crowning the “Grand Lama of the
family circle” with one of his attractive hats. The price was right, the palaver unbeatable.
Marooned over on Market Street, hard-pressed Henry Dinant’s shop broke lances with Steele
directly, undercutting his cash price for men’s hats by fifty cents and claiming to be “the only
hatter in the city” who produced the wares he sold. But Dinant’s claim was dubious, his roots
shallow, operation small, styles old-fashioned. Come 1860, he was done.\(^\text{11}\)

Sited at King Street’s Bend, Ketcham’s “Sign of the Golden Hat” could not have been
planted more advantageously. Just here, carriage and foot traffic slowed on Charleston’s busiest
street. Shopkeepers had a superb chance to draw in customers, crowded, jostled, and looking for
relief. That was one way George Cook, Bird, and their neighbors made money. Still Ketcham’s
shop struggled against Steele’s “Big Hat.” By the fall of 1857, Ketcham croaked that he kept on
hand four-dollar hats “precisely as good, if not better” than those Steele sold, failing to see this
as a complaint about collapse, not an attractive sales slogan. Another year on, “overflowing with
all the newest and best styles,” Ketcham’s store capsized.\(^\text{12}\)

He ran up the white flag on April 4: the sheriff came in, and out went stock, supplies,
and furniture, under the auction hammer. “Silk, felt, and wool hats” were knocked down; “straw,
\(^\text{10}\) Charleston Mercury, August 6, 1856; Charleston Courier, August 23, October 18, 1856. The homosocial tie
between Taylor and Steele grew and developed down to secession. In 1860, Walter’s brother John H. Steele was
one of five single men residing in the all-male household of sixty-seven-year-old Tom Taylor, in Ward 2.

\(^\text{11}\) Charleston Courier, November 8, 1856.

\(^\text{12}\) Charleston Mercury, September 24, 1856, November 19, 1857; Charleston Courier, March 25, 30, 1857,
November 15, 1858.
palm-leaf, and leghorn hats; cloth, velvet, and glazed caps; children’s fancy hats and caps.”

Canes and furs and hat boxes were bid off. A mahogany desk was carted away for cash, along with mirrors, show cases, gas fixtures, tools, stools, and tables. By nightfall, nothing was left of Ketcham’s save a great gilded hat swaying in the breeze. It was a mocking material metaphor—a sign in the truest sense—that Charlestonians regarded with fear on the eve of secession.13

For a few months, the head under the hat followed his father’s downward path, shifting silently along King Street to a minor clerkship in a more monied firm. Too many others had gone that route in the 1850s, as bookkeepers and clerks staked their all on small shops, only to see grand hopes smashed as debts mounted, payments lagged, and patrons fled. Battalions of other pen-pushers never even got the chance to die that proprietor’s death by cash-flow, waiting patiently for the moment they might be summoned from ink and subservience to the opportunity they dreamed of—when an aging boss, a fortunate betrothal, or simple luck might vault them higher. Across the 1850s, clerks, salesmen, and bookkeepers by the score stacked up in local shops like lost luggage, and for nearly all, the life-changing call never came.14

Alex Ketcham’s chance was better than most, yet most would have called it no chance at all. After secession, he left for parts unknown. A vanquished man had no call to linger here: first chances in Charleston were few by 1860, second ones almost unknown. Ketcham’s father had no help to give, friends vanished, and every day brought a host of new men with sharp elbows eager to make their way. The heads that stayed behind shook slow from side to side: no man of common sense and half-way decent connections would have brought himself to such a

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13 Charleston Courier, April 4, 1859.

pass. No surprise, either, that a cool fellow like Steele demanded hard cash. If you could not plunk down for one of his four-dollar hats, Steele twitted, he would give you a cap—gratis. It was bound to fit better.

That joke stung on both sides of the class divide. What Charleston did not need, honorable and respectable men agreed, was a proletarian community united by so visible a symbol of empty pockets. Too many flags in too many forms—carriages, slaves, houses, marriages, clubs—signaled troubling divisions. Now, hats? Already, in the fall of 1860, expatriate journalist James D. B. DeBow had spilled too much ink describing how non-slaveholders gained from a peculiar institution not quite peculiar to them. Having no servant to bow and scrape and work was one thing; lacking the cash to buy a decent hat quite another. If chattel slavery only drove most whites down to wage slavery, Charlestonians worried, how long would it be before class interest trumped race prejudice, and low caps resisted high hats?

The trouble was, as all admitted, Charleston society contained too many Ketchams, too few Steeles, too many slave straw hats and proletarian caps, too many felted mock-ups masquerading as posh hats, too many tall beavers too liable to be sent flying at the first financial gust, too few hats fitting, modern, and suitable, sitting on heads fit to guide the state in matters of economy, finance, and social order. Credit had come to dominate all aspects of life in antebellum Charleston, and so many men were so indebted—or so badly in need of credit they could not obtain—that the whole system seemed ever about to seize up. On this outer limit, only subterfuge, outrageous boasts, bold villainy, and the most reckless gambling spirit kept cash and

15 *Charleston Courier*, March 19, 1861.

promises flowing from hand to hand. With grim fatalism, Charlestonians awaited some crushing blow—monetary, political, or systemic—from afar.

Somehow, meeting that challenge all came back to the matter of melodramatic self-portrayal—knowing and performing one’s duty when called upon—to hats and the verisimilitude of those who wore them.17 Hats were unlike other forms of clothing, Victorians noted: while other garments were worn for “the sake of decency,” warmth, or display, men’s hats failed on all these counts. “The most ugly, unmeaning, and uncomfortable of… head coverings,” the hat was “an abortion of ingenuity, the horror of taste.” Still Americans purchased them in astounding numbers—New York alone sold 1.5 million dollars’ worth of hats annually by 1830—and used them ingeniously. Foreign commentators marveled how American hats served “at once for a head-covering, a writing-desk, a larder, and a portmanteau.”

In it the merchant deposits patterns of various descriptions: the doctor uses it as an apothecar[y] shop: the married man, returning from market, converts it into a depository for potatoes and other vegetables: to the traveler it serves as a knapsack.

Lawyers and politicians stuffed briefs and speeches inside. Gentlemen traveled with “a pocket handkerchief and a dozen cigars” and all manner of other items tucked under their hats.18 Outdoors, men clung to them—as emblems of personal identity, measures of cultural currency, instruments of social communication, arbiters of class location—carrying the same impulse into the photographer’s studio. Posed for the camera, men wore hats proudly, propped on a knee, or

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handled like some strange semaphore.\textsuperscript{19} Where hats are absent from portraits, the subjects seem half-dressed, unready to perform a proper public role. Will Grayson’s memory of an old-time planter’s club measures well the social centrality of men’s hats. “On one occasion,” after many toasts,

> it was proposed to sit in a circle on the ground, to sing a song and, with the chorus at the end of every stanza, to beat the ground with their hats…. The majority ruled. The song was sung and the hats battered. The joke of this boisterous merriment was… that one of the party, a raw member or guest, wore a new beaver of which he seemed proud while the rest of the company brandished their old hats that were none the worse for the sand or the beating.

The moral was obvious: a hat here meant more, did more than any other personal item, standing for the man himself. As other facets of men’s dress grew democratized and class-neutral, the centrality of hats shines forth from any illustration of daily life.\textsuperscript{20}

> All men covered their heads in some fashion when they went outdoors, and that covering conveyed essential information about race, class, age, and social prospects. Men of means switched hats according to the season, the weather, the hour, and the occasion, presenting visual demands that personal claims of identity, power, place, and connection be read, trusted, and socially recognized. Being wrong-hatted was the most obvious way of going wrong-footed. Just so, the “bashful young gentleman” who fled female company in a footman’s hat was unmanned indeed. Still, any hat was better than none, for headgear served as a crucial prop in social communication. Charleston men touched, lifted, waved, even threw their hats to convey affirmative opinions about the world they encountered face-to-face. Refusing to perform such hat-play, or executing it in stilted fashion, was the essence of declaring a social relation “cut.”


Woe to the man with no hat: illegible in the public sphere and rendered mute, he was unsafe in a double sense. So men came to consider a man’s hat in this era a flag of his fortunes. And yet, all knew and feared, false flags abounded. The only safe course was to keep an eye out.

In private, men rarely high-hatted each other. Familiars believed they knew the fellows in their midst. Contention for status was banished by an equalitarian uncovering, with hats commonly dropped on a hall table or handed to a servant’s keeping. In colloquial, same-sex settings, hats were more often hung up on pegs, turned top-down on the floor next to one’s seat, or pitched into a pile in the corner. A pair of Victorian photographic gems, *The Chess Players* (1843), breaks that custom consciously, depicting two men contending over the board, one bare-headed and intent, the other displaying an outlandish top hat. Wearing that beaver indoors was the most obvious sort of gender provocation—or over-intimacy. Was it strange, then, that the *Mercury* told of the German gent unable to control himself in public, battering down, off, or away every hat which confronted him? The papers called this an irrational mania, but there was no less a politics and assertion of status which put the law in play here. So there was with Steele’s coy ad, linking politics to hats with chess-like precision.

After Lincoln’s election—when “Wide Awakes” wore low-crowned caps as a symbol of Republican loyalty and Abe’s stovepipe stood for the man himself—putting hats on heads or


22 The two images are in the collections of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Variously attributed to the competing London photographers William Fox Talbot and Antoine-François-Jean Claudet, they in fact portray those two men playing chess, most probably in Talbot’s Adelaide Gallery.

23 *Charleston Mercury*, October 27, 1860.
badges on hats turned consumption into radical politics and theater both. But why? What did hats signify at street level in Charleston on the eve of secession? And why did men so flock to Steele’s shop in particular?

Answering these questions demands unraveling the business of hats and the trajectory of hatted business in antebellum South Carolina. The fortunes of hats and misfortunes of commerce were bound up with a broader transformation in modes and ideals of masculine self-presentation, linked once again to the conflict between honor and respectability as cultural imperatives. Across the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the focus of male fashion in Western culture shifted sharply, as cloth replaced silk in elite coats, breeches upstaged the stocking set, men took off wigs, and flat shoes deposed boots and pumps of various sorts. Following the lead of English dandies like George “Beau” Brummell and Lytton Bulwer, who aimed at tasteful precision—rejecting difference, diffidence, or exoticism—men came to adopt what looked ever more like a class uniform, melodramatically announcing social status and gender identity.25

Oddly, historians of costume now see this moment when elite men strove toward excellence in dress—carrying along whole classes in their wake—as a movement of anxious fellows turning away from fashion for fear of being thought frivolous or effeminate. But there was no “great masculine renunciation,” certainly not in Charleston. Clothing and fashion there


fascinated—and worried—men more than ever, spurring them to scan the smallest details of style for flaws in manly self-display. “Great care should be always taken to dress like the reasonable people of our own age in the place where we are, whose dress is never spoken of one way or another,” one advice manual warned. “All affectation in dress implies a flaw in the understanding.” But apathy was worse than foppery.26 In clothes as in other aspects of life, respectability and honor both demanded endless self-scrutiny in the service of uniformity.

That long hard look soon made men’s garments much alike: dark-colored suits cut quite the same way, a standardized set of accessories, topped off with a hat. From the 1840s, observers noted how the standard male outfit of leading fashion magazines ever more resembled the everyday wear of an English country gentleman with the mud wiped off: a white boiled shirt with starched cravat; close-fitting trousers (this age was all about fit and fitness) splayed over dress shoes; a wool or cotton coat done up against the elements, with matching waistcoat peeping out behind.27 For the elite, gloves, watch and chain, and a cane or umbrella completed the portrait, almost. None could make the least profession to gentility or respectability without a decent hat.

Yet closer scrutiny uncovers personal and stylistic differences everywhere and—for the laziest detective—there was nothing as distinctive as a man’s hat. Each was shaped to a particular head, bore the beatings of weather, labor, and society, transported the sundries stuffed inside, revealed the nominal insignia inscribed on its lining and the declarative signs affixed to


its hatband. The photographs Quinby took of prominent Carolinians in March 1861 show this singularity clearly: John Means and John Manning both strike masculine poses, but Manning holds his shiny bell-crown casually, pinching a finger and thumb; Means grips his brushed stovepipe as if it would run away. While Frank Pickens holds his hat hip-high and turns it at an angle to his body, the better to show size and proportion, only a fragment of David Jamison’s hat peeks into a lower corner, rendering style and size obscure. Ex-governor James Adams’s huge old-fashioned whiskers mirror the worn, oversized topper he carries, but hardly match James Petigru’s conservative Wellington for being old-hat.28 In each of these images, unconsciously but distinctly, hats measure the men who wore them, describing character, politics, personal style and social outlook.29

Contemporaries affirmed this link, hooting at how hats unmasked men. “Here is a hat now!” one writer declared. “Did its strong curves and sharp corners ever cover any other kind of face and costume?” Almost certainly, “this sharp hat covers the head of a sharper!” Other kinds of gents wore other kinds of hats: the “melancholy or forlorn hat” covered a “lugubrious” fellow, the hat “straight and square in its angles” with “not much nap,” stood for one far different than the swell sporting a hat with “graceful curves.” In general, men agreed, “if you could only see the hat over the fence, you could take your affidavit of the sort of man you would find under


it,” and seldom go astray. Men did mix up hats, but that was a subject for hilarity and confusion both: how could any fellow half-way keen get a thing so vital to social identity so totally wrong? If you could not read a hat, how could you reckon a man?

In Charleston on the eve of secession, most men got their hats from one of a handful of shops, chiefly Steele’s. But the trade in these stores represented only the pinnacle and chief purpose of a process of production, exchange and consumption stretching across continents and centuries that summed up in miniature the economic crisis Carolinians faced. As conventionally used, the notion of an industrial revolution misleads by the narrowly Anglo-centric associations it conjures: coal mines and steam engines, child labor and satanic mills. To be sure, such features were central to the development of capitalism in Western Europe and America before 1860, and to the process of proletarianization at its heart. But the trajectory of hatting tracked quite differently, until just when Walter Steele appeared on the scene. And in many ways, the story of a single hat tells a truer tale about the character of capitalist development.

For more than two centuries, down to the Jacksonian era, that hat almost always began to take shape far from European centers of trade and production, in the wilderness of the Canadian Shield, the Great Lakes region, or the Pacific Northwest, when a native North American hunted,
killed, and skinned a beaver, processing and transporting its pelt by canoe to trade with British, French, Dutch, or American merchants hundreds of miles distant in return for desirable commodities: textiles, iron goods, firearms, alcohol. At the beginning, the abundance of beaver made such transactions seem to native people both strange and splendid, since Europeans sought the most worn and apparently worthless of furs. Within a generation, though, hunting and trapping had turned into a structured pattern of labor—a job—and by 1720, a single corporation, the Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC), dominated continental trade, setting up forts, sending agents, surveyors, and traders into the hinterland, and tying the fortunes of native tribes to the hemispheric ebb and flow of the fur trade.33

As often with primary producers around the globe, a rich harvest looked to mean a warmer winter and fuller bellies till trapping season came round again. But that payday was entirely dependent on economic, political, and military decisions made a continent away—all tangled up with vagaries of fashion quite foreign to native cultures.34 Across the eighteenth century, a wide-ranging consumer revolution transformed social relations on both sides of the Atlantic, as men and women, high and low, meshed the struggle for life’s necessities with the purchase of discretionary niceties.35 Historians debate the balance between customary purchases

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34 By the 1860s, though, Cherokee, Sioux, and Chippewa leaders had incorporated top hats into ceremonial portraits and daily life. Cf., Robert F. Berkofer, Jr., The White Man’s Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the Present (New York, 1979).
and voluntary consumption, and have not well explained why a world dominated by merchant
capital sponsored a system where relations of production took the lead in generating growth.36
But, in both cases, any answer must consider the rising importance of men’s hats.

Start here: French imperial aims in the four decades before the fall of Quebec drove
aggressive expansion into the beaver-rich Ohio, Mississippi and upper Missouri River lands. By
contrast, Spanish colonial policy from the 1520s to the nineteenth century left the thriving animal
populations of the southern Rockies quite untouched.37 From the 1770s, when the Northwest
Company arose to rival the HBC, to the 1810s, when John Jacob Astor’s Pacific Fur Company
staked out the Oregon country, competition should have brought native hunters higher incomes.
Except in local circumstances, though, this was a case of too many people too well armed
chasing a dwindling number of severely stressed animal communities.

Increasingly, too, free-lancing American mountain men cut out native middle men.
Riding into native territory armed to the teeth, they banded together, trapped and hunted hard for
a season, then descended on an advertised transit point in Wyoming or Utah for a grand

35 John Brewer and Roy Porter, Consumption and the World of Goods (New York, 1993); Cary Carson, “The
Consumer Revolution in Colonial British America: Why Demand?” in Of Consuming Interests, 483-697; Paul
Daniel Miller (London, 1995), 164-203; Daniel Roche, A History of Everyday Things: The Birth of Consumption in
France, 1600-1800 (Cambridge, 2000); Frank Trentmann, “The Evolution of the Consumer: Meanings, Identities,
and Political Synapses Before the Age of Affluence,” in The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in
East Asia and the West, ed. Sheldon Garon and Patricia L. Maclachlan (Ithaca, 2006), 21-44.

36 Roberta Sassatelli, Consumer Culture: History, Theory and Politics (Los Angeles, 2007), 13-31; Maurice Dobb,
Studies in the Development of Capitalism (London, 1946); Rodney Hilton, ed., The Transition from Feudalism to
ecumical—and sketchier—has been the American version of this debate. Charles G. Sellers, The Market
Revolution: Jacksonian America, 1815-1846 (New York, 1991); Douglas Egerton, “Markets without a Market
Revolution: Southern Planters and Capitalism,” Journal of the Early Republic, 16 (1996), 207-221; John L. Larson,

Sleeper-Smith, 215-245; Wien, “Exchange Patterns in the European Market for North American Furs and Skins,
136.
rendezvous where furs were sold, appetites indulged, and plans made for the year ahead. Between 1825 and the early 1840s, these sites offered the purest celebrations of entrepreneurship and masculinity America ever saw. Indeed, they worked too well, slaughtering vastly right up to the moment the national economy collapsed in 1837. It took time for that panic to cross the prairies, but after 1840 the ranks of independent white trappers dwindled.

Coupled with this, an ocean away, consumers had already shown a willingness to go a-strolling in hats made of other animals’ soft sides: fur seals and otters, muskrats, even South American nutria. As European buyers proved unable to tell (or unwilling to pay) the difference between a handsome beaver and an overgrown rat, the profits native trappers took and the wages white company men earned in the fur trade shrank. Somehow, Adam Smith forgot to sketch that onset of peonage in explaining the causes of the wealth of nations.

How odd: for how could Montreal, Boston, or New York have gained economic eminence without a thriving hat trade? So, too, across the Atlantic, the factory system first took root in the early 1700s, far from the infamous mills of Lancashire, on the south bank of the Thames, where beaver pelts became stylish hats. There was a special trick—a craft—to that transformation, and by grouping ten or twelve dozen men and boys under one roof a steady flow of felts could be counted on—four or five per journeyman each day—as the skill of making hats became the core of a thriving trade.

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superior hats flowed from master to apprentice. That meant a flood of money washing over the wider economy as wages, rent, consumer purchases, and profits. All boats rose.

A confluence of forces conjured this windfall. Just as the first fleets of HBC beaver were starting to stack up in English warehouses for lack of skilled labor to process them, the French crown withdrew religious toleration of Protestant Huguenots, who happened to dominate the continental hat trade. The consequence was mass emigration to England and quick integration into a thriving workforce.41

That conjuncture sparked a Thames-side clash between entrepreneurial ambition and craft skill that doomed the putting-out system so dominant in other clothing trades. Now master hatters kept close watch over journeymen, apprentices, and expensive raw materials through each step of the labor process. Advanced pelts on credit, Southwark’s small bosses grew enthralled to “big hatters”—London men with money but no idea of how to make a hat. Rationed skins according to personal pliancy, pushed to complete contracts by hook or crook, driven to break the rules of their Feltmaker’s Company union, English hatters lashed out repeatedly. Early on, some of their strikes succeeded, and in 1732, London hatters (fronting for the HBC) rammed through Parliament an act barring North American competitors from exporting hats to England, and from selling hats beyond the borders of each colony without shipping them through an English port. What better way to link distant outposts in outrage against their homeland, one might ask, or to turn provincial seamen into professional smugglers? Long before impressment, stamps, or tea, the right to make and trade hats fired colonial anger against Westminster.42

41 Madeleine Ginsburg, The Hat: Trends and Traditions (Hauppauge, NY, 1990), 32; Corner, “Tyranny of Fashion,” 156.

Terms of trade and labor roiled the shop floor, too. Since hat-making involved only a few steps of moderate difficulty, the key to fat profits was steady toil: keeping rollicking workers relatively sober and on task. Bosses here had all they could handle, calling on Parliament to limit the rights of journeymen to combine, emigrate, or otherwise obstruct the flow of profits. By the 1780s, the driven, industrial character of the trade came at a double cost to workers. Alongside a regime of relentless, routinized toil grew a new image of hatters as stereotypically mad—odd, fearfully shy, and gripped by the “hatter’s shakes”—from breathing the fumes of mercury used to process pelts.  

For bosses, that was a bonus, and there seemed no alternative anyway: all the world was hat-mad now.

The transmission of pelts, hats, and cash was central to the Atlantic economy before 1800. Britons bought felted hats at a rate of roughly one per capita annually, and pumped them out for foreign consumption at breakneck pace, peaking at more than 700,000 in 1736. They went to Africa in exchange for slaves; to Asia, trading for tea; across Europe, draining off hard currency; back to the Americas, paying bills and demanding profit. No single finished commodity played a greater role to kick-start the global capitalist economy. The new consumerism of Western Europe declared the stakes starkly: a man must have a hat, and a proper one, too. Twenty-five generations before Ford, Nike, and Apple, men high and low learned to perform the identities they claimed through the commodities they purchased.  

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those with cash to buy pelts to make hats, the pay-off was consistent, sizeable, revolutionary. Almost surely, men with furs could get vastly rich.

Or so it seemed. By the 1770s, the quest for a cheaper “good hat” had changed the Western world. Demand for British goods fell below thirty percent of 1736 levels, thanks to a rising Iberian and French hat industry, and British wage demands. In England, the decision of farmers to take up small-scale hat-making followed from hard times. In America, it was more often entrepreneurial choice, responding to the admixture of opportunity and leisure. What was contained in a hat in the early republic? Elegance and achievement, opportunity and gumption, poverty and alienation, uniformity and individualism—depending on where one stood.

There was great risk, too. As the raw materials of hat making grew expensive and scarce, both furs and finished hats substituted for currency in trade. For consumers, hats not only symbolized station and wealth; they were readily pawned or resold when times got tight. As well, unlike other clothing before 1850, hats could be mass produced, stacked up by size in shops, and sold ready-made. Economies of scale meshed here with the joy of impulse buying: making hats was almost like printing money.

All those benefits, though, bowed down to Dame Fashion. A hat held exchange value only so long as it was in style, and styles changed swiftly. With global production controlled from just a few sites—the environs of London, Paris, and New York—and competition between hatting firms fierce, both local merchants and metropolitan hat makers had to time markets precisely. Put in seasonal orders early, and a man got stuck with scads of outmoded hats. Send


46 Wendy A. Woloson, In Hock: Pawning in America from Independence through the Great Depression (Chicago, 2010); Zakim, Ready-Made Democracy; Edward M. Woolley, A Century of Hats and the Hats of the Century (Danbury, Conn., 1923), 12, 14, 16; Henderson, Top Hat, 54.
salesmen out to the hinterland late, and more aggressive competitors snatched up lucrative contracts.

Even steady Steele had to reckon with evanescent, gambling firms like Cay and Aveilhe, who imported fifty cases of hats on a speculation in 1853, inviting all to find a color, size, and price to suit from their dockside crates. The upshot was that between manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers, and fellows further afield, bargains were struck within a brief span each season, sending hat production at the North or in Europe roaring to life suddenly, making men labor furiously for eight or ten weeks, and then watching the process peter out as orders shipped. The boom and bust of capitalism’s economic cycle were built into the hat trade by design.47

Come 1820, war and fashion had both segmented and integrated the Atlantic hat market. The fall of New France, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars all served to bisect British and French hatting networks.48 Likewise, between 1776 and 1815, revolution, embargo, and war split Americans off from English markets and producers. Of contrary and equal importance, though, was the advent of the top hat.

Networks of hat production and exchange shattered in these years, not least because of Anglo-American fears of feminization.49 By the late 1700s, French and Italian fashion had shrunk men’s hats into tiny bicornes and tricorneres, meant to be tucked under the arm to avoid

47 Corner, “The Tyranny of Fashion,” 166-175.


distracting from the splendid wigs men wore. Almost inevitably, amid growing antipathy to all things French, that *chapeau bras* style wore out, and with the arrest in 1797 of an English hatter named Heathcote—or Holbrooke—or Heatherington—who is said to have alarmed the citizenry by riding about with a tall, brightly shellacked hat, a new, decidedly phallic fashion was born. Over the next three generations, top hats appeared in various designs, with crowns ranging from three to twenty inches high, in a range of styles and colors, from the uncompromising stovepipe to narrowly tapered Wellworths. Rival approaches like the broad-brimmed Kossuth hat or the utilitarian bowler sought a place in the 1850s, to little avail. Light “Paris hats,” made of silk, stole a slice of America’s summer trade by the 1840s, but only confirmed existing attitudes toward structure and style. Whether made of fur, wool, or silk, any man of mark had to have his “beaver,” though by mid-century only the best (and most old-fashioned) hats still contained any scrap of that creature. Now men scrambled after the latest styles, hoping to blend in with the best of local society—not too flash or *avant-garde*. No wonder, a century on, that the top hat was still *de rigueur* for formal attire, the requisite symbol of masculine power and attainment.50

In the antebellum era, those who bet hard on the top hat trend reaped brilliant rewards. But who could guess which way fashion would tend? Combinations and varieties of materials, height and tapering of crowns, characteristics and length of brim, dye color and finish transformed a single pattern into a vast array of styles. Some caught on for a season: rough white beavers looked intermittently rakish in the 1830s and later. Others flopped badly: red silk hats drew crowds in Paris, but derision beyond. Entrepreneurs were often mere gamblers with a product that, bafflingly, hit big. In Charleston, the proof of that process was Zalmon Wildman.

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Across the 1820s and ’30s, the central theme of the correspondence of Wildman and his underlings writing from Charleston to his home base in Connecticut remained the same: plans gone awry, styles all wrong, strong measures needed to right the ship. Sent south from Danbury to sign contracts with local merchants, E. M. Starr took bold steps in 1820, opening a Broad Street store for Wildman’s stock without his say-so. The arrangement was temporary, and “I did not intend to keep it secret,” Starr insisted, “as it was a matter of Experiment with me unaccompanied with any risque & wholly fine Hats.” Most important, there would be no “hazard”: “I assure you not a single Hat will be credited in consigning.”

What led Starr to this step was his customers’ readiness to pay cash on demand. Presented with an array of hats he admired, one well-heeled patron noted that the usual terms were twelve months’ credit. No, drawled the clerk—“he sold for nothing but cash,” and instanter, “the reply was Cash it was.” What a stunner to merchants used to contriving all sorts of bridges of barter, credit, and auction to keep trade flowing. “The Broad Street Establishment” was in their pocket, and so the trend was set; Starr’s “neighbours who have heretofore sold a good many English Hats grumble very much”—as well they might. How could locals hope to carry on a stable business when an outsider drove the lane, disrupting ties between merchant and client, bulldozing competition with outlandish (and, some said, second-rate) styles?

Under Starr’s manager, William Waters, the Wildman store bumped along, buffeted by contingencies of weather and wealth, looking to make local fashion. In 1824, Waters noted, “all King street came out in the Franklin” style of hat, “with the exception of those that I most wanted to see and the weather is so cold they look as saucy as you please and fear Nothing.” By year’s end, though, the shop was running mostly on a credit basis, trying to expand ties with

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51 E. M. Starr to Zalmon Wildman, May 15, 1820, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL.
52 E. M. Starr to Zalmon Wildman, May 14, 1820, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL.
piedmont merchants any way it could. Writing north about sales and trends, Waters and Starr described capitalism in its purest terms: the stocks they worried over were stocks of hats, and the way their value fluctuated according to competitors’ decisions, the whims of fashion, and the availability of cash. News that the patrons of other hatters had gone broke roused no rejoicing—especially since Jacob Lazarus, one of Wildman’s chief local buyers, had also reneged. By the spring of 1825, Yankee rivals like Dan Boughton were reduced to making fashion for Charlestonians by “Sticking a Hat on their Head while walking past his Store.” Sometimes the ploy worked. More often, second-rate “castors” were cast off, as hat shops generally became known for hard-sell tactics and dubious wares.53

“Tom Tickler” mocked Boughton in verse, describing mercantile methods locals recognized as commonplace, especially in the retail trade: the “notorious deceiver” in his doorway, chirping at passers-by, who pulled them “by the shoulder and arms” into his shop “with a smile of contempt.” The next step was to pass off “muskrat and wool” as the “finest of beavers.” Thankfully, the satirist argued, Starr, Wildman, Waters and their wares were made of better stuff.54 Yet any hatter knew what drove a fellow to desperate measures in a market where “complaints of drought, sorry crops, hard times & scarcity of money are daily ding donged by everyone we meet.” By 1828, Wildman’s lieutenants had gained credit from Connecticut kin, set up on their own account, and quickly gone bankrupt. So did the rival Dibble family, and others besides. “[T]here is no business in which a knowledge of the business with care and Judgment is so necessary and so well rewarded,” Nathan Wildman declared, “and there is not a business that

53 William Waters to E. M. Starr, October 31, 1824, E. M. Starr to Zalmon Wildman, February 10, 21, 1825, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL.

54 John A. Jackson to Zalmon Wildman, May 17, 1825, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL. That was a risky claim: Boughton came from the same community as Wildman and was related to the Starrs by marriage.
without it a man can loan so much money before he is aware of it.”55 Bad hats and easy credit would sink any ship.

Across the Nullification era, Wildman and his managers tried to guess whether it would be tall hats or short, brims broad or narrow, colors drab or bright, whether production should be increased or cut off quickly, whether debtors deserved a season of forbearance or the hammer of the law. Fashion, finance, and salesmanship mingled with the vagaries of the cotton trade. By 1835, Wildman found himself cut out of both the wholesale and retail lines by New York rivals. On Broad Street, “[c]ompetition was high,” prices low. Dollar values for sales swelled, yet the mountain of hats needing heads to keep the firm afloat grew unabated. Elected to Congress from Connecticut in 1834, Wildman died the next year. Thereby he missed the 1838 fire that devastated Charleston trade but left his own shop standing, and the reshuffling of partnerships between his heirs and the Dibbles, Waterses, and Starrs which followed from the great rebuilding. All manner of hard-pressed men flooded into Charleston at the end of the decade, looking to carry a hod, lay brick, and maybe rise up like the charred city itself—or at least use high wages to buy signs of higher status. After a decent meal, a few rounds, and a tumble, that often meant a better hat. High and low, there was money making at that moment for men ready to smile and snatch it up. By 1840, Wildman’s Charleston manager announced himself “very tired of my business this year.”56 Mired in the fourth year of depression, cast down and pulled up by social crisis and regeneration, he spoke for the city’s merchants almost as one.

The Panic of 1837, the great fire, various local floods and droughts of succeeding years, and the

55 Richard Allen to Zalmon Wildman, July 23, 1827, Zalmon Wildman to Frederick L. Wildman, January 13, 1828, Nathan H. Wildman to Zalmon Wildman, March 15, 1828, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL.

56 Nathan H. Wildman to Frederick L. Wildman, February 21, 1835, Lemuel G. Starr to Frederick L. Wildman, March 20, 1835, Samuel G. Starr to Frederick L. Wildman, February 4, 1840, Zalmon Wildman Papers, SCL; Charleston Courier, December 19, 21, 1835.
gradual easing of credit that revived agriculture and commerce in South Carolina between 1844 and 1854 advanced central tendencies in the hat trade. Shops became fewer, bigger, more stable, and quite dependent on the same Northern and European sources of production as their competitors (see table 11.1). Location, pricing, stock, salesmanship, and capital resources made all the difference between those who stood or fell. Virgil Dibble, Fred Fanning, Henry Williams, and a few others jockeyed for position, but by mid-decade Steele had won the high ground.

Come 1860, after two decades of striving, he was semi-retired in the parishes, writing the eye-catching copy which drew customers to his shop. By that stage his formula for success was well established in local consumer commerce. Men who mastered his methods of enticement—like Bird, Cook, Courtenay, or Charles F. Jackson—rose in tandem. Those who did not usually sank.

Failure plunged those types most often back into the pool of hard-worked penmen from whence they came, a reversal doubly alarming in the 1850s. The “perpetual struggle to raise himself” above “the regions of want and need” had failed for these men, who found every opening for the most minor clerkship now “thronged by aspirants.” The case of “C” was typical: a young gentleman with three years’ clerking under his belt, he determined to “carr[y] on business for himself,” and promptly failed. By the autumn of secession, he was hunting any situation “in some wholesale establishment, counting-house, broker’s office, or any house where a Clerk is required.” The odds were against him. The “supply of clerks is greater than the demand,” Henry Denison explained simply, and that imbalance only grew in the late 1850s.57

What clerk could account for—or simply count—the scores who came to Charleston each month, by sea, rail, and road, seeking fortune with a nib and a glad hand? How to discount former fortunes who had risen to a higher rung, only to come pelting down a few years on,

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57 Charleston Mercury, November 19, 1860. Similar examples dot the pages of city papers. See, Charleston Courier, December 5, 1853, January 17, 1854; Charleston Mercury, October 2, 1860; Henry M. Denison, Lectures to Business Men; Delivered in St. Peter's Church, Charleston, So. Ca. (Charleston, 1858), 17, 66-67.
### TABLE 11.1

**CHARLESTON HAT SHOPS, 1840-1860**

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**Sources:** Fay, *Charleston Directory* (1840); Honour, *Directory of the City of Charleston... 1849* (1849); Bagget, *Director of the City of Charleston* (1852); Gazlay, *Charleston City and Business Directory for 1855* (1855); Mears and Turnbull, *The Charleston Directory* (1859); Ferslew, *Directory of the City of Charleston* (1860).
dashing dreams of wealth and stature? For the ever expanding army of scribes, tallymen, and salesclerks who kept Charleston firms going, the steadily narrowing chances each faced seemed ever more obvious. Without some extraordinary event, the leap from clerkship to ownership looked all but impossible. Most young men halted, hoping merely to hold the rung they grasped, gain the boss’s good will, and seek a salary and position as would win a wife and, by middle age, a home of one’s own. That broad redefinition of petit-bourgeois success was reflected in the 1840s and ’50s by the changing nature of hat play on Charleston’s streets, and the sweeping revaluation of men’s hats Steele sponsored.  

Gaining “middle-class” status, then, was akin to surviving shipwreck—a fate which terrified antebellum Americans. Historians have missed the thrashing, drowning quality of class formation here, not least because they have paid so little attention to men’s hats, bobbing on the surface. As material objects, hats performed potentially contradictory functions of covering—visibly portraying power and identity; communication—staking social claims of achievement and aspiration; and concealment—hiding flaws, doubts, and contradictions from


60 But see Asa Briggs, Victorian Things (Chicago, 1989), 229-254.
public view. That multivalent character has been notably absent from work on “middle class” culture and consciousness in the Old South, a social group shaped by the interplay of achievement, aspiration, and fear.

In Charleston, such men and women belonged neither to the peripatetic slaveholding gentry—though some held slaves and could claim elite kin, nor to the ranks of manufacturers, factors, and finance capitalists—though some held bank or factory stock, or paid wages to manual or clerical underlings. The fortunes of these middling merchants, lawyers, bankers, and such were wholly wrapped up with the fate of the slaveocracy and capitalist development both. Yet they lacked the power and agency planters and bourgeois possessed precisely because of their fluctuating class position. That showed plainly anytime the economy turned down and the pleading began. And yet their small-fry status shielded them from greater risks and rewards. Their homes were smaller than the men they served, possessions less fine, their outlook more materialistic, calculations closer. With less to lose, they placed smaller bets, won smaller stakes, drawing back instinctively—in politics as in finance—from radical risk. Such circumstances hardly created anything like a cohesive class identity.

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That point was doubly true for Charleston’s petit bourgeoisie, buffeted by centrifugal and centripetal forces from above, below, and abroad. Clerks, porters, accountants, and the like—the hundreds of marginal men who depended on their pens and wits to win bread—were always a transitional class, teetering between productive property ownership and persistent proletarian status. Across the antebellum era, their self-predicted path had been upward, or on to greener pastures elsewhere. By the 1850s, though, men worried that they might never step beyond wage labor.

Either way, quite literally, no man who mattered could move in Charleston—up or down, in or out, through its streets or across its thresholds—without a proper hat. Neither was there any way for men of merit or aspiration to interact publicly without misgiving or recrimination, except by recourse to a topper. Hats stood out like a neon sign, declaring and affirming a man’s social position—who and what he was, where he stood, where he thought he was headed. Any who pondered Ben Franklin’s ostentatious coonskin, Yankee Doodle’s confounding feather, or the Jacobin cap of liberty understood as much. Across the 1850s, though, as the gap between hopes and fears widened, choosing and using the right hat without error or fraud seemed increasingly difficult.

Moving through Charleston’s streets in 1860, the hats men met demanded that they confront these questions of difference, division, stratification, and conflict. For as much as they prized distinction, rank, and order, elite and minor Charlestonians dreaded the disunity that

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seemed to follow inevitably in their train. More than this, they feared that, however successful their efforts to overcome internal divisions might appear, there was a species of trickery and deceit specially thriving in hats—that odd conjuncture of play, theatre, commerce, and subversion Walter Steele’s ad described.

The sheer variety of headgear one encountered passing along Broad or Church—occupational, politico-military, associational, fashion-conscious, class-demonstrative, and more—signaled how utterly plagued with divisions civic life had become. In the comic theatre of the day, “chapeaugraphers” entertained audiences by mashing a felt circle into various hat shapes and transforming their features and behavior to mirror stereotyped wearers. That mocking species of hat play was two centuries old, building from a subversive charlatan whose skill at shifting personal style to fit the hat he wore electrified seventeenth-century Paris.  

Popular success transformed the wooden sword Tabarin wore into a seigneur’s blade, proving the point of his *commedia dell’arte* exactly: character was in no way fixed, honor could be bought and sold, identity was malleable, multiple, usually misapprehended. The hat made the man, audiences roared, hailing the glorious transformation of character and destiny both.

But the lesson of that performance was instantly obvious to anyone strolling Charleston’s streets of a late afternoon. The slave who doffed his stocking cap before the seat of power or went about bare-headed, the printer who passed down Meeting with a rectangle of newsprint atop his head, the sailor or drayman who worked the wharves of East Bay under a broad-brimmed straw hat, or the factory hand trudging back from the railroad shops north of Calhoun, a laborer’s cap pulled low upon his brow, each silently declared who he was, admitted where he ranked within the social order. Likewise, the banker with an old-fashioned beaver, the Broad-

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Street lawyer in his stylish silk hat, or the respectable mechanic sporting an outlandish stovepipe. Hats ordered all men, grouping and dividing, conferring essential information about attachment and social identity in exchange for the enactments of paternalist reciprocity and affirmation of the social order hat-wearing implied and compelled. But suppose some of those radically different heads slipped under a stylish beaver somehow? Or that the honorable and respectable men who claimed such hats suddenly saw them knocked off by the dozens, by economic calamity or social disorder: what then? Did the hat make the man with the topper in the gutter?

Men went to great lengths to identify particular hats with specific heads, establishing complex rules of social recognition and personal deportment to regulate and valorize hat play. Agreement on who should wear what where and how was socially negotiated over the course of decades, and each turn of fashion’s wheel cast matters in doubt for another season. However trivial such wrangling appears today, antebellum men accorded hats almost magical power over personal fortunes. Sudden change happened at the drop of a hat or was pulled out of a hat. Secrets were safe under hats, and liars and fools talked through hats. A man fooled had his hat—“the wool”—pulled over his eyes. To belong somewhere, men hung their hats; to quit a task, they hung hats up. Nor was hat play merely metaphorical. Alarmed by the social ills supposedly stemming from men’s bodies overheating, the Yankee reformer William Alcott strove to turn down the gender temperature through hat reform. Bodily warmth encouraged sexual wantonness, he insisted, and wearing “thick, hot” top hats was “as wrong as wrong can be.” Light straw hats, “porous” hats, or going hatless like the “Todas, or Tojadas, a somewhat ancient and numerous tribe of the East Indies” was best.⁶⁷ Hardly: passing the hat in support was one

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thing, choking down the diet of Graham crackers, water, and greens Alcott prescribed to curb concupiscence, quite another. No fellow of sense was going to give up his hat.

Momentary uncovering, though, was both right and good. The custom of hat-tipping advertised social worth between elites and men of lesser means, affirming unity and difference in the same gesture. Such greetings saluted the man through his hat, yet, in truth, no man of merit in Charleston owned a single hat capable of unifying all his disparate identities. Washington Albergottie donned one hat when he went to work as a ship broker’s clerk down on the East Bay, another when he did duty with the Vigilant Fire Engine Company. Henry Baker alternated between the headgear of a wharf-side coal merchant, treasurer of the St. Patrick’s Benevolent Society, and a private in a volunteer militia company. John Britton wore a printer’s cap in the *Mercury* pressroom, a higher hat as president of the militant Charleston Typographical Union, and different headgear when he stood in the ranks of a local Minute Men formation. When Robert Wallace died in an industrial accident in 1854, he was followed to the grave by the members of the Yates’ Tent collective of the Odd Fellows’ society, the Palmetto Division of the Sons of Temperance, the Palmetto Fire Company, his co-workers at Cameron, Mustard, and Company, the prominent manufacturing firm, and “a concourse of friends.” At times, the identities of such men and their female attendants meshed and complemented each another; at others, they clashed, betraying contradictions.

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Still other Charlestonians employed hats as a form of disguise in aid of action, such as Jeremiah Casey, Thomas Maher, and Frederick Shouboe, all members of the city’s undercover detective squad. Private citizens used hats to deceive, too, like the members of the South Carolina Association, who spied on dangerous-looking newcomers in the name of public safety. Across the antebellum era, con men, crooks, and covert abolitionists roiled the city again and again, each displaying appropriate signs of honor or gentility, each set upon fleecing the unwary—or worse. The men with hats pulled low at wharf-side and near the city’s train depots looked to root out such dangers.

Crude social markers simplified that task: women’s hats unmistakably declared their sex, not least by their uselessness for social communication. Straw hats and workingmen’s caps signaled masculinity, but shifted wearers instantly from the circle of honor to respectability’s margin, or beyond. Dressed to the nines—or elevens--African Americans might doff fine hats to each other on the street, but that sort of ritual was laughed off by whites as ridiculous imitation, or resolved with fists when blacks seemed uppity. Except where there was strength in numbers or white rule grew lax, few risked the consequences a stylish beaver might entail. Hatless men, black or white, could be dismissed out of hand.

But, too often, one hat looked confoundingly like another. Charleston men relied on that broad uniformity as they sought a chance within the ranks of the respectable and honorable.

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69 Charleston Courier, January 25, 1854.


71 Shane White and Graham White, Stylin’: African American Expressive Culture from Its Beginnings to the Zoot Suit (Ithaca, 1999). Monica L. Miller, Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity (Durham, 2009) sees styling as subversive, though her evidence suggests that whites more often saw “Mungo Macaronis” as ridiculous.

72 So, in Shakespeare, hatlessness signals subservience, speechlessness, or even madness--real or feigned. Alan R. Young, Hamlet and the Visual Arts, 1709-1900 (Cranbury, NJ, 2002), 148-149, 288, 320.
Watching which hats men chose, how they handled them, following suit, and trading signals of social acceptance was central to male social interaction among elite, bourgeois, and petit-bourgeois tribes. Figuring who belonged or did not, men took cues from local custom as well as the dozens of manuals on manners showered down on Americans in these years, and summed up in novels, poems, and newspaper articles.

A man’s first task was to top himself correctly, and to see that others did likewise—a difficult business. For all their seeming uniformity, some hats suited some heads better than others. “[T]here is character in the hat,” insisted Robert De Valcourt, “and in the mode of wearing it.” “[M]uch judgment” was required in its choice, agreed another guide, since “[t]he hat characterises the appearance much”:

the contour of the head is greatly affected by it, as well as the age of the wearer; a broad-brimmed hat adds considerably in appearance to the age, and tends to give a look of sedateness; and a narrow-brimmed hat has just a contrary effect. The look of stature is greatly influenced too by the hat: a low crown considerably decreases the height; and a high-crown one greatly adds to it. Thus much judgment is called for in the choice of a hat.

Most important, a hat “to look well, should always have a look of newness, as no one article of dress casts a greater gloom over the rest than a shabby hat.”

No personal detail so shouted the distinctions of social class, authors harped, and the imagined differences of moral character underpinning those divisions. Some hats were always “smooth and shining; others “rough and dusty from the first day of… newness.” A “handsome” hat—“well-made, well-brushed, moleskin or beaver”—signified gentility and self-worth because that was the sort men of taste and character would naturally choose. Cruder men selected cruder

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hats, both from occupational necessity and “phrenological development.” Beyond this, good hats cost good money and, unless a man of modest means meant to “rush to inevitable ruin,” he would embrace the economic morality of modest dress. In any case, the stylish beaver and other signs of “a man of fashion” were “grievous encumbrances to a vulgar man,” unable to sustain the assertions of class and personal attainment his hat declared. The gentleman who wore a “tall specimen of the joint of a stove pipe” had

an entirely different mental organization from this spectacled old gentleman who wears his hat more particularly to protect his head from sun, rain, and cold, and takes the form he supposes best adapted to that purpose. Different from either [is] this more tasteful man of fashion, who dresses near the mode, without being in excess.  

Different hats on different heads drew different responses. Yet all looked out for signs of poverty and failure. “Wear a shabby hat a few days,” De Valcourt mocked, “and see how many of your friends will grow near-sighted.” And rightly so, perhaps: the fellow with “the rim of his hat turned up, and the crown knocked in” was bound to be “a sluggard, a knave, or a tippler.”  

“Make a point of buying a good hat,” another writer warned. “One proper fur hat worth four or five dollars, when a year old, looks more respectable than a silk one bought yesterday.” Other manuals disagreed. “The fashionable fur hat, in its innumerable but always ugly forms, is… an absurd and unsightly covering for the head,” Sam Wells sniffed, “and it is hardly less uncomfortable and unhealthful than ugly.” Sensible men donned “fine, soft, and more picturesque felt hats,” he declared, or straw hats in summer. Anything too “out-of-the-way” betrayed a man as a fool, a shopman, or a pickpocket. There was much to recommend a “rakish hat” or even a cap in terms of fit and purpose, yet “fashion and custom” trumped “ugliness and

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75 [De Valcourt], Illustrated Manners Book, 40, 44, 454; “The Morals of Dress,” The Southern Light, 1 (1856): 58; A Member of the Philadelphia Bar, The American Chesterfield, or Way to Wealth, Honour, and Distinction; Being Selections from the Letters of Lord Chesterfield to his Son; and Extracts from other Eminent Authors, on the Subject of Politeness: with Alterations and Additions Suited to the Youth of the United States (Philadelphia, 1828), 49.
unfitness”: however “hard, unpicturesque, and inconvenient,” there were “twenty hats to one cap” in any well-dressed assemblage. “[H]igh crown or low crown—a wide or narrow brim—a stiff or flexible material—a sharp or rounded outline,” the hat “harmonizes with our modern costume,” serving its central class purpose. If a man walked well, behaved well in company, “wears his hat well, moves his head properly and his arms gracefully,” that was “almost all that is necessary” for social success.\textsuperscript{76}

But what a task that was: however apparently well-hatted, distinctions appeared as soon as men sprang into action. “[M]anners are as much a symptom of disposition,” one divine warned Charleston businessmen, “as you may learn from the sign over a shop door what is sold there.” Most comical was the sight of the “clown” posing as a gentleman, quite “at a loss to know what to do with his hat when it is not upon his head.” Too many compounded the error by forgetting to remove their hats at all. When entering a private dwelling or public building, writers urged, “\textit{take off your hat}; it is only a proper mark of respect to your own class, towards whom you should \textit{pay} the same deference you \textit{exact} from others.” That impulse would be instinctive for a true gentleman, “even if there is no one present but himself.” Its inverse signaled “vice and immorality.”\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{76} [De Valcourt], \textit{Illustrated Manners Book}, 30, 40, 44-45, 454-455; George S. Weaver, \textit{Hopes and Helps for the Young of Both Sexes. Relating to the Formation of Character, Choice of Avocation, Health, Amusement, Music, Conversation, Cultivation of Intellect, Moral Sentiment, Social Affection, Courtship, and Marriage} (New York, 1855), 22-23; \textit{How to Do It}: \textit{Or, Directions for Knowing and Doing Everything Needful} (New York, 1864), 12; Samuel R. Wells, \textit{How to Behave: A Pocket Manual of Republican Etiquette and Guide to Correct Personal Habits} (New York, 1856), 37; Charles W. Day, \textit{Hints on Etiquette and the Usages of Society; with a Glance at Bad Habits. Adapted to American Society by the Author} (Boston, 1844), 62, 64-65; Member of the Philadelphia Bar, \textit{American Chesterfield}, 54.

Social strivers might be guided by respectful servants. For the recalcitrant or obtuse, there were stronger measures still. In the theaters of Europe, one writer declared, patrons seated behind a man refusing to uncover would knock off the offending hat, call assistance “to compel a conformity,” or “ask him for his address.” The question of hat or no hat, then, might turn to a point of honor, even a duel. Others sought simpler solutions. Wells cited the Yankee farm servant bribed into uncovering in his employer’s home. A dollar a month was the price John won for making what he saw as a sign of inferiority. But that reading of ritual was all wrong, Wells explained: the respect due a “fellow citizen and co-sovereign” offset any discount due to “accident of… position.” Matters of wealth or trade could never negate Americans’ status as “men and equals.”

Perhaps: but not in Charleston. And, certainly, men’s mishandling of hats supplied a worrisome measure of republican ideals in antebellum life. Even men who looked like gentlemen had no idea what to do with their hats once they bared their heads. In church, warned De Valcourt, men should hold their hats under the left arm or with the bottom turned inward: “[d]o not let it be supposed that you are passing it around for a contribution.” In drawing rooms, dining rooms, and most other interiors, hat-holding signaled social incompetence. “In putting down the hat,” cautioned one maven, “we should not do it carelessly.” Still worse was to follow those who parked their hats on a knee or sat stupidly “twirling their hats.”

Proper conduct outdoors was doubly challenging for those lacking “easy and graceful deportment,” yet the central gesture of masculine courtesy remained the same. Uncovering the

78 A Manual of Politeness, 140; Member of the Philadelphia Bar, American Chesterfield, 202; Wells, How to Behave, 142-144.

79 Day, Hints on Etiquette, 50; [De Valcourt], Illustrated Manners Book, 126, 247; Hervey, Principles of Courtesy, 124, 237; Elisabeth Celnart, The Gentleman and Lady’s Book of Politeness and Propriety of Deportment, Dedicated to the Youth of Both Sexes (Boston, 1833), 66; Member of the Philadelphia Bar, American Chesterfield, 137.
head to elite white women or men deserving particular respect came naturally to a proper gentleman. Strivers toward decent manners had to be on guard: forgetfulness would not excuse failure to recognize and greet one’s peers. Beyond that, though, the rules of salutation grew complex and disputed. A gentleman “of the old school” remained uncovered while speaking with ladies in the street, holding his hat “in the most graceful manner he can command, until requested as many as three times to put it on.” “[M]odern beaux” raised their hats slightly and thought their duty done.80

The key, argued most manuals, was to appear “well bred and agreeable” in company, willing to “sacrifice your own ease and comfort to add to the enjoyment of others.” Even a fellow of “ordinary appearance and breeding” could be guided toward a monkey-see, monkey-do sort of politeness by following the lead of well-mannered peers. Nor should neophytes feel too abashed at getting rules wrong. Figuring out who to salute and how was abstruse. “Well,” asked De Valcourt, “which hand will you use in raising the hat?”

Both—not both at once; but sometimes one, sometimes the other…. It is a question of position, and grace of grouping. All these cases are governed, either by evident utilities, or by esthetic rules. Raise the hat with the hand farthest from the person saluted. If the lady is passing at your right, use the left hand. It presents the front of your figure. If you use the right, she gets a side view, and you are concealed by your arm.

*How to Do It* did it differently: in meeting a male acquaintance, the manual declared, “you bow, raising your hat slightly with the left hand, which leaves your right at liberty to shake hands if you stop.” With women, no action should be taken except in response, when the “bow must be lower, and your hat carried further from the head.” Men ought to be ready to make that courteous swoop: though a woman “may possibly choose to “cut” you, and thus place you in a

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very awkward position,” except in dealing with cads, “she certainly should not do such a thing.”

Cutting—deliberately refusing to acknowledge a salute—was a virtual blood sport in the antebellum era, especially as men’s social fortunes rose and fell. Both the fellow pitched up and the man cast down faced the same problem: reckoning one’s immediate peers, superiors, and inferiors, and acknowledging them politely without miscalculating the measure of deference due on each side. Who was to say when a man was slighted, or simply over-sensitive? Should a fellow calibrate his social relations on the basis of his current standing, his previous position, or possible future attainments? Was wealth, kinship, or social standing the key to self-situation? And which standard should one apply to those one met on the street? Should gossip and rumor be factored in? Calculations of marriage prospects, financial woes, or friend-of-a-friend utility? Long before men had credit scores, Charlestonians analyzed and announced social capital through hat play. Cutting rendered a fellow hatless—unmanned, invisible, no account. It demanded that honorable men dishonor him. Respectable men should pay no respect. Rightly stage-managed, refusing to tip one’s hat was the ultimate insult.

Proper hat-play should vary “according to the rank of the person you meet, or the terms of acquaintance you may sustain with him,” asserted one critic. “With common acquaintances, a slight bow, or a graceful wave of the hand, answers the purpose. More distant acquaintances require the hat to be touched or just raised; and in saluting ladies you should take the hat off.” A Manual of Politeness promised that men might learn gentility through practice, promoting nods and bows according to “the circumstances of the case”: some meetings earned “a bow without

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81 [De Valcourt], Illustrated Manners Book, 120; Smith, Book of Manners, 18; How to Do It, 13; Wells, How to Behave, xiii, 101.

82 The Cutter, in Five Lectures upon the Art and Practice of Cutting Friends, Acquaintances, and Relations (Boston, 1808).
touching the hat; in others, we touch the hat.” In more special cases, lifting the hat or even uncovering was *de rigueur*. Other writers cited the example of George Washington, punctilious about removing his hat in reply to the greeting of even the least of men. Salute a slave? “I should not wish to have him outdo me in politeness,” the president explained. A bow or even a tip of the hat was “a note drawn at sight,” the saying went: once acknowledged, “you must pay the full amount” of the debt it betokened.  

Simply walking down the street, then, required a gentleman to reckon instantly and accurately the social positions of those he met, to discriminate between those who mattered and those who did not, to calibrate his own social standing in relation to theirs, and to triangulate an appropriate outward response to their approach. How to respond to the attentions of others was vexing, especially where woman were involved—in such cases, a gentleman would not acknowledge his closest male friend unless the female that fellow accompanied first saluted him. Simpler, but potentially more fraught were those moments when a man met a fellow he knew, alone or in company with other men, where no woman’s presence could shape the encounter. Who ought to acknowledge who, and how? Suppose a man nodded, or touched his hat, or even uncovered deferentially, and was left standing hat-in-hand, unacknowledged? That was simply the risk one ran, *The Perfect Gentleman* explained. Ignorance and stolidity threatened all about, yet a gentleman would “never omit a punctilious observance of the rule of politeness” for fear of being rebuffed.


There must be “some distinction” made in dealing with different encounters, George Hervey argued, based on the different relationships each meeting unfolded. But personal feelings should be put aside here, unless a man had made himself socially infamous: at worst, “a careful but distant, formal and chilling politeness” established social distance silently. “We must not shake hands with everyone,” most agreed, “nor doff the hat to all. To some we need only touch the hat, to others waive the hand; to others we make a mere inclination of the head.” Saluting all with great cordiality would subvert the whole project of politeness.86

But subversion was just what some men aimed at. Charleston fops and dandies were hooted at even in the best streets, and when honorable or respectable types ventured into rougher parts of town, it might be open season, no matter how ordinary they looked. “What a shocking bad hat!” some wag would bray out, and soon the taunt was taken up by “a hundred discordant throats.” That game, which first convulsed London, linked hats with politics directly. Enlarging the franchise in 1832 led parliamentary candidates to try a hard-sell approach to campaigning. One hatter grew notorious for trying to bribe voters, calling out, “What a shocking bad hat you have got; call at my warehouse, and you shall have a new one!” Alas, his corrupt generosity backfired. On election day, opponents tramped the streets, shouting “What a shocking bad hat!” in derision and defiance. Soon the cry swept over the city, denouncing cheats and scoundrels high and low. From men who could be bought to crooks who did the buying, the slang swelled its meaning to encompass villains and pretenders of all sorts, fellows who put on the dog,

86 Hervey, Principles of Courtesy, 192; [De Valcourt], Illustrated Manners Book, 122.
behaved punctiliously, or just looked out of place. Wellington himself cursed the first Reform Parliament as full of “shocking bad hats.”

Before long, British and American hat merchants strove to uncouple the connection between hats and politics the “shocking bad hat” made, deploying the cry simply to drive up sales. How could a man with “a shocking bad hat” gain entry to a respectable hotel, asked a Boston paper. Who could consider him “well-dressed?” “We can conceive of a man’s wearing a bad hat and being a good citizen, an exemplary father…, an honest man, and even a Christian,” declared another editor, but “the prima facie evidence is against it.” Drunkards wore bad hats. The notorious trickster P. T. Barnum wore a “shocking” one. “[W]ithout a single exception,” criminals were “distinguished by the badness of their hats.” No wonder bad-hatted men were “objects of public suspicion,” unable to “stand up like a man in the presence of men.” The way to repair one’s fortunes was to go shopping. Even the first step of reforming a convict was “to give him a new hat,” as a prompt toward “the emotion—it may be a deceptive one—of respectability.” Knocking off the “shocking bad hat” of a passing stranger, replacing it with a new beaver and offering a glowing compliment, more than one merchant made the coins jingle. Some called that strategy improper, even criminal, but efficacy was all the ethics trade required. “Hann’t a man a right to sell his goods the best he can?” asked one for all.

Sale or no sale, there was pleasure—and class vengeance—in hat-knocking and verbal derision. Melville’s Ishmael only went to sea because he felt the old pull of “deliberately


88 Charleston Courier, September 17, 1851, May 20, 1854. (Abbeville, S. C.) Independent Press, April 30, 1858; (Anderson, S. C.) Anderson Intelligencer, November 1, 1860; (Abbeville, S. C.) Independent Press, April 30, 1858; (Charleston) Southern Patriot, November 24, 1832, March 12, 1845. See also Edgefield Advertiser, February 12, 1852; Charleston Mercury, May 9, 1859.
stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off” washing over him once more. 89 Before long, that became common sport: any hat-wearing man might be hunted by cap-wearing “ruffians,” mocked, and harassed. “The obnoxious hat was often snatched from his head and thrown in the gutter by some practical joker,” Charles Mackay recalled, “then raised, covered with mud, upon the end of a stick, for the admiration of the spectators, who held their sides with laughter,” and bawled of bad hats. The prudent man ignored provocation, but so did the coward, a coincidence which only redoubled the mob’s jeering. It was one thing to parody the extravagance of a fop or an “out-and-out” gentleman in the street or the press. Such men almost seemed to seek ridicule through dress and deportment. But the “shocking bad hat” mania sought more than satire. It targeted middle- and upper-class men for their assertions of class position, threatening hat, man, class, and all with sudden violence. Marx attacked Ricardo’s political economy and Hegel’s philosophy in just these terms. “If the Englishman transforms men into hats,” he mocked, “the German transforms hats into ideas.90

From the heights of philosophy, a broad swath of writers—from conservative to Romantic and beyond—supported that first knock. Men were more than scarecrows, insisted Blackwood’s Magazine, shaped by the clothes fastened on them. Regardless of dress, some led “the life of a hog” by “the irresistible urgencies of instinct.” Others aimed higher in station because they were higher in nature, and their hat mattered not a whit. Hogs could not be “metamorphosed” into humans “by any amount of washing, or the advantages of apparel.” Conversely, Carlyle declared, the tailor required retailoring—or undressing—to reveal his truer,
higher nature. Unclouded by hat, the hero would shine forth. Or the villain: man was more than
“an embodiment of the divine idea of cloth,” replied Charleston’s Stephen Hurlbut, but was there
finally anything underneath the hats of many men except a Frankenstein’s monster, debasing
manhood and counterfeiting identity? Either way, men were never nearly hidden by the hats
they wore. Even Charleston’s “Great Men” were hardly “all genuine,” another poem agreed.
The modern gentleman parading King Street was a charlatan, “[f]orever dressed up to the eyes /
As if his true state to disguise.” For all their splendid “five-dollar hats,” the satirist concluded,
and disdain toward “plebians” and trademen, high-living “lords” were often flat broke.⁹¹

That jibe called hats bad in the truest sense. Hats were more than ideas: they came with
a price attached, inspiring a complex trigonometry of hats, fraud, and social order. “Be in no
one’s debt for anything so easy to repay as civility,” advice manuals warned.⁹² But when the
claims of genteel superiority a hat made were patently bogus, what was left except to bat that lie
straight into the gutter? Between 1803 and 1860, more than ninety hat shops and manufactories
came and went in Charleston, not least because men purchased hats they never paid for.

The prevailing credit system put double stress on local shopkeepers, who risked wealth
and reputation whenever a customer declared, “charge it.” Masculine identity, social
respectability, and the public voice were all bound up in this imperative, and woe to him who
withheld credit from the fellow who deemed himself “worthy.” Should he refuse the order—
such requests were always phrased as demands, vendors complained—the merchant lost business

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⁹¹ “Clothes and Scarecrows,” Blackwood’s Magazine, 135 (1859): 278; Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus: the Life
and Opinions of Herr Teufelsdrockh (London, 1838); “Carlyle’s Works,” Southern Quarterly Review, 27 (1848): 77-
William G. Simms (Charleston, 1845), 356; Eugene Sue, Jr. [pseud.] The Mysteries of Charleston: A Brief View of
Matters and Things in General, the Internal Arrangements and Progressive Improvements, Past, Present, and
Future, in the Great Metropolis of Charleston, With a Peep into the Various Ramifications of Society in its Several
Aspects, Moral, Social, Political, and Financial (Charleston, 1846), 7-8. See also H. L. J., “Aesthetics of Dress: A

⁹² [De Valcourt], Illustrated Manners Book, 122.
and offended honor in the bargain. Should he fill it and go unpaid, his good name was jeopardized and the hat’s value lost. That double bind forced Charleston hatters to abandon production by the 1840s, putting one after another into bankruptcy or debt servitude to northern suppliers in the decades following. Such losses eroded the economic and social capital of the broader community.93

It had not always been so. Before 1837, credit was an important mechanism of social bonding and class cohesion, promoting a mutualist ethos. “[F]ew persons were in debt then except for property bought,” David Gavin recalled, “and people were generally cautious of going in debt, and when in, tried to get out.” Credit had an equalizing effect on men qualitatively, even as it redistributed funds quantitatively. “Do you pity the poor man, who has no money?” one boy’s copybook exercise asked in 1836. No, came the telling reply, “I pity him who has no credit.” Interdependence—not independence—was the *sine qua non* to upward mobility, and debt, promptly discharged, became a sign of ambition and personal worth. “There is not a District in the State which cannot present hundreds of examples of individuals, now in the enjoyment of wealth, who commenced on small beginnings, *aided by debt*,” argued “Anti-Alarmist” in 1848.94 The loan of work animals, fodder and provisions, even slaves, was common in the countryside, and all but socially obligatory.95 Neighborliness hardly figured in

93 *Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier*, November 13, 1860.

94 Entries of May 31, June 23, 1856, David Gavin Diary, SHC; Lesson for October [17], 1836, Robert B. Boyleston Notebook, in Attorney’s Commonplace Book, Records of Uncertain Provenance, Marion County, SCDAH; *Anti-Alarmist and Charleston in Reply to Objections to Railroads by Anti-Debt* (Charleston, 1848), 6.

95 Entry of May 10, 1860, Lemuel Reid Diary, SCL; J. J. Seibels to J. J. Seibels, May 25, 1845, Seibels Family Papers, SCL; Statements of Alfred Proctor Aldrich, January 1, 1848, January 1, 1851, Lewis Malone Ayer Papers, SCL; Entries of November 15, 29, 1852, Clark Brewer Stewart Journal, SCL; Jesse Hammett to Henry P. Hammett, December 11, 1850, Henry Pinckney Hammett Papers, SCL; S. B. Griffin to Milledge L. Bonham, May 25, 1853, Milledge Luke Bonham Papers, SCL; Entry of October 28, 1855, John Durant Ashmore Farm Journals, SHC. On debt as obligation, see Francis W. Pickens, *An Address, Delivered before the State Agricultural Society of South Carolina, in the Hall of the House of Representatives, November 29, 1849* (Columbia, 1849), 8; John McLean to Benjamin L. McLauchlin, April 25, 1844, W.H. Mears Papers, SCL; The Octogenarian Lady of Charleston, S. C.
here: personal contact and mutual interest ensured that requests were fulfilled and property returned in proper order. Beyond this step, duty in all its forms was an “obligation.” When a merchant or planter accepted another man’s note in promise of payment, put his name to a contract, or guaranteed his neighbor’s bond with his own signature, he vouched not just for questions of creditworthiness, but for the debtor’s character itself, as worthy of trust and rooted in a code of honor.

But the problem of debt and Carolinians’ attitude toward it underwent a profound transformation in the late antebellum period. Formerly, indebtedness had been seen as a natural, transitory part of social life, a relation offering opportunity to borrower and lender both. By mid-century, times had changed. “[L]argely in debt and always pressed by sheriffs into the imminent peril of having my family turned out of doors,” C. W. Miller of Sumterville was no one’s model of the in- or interdependent farmer. “I now finde to be true what I have often heard but never believed,” David Richardson agreed, “(that a man in debt is not a free man), his minde is distressed & his property ever subject to be sacrifised by his creditors and the Lawyers fed upon his labour.” As the burden of lending shifted from private to corporate sources, Carolinians found it increasingly difficult to pay their bills. Debt came to be seen as something to be avoided, yet virtually unavoidable, ensnaring not only the reckless and the indolent, but

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even the thrifty and industrious. The upcountry farmer who had been in debt “all my life,” hounded by creditors, attorneys and sheriffs, became a social commonplace. “What a slave, does an extravagant man, or a heedless man–make of himself,” William Elliott summed up, “when he plunges into debts–or outlives his income.”

Increasingly, Carolinians came to view debt as bondage, crippling estates, chaining choice, corrupting virtue. Despite a barrage of moralizing and analysis, though, sheriffs and debt collectors worked ever more furiously on the eve of Lincoln’s election. All, declared William Gregg, from the richest to the poorest, were in debt to the banks, their factors, hard-run kin, or threadbare neighbors. From benefactor and class ally, the creditor was transformed into a heartless enslaver. The social cohesion debt once offered became irrepressible conflict.

By 1860, too many middling and elite Charlestonians—indeed, much of South Carolina planter society, and its bourgeois/petit-bourgeois lieutenancy--were desperately endangered. While other sections of the slaveocracy enjoyed “flush times,” Carolinians saw their world crumbling about their ears. Not only were whites flooding out of the state; bondpeople were departing in huge numbers. Across the 1850s, the slave population of twenty-four of the state’s twenty-nine districts grew at an average annual rate of one percent or less. Charleston District bled worst of all, dwindling from 62,000 slaves in 1830 to barely 37,000 three decades later. Average farm size shrank, horse and mule populations declined, production of swine, corn, hay,

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98 Speech of William Gregg, Member from Edgefield District, in the Legislature of South Carolina, Dec., 1857, on the Bank Question (Columbia, 1857), 5, 32-34; idem, Letter… to Thornton Coleman, Esq., June 8th, 1858 (Charleston, 1858), 8.

and a variety of other provision crops fell. Scholars have laid off some of this disaster to a shift in emphasis from corn to cotton production in the 1840s and ’50s. But that is, at best, a sanitized way of looking at the process of environmental destruction which came in cotton’s wake, substituting description of imagined market choice for historical analysis, and one which ignores the economic writing on the wall Carolinians had learned to read by the late 1850s.

Even as cotton prices peaked, production increases and yields per acre were tailing off across the state. Worse was on the horizon. Carolina rice planters were in deep trouble, too, losing more than a quarter of their annual investment on the crop of 1859 alone. Sea-island cotton planters likewise saw a bleak future, as production figures roller-coastered down to disaster by 1860.

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“[O]ne hundred to one,” warned William Gregg, the hard cash in a man’s pocket represented “the indebtedness of a bank.”

For many, it seemed the world had turned upside down. On one side, land and property were shifting steadily toward the state’s wealthiest planters; on the other, debt was driving poor and middling farmers downward, compelling many to supplement earnings through wage labor, forcing more into agricultural tenancy. But even Wade Hampton—perhaps the richest man in the South—had to go hat-in-hand to Robert Gourdin, seeking aid to clear off half a million dollars in notes, mortgages, and bills which threatened to swamp his empire in 1858. That kind of money had to come from England, he knew, offering seven-percent interest, a mortgage on land and slaves valued at more than a million dollars, a promise to ship a thousand bales of cotton annually to his creditors as payment, plus the signatures of his brother, brother-in-law, and New Orleans factors. Yet the deal went undone: English law forbade British bankers or their American agents to hold a note on slaves. By 1860, humiliated Hampton was selling off slaves and lands to ease his troubles.


104 Wade Hampton III to Robert N. Gourdin, July 9, September 12, 1858, Keith Morton Read Collection, UGA; Wade Hampton II to Franklin H. Elmore, October 28, 1849, and Wade Hampton III to Armistead Burt, January 24, 1860, both in Wade Hampton Papers, DU.
After 1850, suits for debt across the state soared both in terms of cases tried and the mean and total dollar value plaintiffs demanded. Sheriff’s sales and bankruptcies followed the same pattern. Alongside the familiar world where unfree black labor generated immense wealth for a few whites, a disturbing new system of landlords and tenants, workers and bosses was distilling from what had once seemed a society of honorable gentlemen and interdependent farmers. In Charleston, the houses, shops, and fortunes of a few grew dazzling, and every day saw new parcels of hard-pressed men and “ragged boys,” proceeding by ones and twos through the streets, begging, looking for a place to gain the slightest foothold. “Twenty clerks in a store,” figured the *Mercury*; “twenty hands in a printing office; twenty apprentices in a ship yard; twenty young men in a village—all want to get on in the world and expect to do so.” How many would succeed? Just one of each, came the calculation—long odds, indeed. Rich or poor, heading up or down, their fates were usually reflected in their hats.

No wonder that measure of manhood attracted such derision, anger, and fear. It stood both for the man under the hat and for the fellow who had put it on his head. The hatting of a man, after all, was no simple event, undertaken accidentally. It was the culminating moment in a ritual performance between valorized men--salesman and customer--who understood each other’s interests as simultaneously complementary and antagonistic, triangulating carefully between desire, hat and man to reckon honesty, sincerity, and pliability on both sides.

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106 Gregg, *Essays on Domestic Industry*, 47; *Charleston Courier*, October 1, 1858; Denison, *Lectures to Business Men*, 66-67; *Charleston Mercury*, November 12, 1860.

First must come the social greeting, drawing the prospect across the commercial threshold and bidding him browse the wares on gorgeous display. Liminally transformed by a single step, the visitor expected this salutation, and knew how to respond, perhaps welcoming the stir his arrival caused. He basked in the eagerness of the store’s staff to engage his interest, to learn his desires, to chat him up. Moving slowly past the displays, admiring, analyzing, taking stock, the shopper became wonderfully aware that all around him men were sizing him up, estimating his worth and whims, seeking to satisfy the first word he spoke. Perhaps he relished his power in bidding them good day without buying, or holding them in conversation to no transactional purpose, or teasing the beggars with promises to call again.

Less often, he crooked a finger or said a word to make the clerk draw forth a hat. He took it up, turned it about, tried it on, reflected on his reflection, and offered his views, intermingled with the acclaim bestowed by the vendor’s smiling staff. Positive and negative ultimates flew about the room in bursts of gab: “exactly,” “never,” “perfectly,” “superbly” summed up each potential marriage of hat and man. Trying on one hat and then another, patrons drank in the esteem salesmen poured over them, slyly shifting the terms of commercial transaction.

Having exchanged so much commentary and accepted admiration over the union of man and hat, a fellow was almost obliged to settle on something. With every tile he placed on his head, the would-be customer knew, his bargaining power diminished. The economic purpose of buying the hat teetered against the pleasure and worry of purchasing, until the hat as idea finally

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won out. A word and a nod was all it took: a clerk took back the hat and hid it in a bulky carrying case. The bill was written out in slow and flourishing script, the wares passed across the counter. Hands were clasped. The hatter won the promise that the newly hatted would call again, just as suitors were enjoined. No money changed hands, most often, and men on both sides enjoyed the delight of voluntary exchange. Here was market economy in its finest incarnation: the social production of a customer.\textsuperscript{109}

All throughout that transaction, of course, choice vied with coercion, freedom with expectation, as men weighed the relative values of hats and heads and cash. Theories of rational choice or the logic of supply and demand did not nearly capture the structure or dynamics at work. Even the simplest matters--whether browsers could access goods directly or were physically separated by counters and cabinets--shifted the roles and script shared by customer and clerk. Hegemonic power weighed steadily on the progress of market exchange, shaping whether and when, how much, and at what price.\textsuperscript{110} However truly liminal market relations might be, all men understood, power and choice in any transaction ordinarily flowed toward the haves, away from have-nots. Making sense of that black magic was the sum of political economy.

However briefly, antebellum Charleston sheltered far more than its share of economic thinkers—Jacob Cardozo, Thomas Cooper, Francis Lieber, and others—but their impact on the Queen City’s economic thinking was practically nil. As of 1857, the College of Charleston’s professor of political economy, the failed planter Fred Porcher, had only just read \textit{The Wealth of}

\textsuperscript{109} Cf. the discussions of shopping as action in Ann S. Martin, \textit{Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia} (Baltimore, 2008), and the rich essays in \textit{The Shopping Experience}, ed. Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (New York, 1997).

\textsuperscript{110} Ted Ownby, \textit{American Dreams in Mississippi: Consumers, Poverty, and Culture, 1830-1998} (Chapel Hill, 1999), 13-15.
Nations—to his horror—and gave no sign of acquaintance with the work of other major economists.\(^{111}\) Rather, men proceeded by the rough arithmetic of their own situation in the street, reading the signs they saw as best they could. For the sudden erosion of economic and social prospects, many blamed merchants, bankers, and “Mammon” generally.\(^{112}\) “There is a scramble with all for money,” money-hungry James Hammond seethed, and unless South Carolina “educate[d] the heart” of its citizens to “lift them above money,” the state must be ruined. Not a year later, the same jumped-up commoner jumped up in Congress to call cotton king, demanding that all men bow down. The irony was rich.\(^{113}\)

Carolinians scrambled after money, Hammond and his hearers knew, because it seemed to flow relentlessly out of their grasp, especially in the late 1850s. Every planting season, southerners dreamed of the prosperity rich harvests would bring, driving cotton production endlessly upward, packing the region’s port cities full with bales for transshipment each autumn. *De Bow’s Review* and a dozen commercial papers trumpeted king cotton’s prospects. But unfailingly southern wealth became northern profits.

How? From the early 1830s onward, a bitter minority blamed local bankers and big merchants for tight money and hard times. Such men were economic parasites, putting private gain above the common good.\(^{114}\) That view resounded especially in Charleston’s nascent

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\(^{112}\) See Paul H. Hayne’s poem, “Mammon,” in *Charleston Courier*, December 14, 1853.

\(^{113}\) Entry of February 7, 1857, Beech Island Farmers’ Club Records, SCL; *Congressional Globe*, 35 Congress, 1 Session, 960-964.

\(^{114}\) Edmund Rhett, “Agricultural Address—Entitled—‘Who is the Producer?’ Delivered Before the Beaufort Agricultural Society, 1840,” *Southern Cabinet*, 1 (1840), 706-716, esp. 706, 714; William Elliott, *Examination of Mr. Edmund Rhett’s Agricultural Address: On the Question, ‘Who is the Producer?’* (Charleston, 1841), esp. 4, 8, 10, 14. The best discussion of the conflict between commercial and agrarian elites for control of banking capital in
workingmen’s movement, under the leadership of one of the nation’s most flamboyant labor radicals. Theo Fisk was everything a Pinckney or Legare was born to loathe. A loud, emotional Yankee, trained for the Universalist ministry, his collar slipped, and he became a vociferous critic of organized religion, publishing a journal called Priestcraft Unmasked. Perambulating around New England, Fisk edited a series of pro-labor periodicals, capping his efforts in 1835 with a widely-circulated, walloping lecture in Boston and an honorary tirade before the National Trades' Union in New York. Such kudos hardly attracted him to the Tradd Street set. Indeed, had it not been for his solid anti-abolition views, Fisk might have been run out on a rail from xenophobic Charleston. To his mind, though, there were “more slaves in Lowell and Nashua alone than can be found South of the Potomac.” Emancipated blacks would only “fiddle, steal, and then starve.”

Alas, proslavery sentiment was only a gloss on Fisk’s anti-commercial, anti-capitalist text. Officially, he served as pastor of Charleston's First Universalist congregation, home church to ex-Governor John Lyde Wilson, among others. Unofficially, city fathers recognized, Fisk was a problem waiting to happen. He shouted about free speech and mercantile greed in a town that valued a close-guarded tongue. On the fourth of July 1837, the fuse was lit. The Queen Street Theatre saw an enthusiastic labor celebration, crowned by the hothead’s newest oration, Labor the Only True Source of Wealth. “Let the Banks perish,” Fisk told a packed hall.

We admit that the bank credit system does a great deal for a few favoured individuals, enabling them to build princely mansions, fill them with gorgeous

South Carolina is Larry Schweikart, Banking in the American South: from the Age of Jackson to Reconstruction (Baton Rouge, 1987), esp. 55-56, 92-108.

furniture, stock their cellars with the choicest wines, and load their tables with the most costly viands; that it enables many without a dollar of actual property, earned by useful toil, to ride in a splendid coach, repose upon a couch of down, and realize all the advantages of prodigious wealth.--But what does it do for the planter who industriously cultivates his acres and obtains in return for continued toil, only enough to sustain him in the execution of his task? What does it do for the poor mechanic, whose lap-stone or anvil rings all the day with the clink of his incessant hammer?

Bank credit might “foster the city--but it ruins the country; it may build palaces in the town, but it leaves the cabin in the country to fall to ruin. It may afford luxury and profusion to a few,” Fisk summed up, “but it spreads vice, ignorance and penury among the many.” Worse, as the nation fell into economic depression, the “rag mills” now refused to pay their debts in specie. The “hard hands” of Charleston would not have it, he proclaimed.

It is a struggle of life and death, of liberty and slavery--of justice and fraud. Let it be a war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt... Let not Charleston chivalry, the glory and pride of our land, become a mockery, a hissing, and a by word. You know your rights, let them be maintained at all risks, and at every hazard. Look well to the men you select for public office--let there be no bankers--no bank borrowers or lenders, among the number, however much they may be respected as men and as citizens.\footnote{Theophilus Fisk, \textit{The Bulwark of Freedom. An Oration delivered at the Universalist Church in the City of Charleston, S. C., June 28, 1836. On the Anniversary of the Glorious Victory at Fort Moultrie, June 28, 1776} (Charleston, 1836); \textit{Monopolies}, [Charleston, 1837]; \textit{Labor the Only True Source of Wealth; or, the Rottenness of the Paper Money Banking System Exposed, Its Sandy Foundations Shaken, Its Crumbling Pillars Overthrown: An Oration on Banking, Education, & c., Delivered at the Queen-Street Theatre, in the City of Charleston, S. C., July 4th, 1837. Also an Oration on the Freedom of the Press; To which is appended the doings of a Public Meeting held in Charleston, July 28th 1837} (Charleston, 1837), esp. 29-32.}

An alliance of farmers and mechanics, united in a workingmen’s party, with its own newspaper, in Charleston? The idea must have seemed preposterous to many. To Carolina’s arch-ranter George McDuffie, though, Fisk’s ideas “had a great deal of sound philosophy” about them, and lawyer Henry Summers found him “argumentative and convincing.”\footnote{The Writings of Benjamin F. Perry, ed. Stephen D. Meats and Edwin T. Arnold, 3 vols. (Spartanburg, 1980), 2: 174; John H. Moore, “A South Carolina Lawyer Visits St. Augustine—1837,” \textit{Florida Historical Quarterly}, 43 (1965): 363.} Suppose others agreed?
Charleston’s elite drew their line. When the rabble organized a follow-up meeting for 8 July, to be chaired by mayoral candidate Henry Pinckney, the bourgeoisie met them head on. He never showed. Instead, the mayor, former governor and senator Robert Y. Hayne, appeared at the head of a mob. Fisk’s latest remarks only underlined earlier attacks identifying factors, merchants and banks as perpetrating “enormous legalized frauds” aiming to overthrow American values and establish “an odious oligarchy of corporations.” Commercial men took umbrage, especially since many were neck-deep in establishing new railroads, banks, and other ventures which could bear no dissent at a moment of financial downturn. Tempers flared, and when Fisk roused the crowd, a local merchant decked him. A full-scale riot broke out, Unionist James Petigru battling alongside ex-Nullifier Alfred Huger in common defense of their class.\footnote{Theophilus Fisk, \textit{The Banking Bubble Burst: Or, the Corruption of the Paper Money System Relieved by Bleeding. Being a History of the Enormous Legalized Fraud Practised Upon the Community by the Present American Banking System, their Deleterious Effects Upon Public Morals and Private Happiness, which, if not Checked, will Ultimately Destroy our Republican Institutions, and Establish upon the Ruins of our National Freedom, an Odious Oligarchy of Corporation} (Charleston, 1837); idem, \textit{Labor the Only True Source of Wealth}, 43-45; Theodore D. Jervey, \textit{Robert Y. Hayne and His Times} (New York, 1909), 430-431; Schlesinger, \textit{The Age of Jackson}, 231. As ever, city papers minimized conflict. \textit{Charleston Mercury}, July 3, 7, 8, 10, 12, 1837; \textit{Charleston Courier}, July 6, 10, 11, 1837.}

Did Fisk’s thundering pose a real threat? Charleston’s commercial elite chose not to find out. Yet their action boomeranged. The news of an elite mob suppressing downtrodden freemen inflamed public opinion from New Orleans to Boston. In Charleston, many like Wilson, who would have discounted Fisk’s agitation, rallied in defense of free speech. At a culminating meeting on July 28, the banks’ “‘promise-to-pay’ money system was dissected” once more, broadcloth “ruffians” assailed, and union and equal rights championed. Worse, pro-slavery Fisk’s supporters now heard a Charleston physician call for a different kind of slave rebellion. “[H]e who labors for another, and not for himself, ceases to be free,” Thomas Calvert declared. “Shall we live and die the slaves—the hewers of wood and drawers of water, to unprincipled, soulless, valueless Corporations… or will we rouse up as one man and assert the
Constitution?” What could have been more radical—or conservative?

Fisk soon departed warring Charleston, but the damage was done. As hard-pressed banks compounded the mob’s error by suspending specie payment again in the fall of 1839, the labor preacher’s claims shifted from street corner and meeting hall debate to the General Assembly. The Panic of 1857 collapsed credit across the state once more. Come 1860, as tight money, high prices, and unemployment pinched badly, Charlestonians culminated years of “spirited debate” with a public meeting at the Palmetto Lyceum, considering the question, “Would the Abolition of the Credit System be Beneficial to the Community?” Strong voices urged caution, but at evening’s end the rally answered, “Aye.”

There was no going back, of course, but the vote was telling. Across the late 1840s and ’50s, men came to conclude, the fundamental bond between producers and traders, sellers and buyers, borrowers and lenders, had broken down. In the boom times of cotton and rice production in the Carolinas, seemingly everyone got rich as acreage expanded, demand skyrocketed, and prices spiraled upward. The opening of new territory in the Gulf states only increased competition for capital and slave labor, even as cotton prices fell. Older lands in the piedmont—Carolina’s best acreage--wore desperately as farmers worked the soil without ease or rest, but this only drove up the price of more marginal acreage, drawing labor from bottom lands into sandy pine scrub: it was like watching a match burn down. The depression of 1837-44 slowed that burning, draining slave labor off to the southwest, and easing the relentless drive to grow more cotton: there was less credit to propel growth. But as that crisis passed off and

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120 “So. Carolina Convention,” Trumpet and Universalist Magazine 10 (September 16, 1837), 2; Armistead Burt to Elihu P. Smith, October 15, 1839, Elihu Penquite Smith Papers, SCL; Fisk, Labor the Only True Source of Wealth, 47; Charleston Courier, September 19-20, 1860. Fisk—kinsman to chess-playing Daniel W. Fiske—pin-balled off all manner of political, social, and religious issues down to disunion, when he was fired from a clerkship in the Dead Letter Office in Washington on charges of robbery. Daily Cleveland Herald, August 17, 1861.
foreign capital came back in, planters and merchants individually faced the question of how to use the credit that landed in their scarcely profitable hands: pay down debt and wait for the soil to restore itself? Ramp up production, expand acreage, buy slaves, and revive lands as best they could? Would greater output justify greater risk? That was the problem planters, bankers, and all who depended on them, from lawyers to slaves, had to get right at just this moment.

“Out of debt, out of trouble!” promised the conservative Courier. Retrenchment was never a realistic option, but Carolinians in the 1850s got the formula for recovery disastrously wrong. “We are gamblers in our ventures,” one planter summed up. “We dare the gamblers loss to win the gamblers gains.” Placing all their hopes on the funds which must flow from the profits of higher cotton production—just as farmers and merchants from Egypt to Brazil to Australia were making the same bet—agriculturists and their allies helped pile up mountains of cotton bales, unsold, unwoven, in the warehouses of Liverpool and Manchester. That surplus was bound to strangle southern hopes before long.121

Crisis was both imagined and deeply felt on a tiny, taxing level, whenever a man went into a Charleston shop. Would there be a chance for credit forthcoming? Did a seller require cash or, worse, a note too close for comfort, where payment was concerned? The ethos of mutuality that pervaded commercial transactions in earlier years had fully faded now. “Nothing can differ more,” declared William J. Grayson, “than the man’s tone who invites you to buy his goods and wares… and when he asks or demands payment for the debt he has persuaded you to incur.”

In one case he is oil, in the other vinegar. In one he presents an illustration of the _suaviter in modo_, in the other of the _fortiter in re_. The trader who has received you at his counter, for six months, with persuasive smiles and obsequious bows,

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presents his bill at the end of the time with sour solemnity. He has a standing reason for being importunate; a large amount to raise, notes in bank to meet, his stock of goods to replenish, an old firm to close.

“Our wish,” Charleston’s Walters and Walker declared typically in 1854, “is to serve our friends, but we cannot do so at the sacrifice of our credit.” Reciprocity was fine, so long as it paid. Just so, Congressman Daniel Wallace told his son, “put yourself under obligations to no one.”

That formula subverted South Carolina’s social system at one stroke. The paternalist ideal rested on an ethic of selfless performance of duty, perfectly balancing mutuality and independence. Planters were expected to be just and humane masters and careful managers of estates. Merchants were supposed to be Christian-spirited honest brokers, mediating between producer and consumer with manly restraint. Parents were meant to be steady providers, mustering a competency of wealth, and passing it along to their heirs. Political leaders were to be high-minded statesmen, servants of the noblest purposes, unlike the spoilsmen and party hacks of the North. All would move in harmonious, united step toward a glorious future.

But by 1860, elite Carolinians had come to realize that the slavery of debt was undermining their slaveholding utopia at every turn. Perfect planters proved imperfect, driving slaves with a forgotten fierceness, selling off thousands they called their people to settle festering debt. Perfect masters proved imperfect, taking their pound of flesh with the unchristian dispassion and relentlessness capital demanded. Perfect parents proved imperfect, leaving legacies of debt, not snug farms and burdened coffers. Though Carolina planters routinely gave

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their plantations names of hope and aspiration—“Harmony,” “Elysium,” “Paradise”—the Colcock family’s “Poverty Hall” or John Townsend’s “Bleak Hall” came closer to the mark.¹²³

Perfect statesmen proved woefully imperfect, too: Calhoun had been too mired in debt to attend Congress without a loan in the late 1840s.¹²⁴ William F. Colcock’s candidacy for president of the Bank of the State of South Carolina was squelched, he believed, because “I might make some big fish pay up too fast.” James Hamilton’s financial imbecility stunted his political impulses, too, crippled his standing as a gentleman, and ultimately cost him his life. The man who begged a loan at the deathbed of George McDuffie fell far short of statesmanship. More serious than the fall of high-minded leaders, though, was the rise of wire-pulling sell-outs. The revival of National Democracy in South Carolina under James L. Orr in the mid-1850s showed the chivalry the dangers of debt. Indirectly bribed by the wealthy and powerful of particular localities, Charleston’s David Gavin feared, the “rabble,” interested not in clearing debts but in “shirking around in them,” would congeal into a powerful “Mob-oc-ra-cy,” to do their masters’ bidding.¹²⁵

How, then, to save the state? In a system that piled “credit on credit,” Carolinians argued, “as boys make fanciful structures of cards,” change must begin at home—or, more properly, in the marketplace. “Don’t run in debt!” the planter Micah Jenkins warned in lame verse:

¹²³ Chalmers G. Davidson, *The Last Foray: the South Carolina Planters of 1860. A Sociological Study* (Columbia, 1971), 174, 256; Title Deed to Poverty Hall, August 21, 1855, Colcock Family Papers, TU.


There’s no comfort, I tell you, in walking the streets
In fine clothes, If you know you’re in debt,
And feel that perchance you some tradesman may meet,
Who will sneer—“They are not paid for yet!”

…
Kind husbands, don’t run in debt any more,
Twill fill your wife’s eyes full of sorrow;
To know that a neighbour may call at your door,
With a bill you can’t settle to morrow.

…
The chain of a debtor is heavy and cold,
Its links all corrosion and rust,
Gild it o’er as you will—it is never of gold,
Then spurn it aside with disgust.
The man who’s in debt is too often a slave,
Though his heart may be honest and true.
Can he hold up his head, and look saucy and brave,
When a note he can’t pay becomes due[?]

“Be careful of your Money” became the watchword of the 1850s, but few knew how “to act upon it in these ‘hard times’. “126

The alternative was to transform merchant culture, turning the clock back to when reciprocity seemed to rule. “God have mercy on the rich!” exclaimed one typical warning. Not only had they won wealth by driving others into poverty, but the personal cost of victory was ruinously high. “Mark the care-worn, anxious expression” of the merchant’s features, bespeaking “weary toilsome days and sleepless nights, with an all-absorbing passion feeding upon the energies, the aspirations, even the very life of his being.” Why endure that Scrooge-like existence, reformers asked, when Charleston itself furnished numerous examples of successful merchants combining commercial prosperity with healthful Christian virtue? Such a man would “rather lose a bargain than leave a stain on his conscience, a bitter memory in his

126 John Cunningham, Suggestions on the Causes of the Present Scarcity of Money, and in Favor of Essential Reforms of our Banking System (Charleston, 1854); “Don’t Run in Debt” [1855?], Micah Jenkins Papers, SCL. For a similar theme, see undated poem, John Lide Wilson Papers, SCL; Charleston Courier, March 31, 1855; Anderson Intelligencer, August 21, 1860.
heart, or a sense of self-debasement upon his soul.” Emulate the merchant who understood his “noble calling,” acting as “the fast friend of liberty, of law, of order,” the foe “of oppression everywhere.” Impossible, declared J. D. B. De Bow: perhaps such men lived once, but surely they had passed away: “where shall the man be found, where the community of such men?”

Perhaps they might be made, or born again. Sarcasm was no solution, tutted Henry Denison, calling for a revival of Christian morality among Charleston merchants and clerks. In a series of lectures at St. Peter’s Church in the winter of 1857, Denison urged commercial men to recognize their “duty… to extend civilization,” standing against a host of economic and political sins: deceptive sales practices, adulteration of goods, over-selling, vote buying, and more. The growth of corporations—aiming only to avoid “moral accountability”—came in for special sanction, as did the careless training and treatment of underlings. Merchants were peculiarly well-placed, Denison argued, to denounce the vices of “this fast age”: the tavern, the theatre, and the “apples of Sodom,” promoting instead a “general refinement of manners,” “the morals of clerks,” and the strengthening of the family under paternal control. Ultimately, he warned, unless the heedless “desire to be rich” was tempered, Charleston would end like Carthage: done in by “luxury and effeminacy.”

A momentary sensation in the Lower Wards, Denison’s revival faded fast. Coming in response to the Panic of 1857, his reform effort was too broad and vague to carry over into daily life, and not half as exciting as the chess mania sweeping the same constituency at just that time.

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moment. Yellow fever felled Denison that autumn but it was Paul Morphy who killed his crusade for Christian commerce.\textsuperscript{129}

Alleviating crisis, Charlestonians understood, meant restructuring relations between buyers and sellers, teaching men on both sides to avoid the economic and moral errors which led toward debt. For Micah Jenkins, that meant restraint and retrenchment for the man walking King Street:

\begin{quote}
Don’t run in debt—never mind, never mind
if thy clothes are faded and torn.
Fix ’em up, make them do, it is better by far,
than to have the heart weary and worn
Who’ll love you the more for the set of your hat,
or the ruff, or the tie of your shoe,
The shape of your vest, or your boots or cravat,
if they know you’re in debt for the new?\textsuperscript{130}
\end{quote}

But that course demanded an impossible redefinition of honor and respectability, and could only stifle trade. Did anyone actually expect gentlemen to walk about in ragged clothes, or last year’s hat?

Not Walter Steele. On January 1, 1855, the shopkeeper announced his splendid solution to South Carolina’s social crisis: a “Revolution in Hats!” He denounced “the miserable and treacherous system of crediting out goods,” a method “which costs tact, influence, capacity and resources unlimited.” Worse was the unmanly practice of haggling over price: instead of paying a premium, men of honor seldom hesitated to wheedle the same sorts of discounts poorer men begged. That degraded buyer and seller both. Henceforth, Steele declared, he would not do it. “My terms are Cash on delivery, one price, and no deviation.” With “the newest, most economical and appropriate styles” of hats to be found in Charleston, Steele’s Hat Hall would

\textsuperscript{129} Charleston Mercury, September 29, 1858.

\textsuperscript{130} Charleston Mercury, March 5, 1855.
make “justice and integrity” its motto bidding defiance to “the extravagance of the age.”\textsuperscript{131}

That manifesto might have been the death knell of another enterprise. But four years on, Steele was thriving. “[A]t any hour of the day almost, a string of carriages” stood in front of the “Great ‘Hat Hall’,” signifying “a constant flow of custom.” In a few years, the boss and his brothers had achieved “what others have failed to do in a lifetime,” both because of what Steele sold and how he sold it.\textsuperscript{132}

Everyone knew that Steele sold hats, talked hats, wrote hats, was hats: the most stylish, well-made, “entirely original” hats from New York, Paris, London, in a stunning range of styles.\textsuperscript{133} There was “always something new.” Steele’s Hat Hall was “the little acorn that grew” to become the largest and best known emporium outside New York in 1860. That was quite an achievement, especially given the vagaries of Charleston commerce. There were dozens of hatters and hat shops fighting for business in seaboard cities from Baltimore to New Orleans on the eve of secession and still more clustered in towns along the fall line. For most, it was a losing battle. Each day, hats by the hundreds poured out of northern factories and filtered into southern markets. The shops that sold them faced high capital costs, low profit margins, and wildly variant seasonal demand. Most leaned hard on the lower end of the market, selling inexpensive straw or palm-leaf hats for slaves and self-working farmers on easy terms, or went in search of greener pastures. A few local craftsmen cultivated niche markets, but cheap Yankee goods and quality European styles left little room for expansion. By 1860, most southern hatters were debt-ridden one- and two-man affairs, casualties of the machine age. Their only

\textsuperscript{131} Charleston Courier, January 1, 1855. In all but a few cases, Steele published identical ads on the same day in the Courier and the Mercury.

\textsuperscript{132} Charleston Courier, September 5, 1853, January 31, 1859.

\textsuperscript{133} See, e.g., Charleston Courier, February 5, 10, April 6, June 12 (quote), August 28, 1852, June 8, December 10, 1853, April 25, 1856.
alternatives were to beg community patronage—charity would have been a better word—or abandon business altogether. When disunionist radicals spoke of their society as tributary to northern capitalists, the hat trade proved their point in spades.134

From the beginning, though, Steele was undaunted, steadily advertising the “great variety” he offered, “low crown and high crown and wide and narrow brims, and extremely rich and tasty”—something for everyone. If it was a French hat “of the finest qualities and richest trimmings,” he sold it; if it was an “Imitation French Hat, made after the finest Paris patterns,” he flogged that, too. “[W]ithout regard to where you are born, or where you are come from,” the Hat Hall offered hats and caps in a rich and humorous range of styles and qualities: “Super XX Moleskin Hats, Gents No. 1 Moleskin, fine dress black Moleskin, good fashionable Moleskin, An excellent black Moleskin, And not a bad black Moleskin.” Beyond these was Steele’s one-dollar “My kingdom for a Moleskin Hat”—and then straight on to caps. Other stores might sell white beavers, but certainly not “Fashionable White Long Napped Beavers,” clear from the Rocky Mountains, and not at his modest price: if so, the Hat Hall would “give them all away (try and catch STEELE).” “There is not a season that rolls around, that Steele does not try to offer something new to his customers,” his ads exclaimed. Inevitably, it would turn out, “There is no Hat just now, like it, in the city.”135

Multiple advertisements placed in different columns of the same newspaper hawked different kinds of hats; other notices grouped the grand variety of styles available under one heading in a big block of text, finely illustrated, to dominate the page. Appearing several times each week in dozens of styles across the seasons, his ads were distinctive in size, layout, and

134 Charleston Courier, November 21, 1849, February 21, 1859.
135 Charleston Courier, April 1, November 13, 1851, April 23, May 1, October 21, 1852, April 29, 1856.
surprise value, too, reflecting just the “Splendor, Variety and Elegance” a trip to Steele’s store was supposed to conjure. Conversational, informative, humorous, head-scratching, his notices were always enjoyable to read, hawking their wares in the most off-hand style. An 1856 notice for spring and summer hats was shot through with headlines both descriptive and instructive: from “Read This!” men passed to “Here is the Important Notice!” and, finally, “Fair Notice—(Final)—Fair Notice.” “Pass this notice not by as a trifle,” Steele warned in 1853; “I want you to become rich, commence saving at the head!” Editors returned the favor regularly, writing puff pieces about Steele’s shop and the worth of his wares. On one occasion, he even bought two large column blocks, side by side: the first cheekily declared in small print, “Read That,” with a hand icon pointing toward the second, where Steele’s styles and come-on shone. After a while, men went looking for Steele’s clever missives might say in the papers each week, and his ads fairly leapt out in greeting. Down to the late 1850s, there was nothing else like it in Charleston.136

If Steele did not have a hat, he would try to find it, or make it somehow. Nor did he limit his custom to hat-wearing men: the Hat Hall featured a moderately priced cap department, uniting all classes under one head. “As no valid reason can be given for placing a particular style of cap, any more than an exclusive style of hat, upon every style of head,” he explained, “our plan is… to furnish all our Cap-Wearing fellow-citizens with fabrics becoming to their features and persons, and adapted to their several occupations and pursuits.” Only Steele’s “extraordinary resources and facilities” could make that promise faithfully. Young boys, too, would find their cap at Steele’s, or Paris hats, “rich and showy.” There were youth’s “holiday caps” and “play ball caps,” straw or leghorn hats for infants, seasonal styles of children’s hats

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136 Charleston Courier, January 23, April 12, September 8, November 1, 8, 1853, March 10, 1855, April 28, 1856, October 3, December 13, 1859.
“with and without feathers.” Here again, the “Juvenile ‘Hat Hall’” mixed promises of variety, quality, and price with bizarre palaver. A “rich fancy beaver” for a tyke? “Why not give the sweet little creature a pretty Hat,” Steele asked in an ad appropriately (mis)titled, “Vive La Babie.” It “will be an ornament to its head while living,” he explained oddly, “that when death comes and separates you, you will ever remember its looks.” Here again, Steele insisted that he only had customers well-satisfied—“bewitched”—by his wares. “So say all the children, and so say all their parents.”  

Said parents were almost uniformly fathers, since the Hat Hall—and King Street’s Bend—was such a well-defined male space. The last and largest illustration Steele published before secession showed his salesman presenting a hat to his customers, a satisfied gentleman and his diminutive daughter. No adult female appears in any picture, nor was any invitation extended to women to visit his shop. Twice in eleven years Steele offered riding hats for “Lady Equestrians,” but those notices vanished quickly, and probably aimed at men wishing to give gifts. Likewise, he gave men and women’s belt sales just a quick try. More important, “for the Ladies,” he offered a winter selection of fur muffins, cuffs, capes, and stoles, sequestered in “Steele’s Fur Rooms.” Priced from seventy-five cents to an astonishing $40, these were sold as “beautiful and cheap holiday presents,” not goods for personal use. On the eve of secession, Steele was wagering big in furs, “to maintain the reputation their firm holds as the first in this city for fashion, excellence, and economy.” He seldom missed a trick.  

Just as for children and women, Steele invited men to stop in to select hats, “round and square crowns,” for their slaves, singly, “or by the dozen, and at inviting prices.” By 1851,

137 Charleston Courier, March 31, May 10, 1852, December 7, 1855, October 27, 1856, March 14, 1857; October 8, 29, 1860; Charleston Mercury, October 16, 1856.

138 Charleston Courier, April 28, 1851, December 13, 1852, July 18, October 16, 1855, December 21, 1857, November 12, 1858, December 10, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 4, 1854, October 18, 1860.
“Thirteen years’ experience” had taught Steele “what is wanted to protect the heads of negroes.” All a man had to do was “state the quantity of heads, with the average age,” and the order could be filled “in Black, Drab, Pearl, Blue and Brown Waterproof Wool Hats,” guaranteed to fit. There were better hats for house servants and caps for servant boys—though these oddly resembled and were priced identically with lower-end wares marketed to whites. Four years on, he repackaged those products as “Plantation Negro Hats,” perhaps to avoid offense. His prices were the lowest in the South, he declared, yet if wool, glazed, or cloth hats stood too steep for a cash-strapped master, still Steele would not be denied. He sold palm-leaf hats at $1.50 per dozen, straw hats cheaper still. By 1859, Steele and Company was vending hats “retailed at wholesale prices”—four dollars and less—in Charleston, and marketed to resellers across the cotton states. They were the South’s largest headwear merchants, Hat Hall ads crowed, unbeatable in selection, price, and quality. Perhaps it was so, but who would try to separate fact from fancy where Steele was concerned?139

His method of selling was as radical as the range of goods he offered. Steele started out modestly in 1849, respectfully inviting customers to call and examine his goods. Soon enough, though, the brakes came off. Never one to simply post a list of wares and prices, Steele beat the drum steadily—and in remarkably inventive ways—to draw customers across his threshold. While others waited on changing seasons to advertise, he advanced the calendar to suit his needs, invented his own seasons and occasions, and dragged competitors after him.140 He plagiarized

139 Charleston Courier, November 20, 1851, December 13, 1853, January 28, 1857, April 23, 1858, August 4, November 30, 1859; Charleston Mercury, January 16, 1854, November 9, 1860.

140 Charleston Mercury, February 5, 1855; Charleston Courier, August 28, 1849, October 7, December 1, 1858, September 23, 1859.
other firms’ ads shamelessly. He tweaked locals in print with talk of “shocking bad hats,” just as he warned strangers against buying “obsolete” hats from his rivals. But these were little jokes—a Steele hat which won an heiress’ marriage vow “and withal her $50,000,” for example—grace notes in a sales campaign superbly staged. So, too, he displayed his hats annually at the South Carolina Institute Fair, but refused to compete for its prizes. The Hat Hall was led by a “Fashionable Hatter,” one who “set the style” rather than reacting to it. What was the spring fashion for 1852? Sage Steele knew what would be “generally worn” as early as mid-January, welcoming men to purchase his “neat” wares. Two weeks later, as tastes became clearer, his range of hats expanded sharply, from big, soft Kossuth hats “with and without Feathers,” to a variety of “new style” dress hats “of the Spring fashions.” It was a delicate commercial striptease. Each hat was “strictly appropriated to the season for which it is intended,” Charleston’s “Leader of Hat Fashions” insisted, suitable to “gentlemen who profess to have a discriminating taste,” and sure to “govern the trade.”

Every man fancies he wears the best Hat,  
Because every man has faith in his own hatter;  
But let him wear one of STEELE’S best,  
And all notions of Hat stability  
Is knocked into nothingness.

“What is to be Worn this Season?” The question seemed stupid: Steele’s styles were ready, and “when the rush commences,” men “left in the lurch go hatless.”

May Day, Gala Week, glorious summer, “a day in the country”: Steele endlessly contrived occasions and reasons for folks to stop by his store. Christmas was “the season of

141 See, e.g., his poaching of text from the ad for Glen’s Photographs, located five doors south of the Hat Hall. Charleston Courier, October 13, 1856, April 26, 1860.

142 Charleston Courier, January 17, February 3, 25, 1852; February 22, September 14, 1853, April 14, 24, 1855, February 7, 1857, March 29, August 20, 27, 1858, October 2, 1860; Charleston Mercury, April 16, 1855, November 25, 1856, January 1, 1858, June 7, 1860; (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, April 14, 1855.
gifts,” and the moment sportsmen hunted, each role requiring different hats for black and white, male and female. The fourth of July could not go by without new straw hats, nor Palmetto Day, which fell just a week earlier. Even if “a gentleman is in search of a friend,” Steele’s was the place to “step in”—in nine chances out of ten, he would be shopping there, surely.

Did Charleston men looking for a “friend,” in fact go to Steele’s and wander through his hats? It is, again, impossible to know, though that throws the homosocial pas de deux of hat-shopping into a rather deeper liminality. As with the Charleston Chess Club, located just short steps away, or in the daguerrean galleries of Cook across the street, men here were granted a semi-private space for self-admiration and the playful trying-on of alternate identities—through hats or chess or photographs, or other items of consumption. That this was a socially prescribed form of play, with distinct rules and limits, must have drawn men toward each other in mutual admiration, wittingly or not, both from the safety of the limits a sanctioned setting offered and, for some, from the imagined possibilities of subversion the hat trade allowed. This was a realm of theatre, play, commerce, men could say—nothing more.

A man had come to Steele’s to buy a hat: really the most masculine of commercial undertakings, since hats had ever been associated—culturally, psychologically, linguistically—with female genitalia. Going to a King Street hat shop was, on a certain level, like going to a Beresford Street brothel. Quality, variety, and price stood in the forefront, plus the promiscuous thrill of shopping. In both settings, too, the item of purchase only nominally served the purpose ascribed to it. Hats were no more about covering heads than sex workers were about fornication.

That was one reason men so loved to photograph their hats, carry those photos

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143 Charleston Courier, April 30, 1851, May 3, 1852, December 19, 28, 31, 1853, June 30, 1855, February 1, 1858; November 15, 1859; Charleston Mercury, October 30, 1854.
around with them, leave them on other families’ hall tables, and wear them (so appropriately) in their hats. The narcissism portrayed in the relation between man and hat was the closest most men dared come past the point of friendship and homosociality they found in a place like Steele’s. “There are men by sex,” warned the Southern Literary Messenger, “who are so unmanly by character, that if not restrained, they would exult in such shameless effeminacy of dress as to bring the whole sex into contempt.” And leave it to Steele—a life-long bachelor—to provide just that restraint, filling up the ambiguity and silences of shopping with all manner of manly cajolery and blather. His hats were splendid and his style quite charming, and who would not buy of him? In just this way—as with chess—men used hats to triangulate relations among themselves, seeking kinship, searching out hidden, imagined identities. Where else could they go, if not to Steele’s?  

Whatever the calendar, men were drawn to the “world-renowned” Hat Hall in all its melodramatic incarnations—the “Mammoth ‘Hat-Hall,’” “that fashionable lounge,” the “Temple of Fashion,” the “Hat Palace,” to avoid losing out on the best opportunities. Hats were not merely put on show: each season offered a “Grand Display,” “Marvelous Exhibition,” “Grand Opening,” or “Programme.” Shopping at Steele’s was like nothing so much as a visit to London’s Crystal Palace or New York’s Hippodrome, amazing and thrilling both. “Don’t insult your head” by going elsewhere, he warned. When hyperbole failed, Steele simply stuck his “Big


Hat” on the front page of city papers, unadorned by text, and let readers fill in superlatives for themselves.146

All of Charleston was familiar with Steele’s rambling patter. His annual New Year’s Day messages read like addled, hat-centric statements from the mayor himself. Other city merchants labeled their brief, charmless ads “No Humbug” just to distinguish themselves. That was hardly necessary: Steele trumpeted the breadth and fame of his styles “throughout the South and West, more glorious than the ‘golden rays of an Indian Summer’s Sun,’ or the radiant beauty of ‘Ocean’s Venus’.” Who could hope to compete? He was the “Poetic Hatter,” marketing his wares with wittily awful verse: “Oh say, can’t you see by the dawn’s early light / That to sell for CASH is STEELE’S delight.” He was the “Daguerrean Hatter,” selling hats with cartes de visite or mirrors craftily sewn into the crown. He was a phrenological hatter, promising to fit hats with a “Conformateur Typographe” to the bumps of individual heads—even “a block-head.” He was an editorial hatter, publishing ads as fake news stories and mock dialogues to make his point. “Our grandfathers and grandmothers would open their eyes wide if they could but witness” the pace of progress in Charleston in recent times, “Justice” wrote. Especially, it turned out, they would be “delighted to see how STEELE, the great purveyor of HAT FASHIONS has ‘woke up’ the Hat-selling and Hat-wearing community of Charleston.” Judging from the crowds hastening to buy his stock, quite “bent upon making the proprietor rich,” one would suppose the “magnificent” Hat Hall “to be the whole world’s veritable centre at the present time.”

“Panegyric is useless! Encomium is wasted! Comment is unnecessary!” summed up another ad.

146 Charleston Courier, April 16, 1852, June 15, October 7, 1853, February 12, March 17, 1856, October 10, 1859; Charleston Mercury, October 30, 1854, January 6, 1855, May 6, September 3, October 3, 1859. By 1860, further up King Street, the rival firm of Williams and Brown was advertising under the sign of the “Big Hat,” but no one was likely to confuse their shop with the Hat Hall. Charleston Courier, September 21, 1860.
“If the vocabulary of praise was to be ransacked, it would fail in conveying a better idea” of “L’inventeur de modes,” and his glorious goods. Still he rattled on.147

Such prating and humbug might have failed badly had Steele’s endless ads been one degree less bewildering, bold, or tongue-in-cheek. Who else would have compared himself to Washington and Calhoun in terms of personal greatness, doubting whether “they were more useful in their calling than the hatter”? Commenting breezily on all manner of historical, economic, social, and political subjects, Steele turned the topic inevitably back to his everlasting hats, the focus of all attention and the solution to all problems. “One fact stands as fixed as the surf-beaten rock of Gibraltar,” he declared, “a fact that is as readily admitted wherever the effulgent rays of truth are evolved, as the existence of earth, air, and water”—the quality of Steele’s hats.148 That, plus price and terms, was the revolutionary triangulation of his pitch.

Just four dollars, when other men charged five or more: Steele harped on price relentlessly. Down to 1852, he had pursued a broader scale of prices, coupled with the assurance that—unlike competitors—he did not mark up his goods. For three, four, or five dollars, he promised, a man “can obtain a HAT, which will be in every point and particular, essentially, a $3, $4, or $5 Hat.” But that approach still opened the door to unmanly haggling, and in the autumn of 1853, he announced a price reduction: his top hats, henceforth, would sell at just four dollars. “Don’t say anything about, can’t you take less?” he warned: “One price.” Banking on “small profits and quick sales,” Steele dared his rivals to match his twenty-percent discount. On top of that, beginning in 1855, he refused all credit. “Steele! Terms!! Cash!!” was perhaps the

147 Charleston Courier, September 25, 1849, September 11, November 17, 1852, February 8, November 1, 1853, January 9, 1854, January 3, 1855, February 5, November 24, 1856, October 22, 1857, March 26, 1858, October 25, 1859, October 5, 1860; (Columbia) Daily South Carolinian, March 8, 1853.

148 Charleston Courier, December 12, 1853, January 23, October 24, 1854, March 14, 15, April 21, November 3, 1855, April 18, October 14, 16, 1856, February 21, October 13, November 2, 1859; Charleston Mercury, October 2, 1854.
strangest headline Charleston ever saw: “Cash on delivery! Almost before delivery!!!” Who would imagine that an ad simply repeating the words “Steele’s ‘Hat Hall’—Terms Cash” over and over could possibly succeed?^{149}

It was a bold strategy, though not as reckless as it might seem at first glance: Steele’s name was good in the city, and his pockets deep for a self-made man. His was also the right message for the times: two months later, the Mercury would second the call of New York’s *Journal of Commerce* for “No Credit.” Cash payment “lessons [sic] wants, adds to industry, cultivates habits, and improves the household.” What is striking, though, is that Steele never deviated from his “One Price—Terms, Cash!” policy thereafter, making it the cornerstone of the ads he flooded city newspapers with over the next six years.

And it worked. At the start of 1855, there were no fewer than fifteen men’s hat stores clustered along King, Broad, Meeting, and Hayne streets, scrambling to eke out a profit. Five years on, Steele had driven his competitors from the field. In 1860, only seven other firms sold hats in Charleston, and at least four of these concentrated exclusively on wholesaling to traders in other markets. The remainder survived by cultivating a narrower business or giving Steele a wide berth. Henry Ash’s small shop nine blocks away was selling “genuine French hat[s], of direct importation” and top quality at higher prices, with the taunt that “a Southern gentleman” should “not wish to wear Northern Wool or Rabbit Skin.” Few took heed. If “a good hat” was “the crowning test of a gentleman,” most Charlestonians felt satisfied equating their worth

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^{149} *Charleston Courier*, February 23, 1852, September 19, 1853, November 22, 1854, June 19, 1855. Earlier, Steele tried lesser measures to drive up sales—free reblocking, storage of summer hats, free shipping, complimentary hat cases—to no avail. *Charleston Courier*, June 12, 1853.
socially with Steele’s four-dollar tile. Ultimately, it was not the hat, but what it stood for that counted.

What, then, did it stand for? “You call tar molasses, make a cake with it, and then say what’s in a name.” Understanding the “principles of credit,” Steele was “an honorable and upright dealer, on whose word you can rely.” Steele’s strict terms of trade—“to buy for cash and sell for cash”—allowed him to flourish, not simply because it freed his business from the “miserable and treacherous” vagaries of credit (his company continued to import hats from the North on terms across the 1850s), but because cash-and-carry attracted new customers who admired the product he sold. Part with that honorable reputation, and Steele “would prefer the Auctioneer’s flag hang out over his door two to one.”

That name and price drew many men to Steele’s, but many more were drawn by the meaning of a Steele hat. Steele stood for solvency, as he ever said, plain and fair dealing. His hat was good quality, too: having plunked down cash, a man could walk out with a Steele hat with no headaches, in a double sense. It was “a shield against extortion,” proof that no man would quietly touch his elbow and quiz him. The hat was good, the man good: “Keep doing!” Steele promised, “Success is certain.” So, too, none could deny the transitive properties of Steele’s wares: as honorable was the seller, so the buyer must be; as careful with his money was one, so, too, the other. Steele worked hard to attain that equilibrium, as a dialogue with a recalcitrant customer showed.

Steele—“What is the matter with the Hat? It is perfectly brilliant and I never saw a Hat become you so well.
Customer—“I don’t like the lining.”

150 Charleston Mercury, March 9, 1855; Charleston Courier, May 6, 1856; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 8, 1860.

151 Charleston Mercury, January 1, 1855; Charleston Courier, November 25, 1852, December 12, 1853, January 1, 1855; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, July 23, 1867.
Steele—“You shall have any kind of lining you wish.”
Customer—“It is too high for me.”
Steele—“No such thing. You are not very tall, and I allowed for that, but I had rather you would select another Hat.”
Customer—“Oh no, I will keep this.”

Benefit here vastly outweighed cost: why “injure… reputation, destroy… character, and ruin… prospects in life” by wearing a bad hat? A fellow wearing one of Steele’s hats was set down as “a man of discernment and good taste.” But how to discern such a man? Steele had the answer: standing in front of the Charleston Hotel, anyone could quite easily pick out men wearing Hat Hall toppers. They looked much different from the “Old Hats Made New” out of Dinant’s shop, or the lackluster wares competitors sold.152 Reading hats was second nature to gentlemen, was it not? Discerning a Steele’s hat—and man—on the eve of secession seemed ever more imperative. It gave the sign of success, a fellow unencumbered by debt and dependence, standing firm on manly integrity. No wonder Hat Hall sales soared.

The fellow who bought from Steele could appear solvent, respectable, fair-trading, “good” in the truest bourgeois sense, at a remarkably low cost. But not all Charlestonians were ready to praise the changes he wrought. On the same day he published his 1855 Manifesto, the Mercury lashed out at its core principle:

Henceforth let the word be “pay”… [M]ake everybody pay—let there be no kindness, no courtesy, no liberality anywhere. Exact the uttermost farthing in every transaction—do nothing for nothing, and count nothing something except money—the real rhino, the [damned] ragged bank bills.153

Steele’s revolution in hats, it turned out, promised economic and social stability, but made war directly on the status system of honor itself.

152 Charleston Courier, November 16, 1853, June 14, 1854, October 4, 13, 1856, April 27, March 22, April 15, 1859, May 26, 1859.

153 Charleston Mercury, January 1, 1855.
Come 1860, how to tell a true revolutionary from a turncoat seemed just as difficult as picking out a worthy man from a crowd of debtors. Steele’s “cash only” system offered one solution to the question of respectability, but despite all his claims, it was devilish difficult to spot the difference between a hat purchased on credit and one bought with “the real rhino.” The same problem appeared politically on the streets of Charleston on the eve of Lincoln’s election as dozens of factions put forth slates of candidates for office, trumpeted bold sentiments, and tramped the city’s streets in support of secession.

Now more than ever, all eyes were on men’s hats. The zealous and prudent adorned their headgear with symbols of political allegiance, and hat-play between men of various classes and races assumed a seriousness hitherto unknown. Disunionists adopted a host of new paramilitary hat styles, parading Broad and Church in romantic French kepi and the glazed caps of the Minute Men. Politicians and would-be soldiers crowded into the photographic studios lining King Street to have their portraits taken, inevitably with hats front and center.154 When, at last, on December 20, secession convention president David F. Jamison announced the birth of the “Independent Republic of South Carolina,” men responded predictably, with their hats: they waved them wildly, tossed them into the air by the dozens, stuck them on walking sticks and swords and shook them fiercely.155

And why not? After three decades of saber-rattling, Carolinians had improbably pulled a revolution out of their hats. It was only natural that the sequel would see them talking with hats—and through them, too. That scene of raucous unanimity was, after all, the true culmination of the day’s—and the generation’s—events, a piece of political sleight-of-hand

154 For examples, see Richard B. McCaslin, Portraits of Conflict: A Photographic History of South Carolina (Fayetteville, AK, 1994), 40-41, 43, 46-48, 65.

155 Charleston Mercury, December 21, 1860; Charleston Courier, December 21, 1860.
reversing categories, denying crisis, resolving dilemmas with the ease of the craftiest magician or con man. Who could say for sure that they were not playing with politics now in just the same way men played with hats as they passed along the thoroughfare? Was saluting the blue cockade or cheering a radical parade any more meaningful than tipping one’s hat to a passing acquaintance? Did it imply anything more than a commitment to maintaining social unity, class rule, manly dominance, and distrust of difference?

There is little reason to think so, except that Steele was in the middle of this revolution. So, whatever else events in Charleston were about, they focused on making money. Steele had been Charleston’s “Military Hatter” for many years, but now he saw a bonanza shaping up. “There is no use of being killed in a Ten Dollar Hat,” he tweaked volunteers, nor in patronizing a shop staffed by Yankees. Steele’s was the only hat store in the South “controlled altogether by Southern proprietors and clerks,” so where else would patriots shop? Just that easily Steele transformed politics into hats once more, revolution into consumption, secession into shopping. On the day disunion became reality, he stretched a radical banner from his shop across King Street, welcoming men to his “Southern Hat Hall,” where they might deposit their “Turkey Buzzard Currency” for a proper Confederate hat or cap.156

Here again, Steele proved a leader of local fashion. In secessionist Charleston, no symbols attained greater prominence or power in shaping politics and memory than flags. Within hours of news of Lincoln’s victory, flags and transparencies of all descriptions appeared.

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156 Charleston Courier, April 6, 1855; April 8, 1859, October 30, December 22, 24, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, December 1, 1860.
Soon they were “everywhere,” focusing loyalties, commanding allegiance, astonishing outsiders. At noon on November 7, a red flag “with the Palmetto and the Lone Star” was unfurled from the radical Mercury office and stretched across Broad Street. From a window above, the blue Palmetto flag of South Carolina appeared, to “vociferous cheers.” At last, “the colors were to be nailed to the mast,” the newspaper declared. Up on Citadel Green, the cadet corps twice hoisted a Lone Star banner, “emblematical of our sentiments,” only to have it removed by their conservative commandant. “We hope to raise it again,” they told the public defiantly. Out in the harbor, the yacht Mercury raised the Lone Star and the brig James Grey, loaded with cotton for the mills of Massachusetts, flew a Palmetto flag, firing its signal gun once for each of the slave states. “Red, white, and blue bunting is in high demand,” newspapers reported.

By week’s end, city papers announced, state rights flags could be found “at every turn in our streets.” They seemed nearly as numerous as blue cockades. “If flags continue to multiply at this rate,” the Mercury declared on November 15, “we shall soon have them waving from every residence, as well as business house, in Charleston.” Locals found such popularity unsurprising. The banners which lined Charleston’s streets revived memories of revolutionary times when Carolinians had “stood in the deadly breach” at King’s Mountain and Cowpens, and of more recent war with Mexico, when the Palmetto Regiment seized victory at Churubusco and Chapultepec. Stirring “the loftiest emotions of pride and confidence,” flags both reflected past

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158 Charleston Mercury, November 8, 1860.
victories and foretold future triumphs. They tested allegiances, marking a political course of honor and independence.

Soon “everybody” who could make flags was “hard at work.” Broad Street and King, Meeting and East Bay presented one “long vista of flags of every conceivable variety of pattern and color, yet all devised with one view—to express devotion to our State.” City newspapers described more than fifty examples by mid-month, but finally confessed that “we have been unable to keep up with them.” Close analysis of these descriptions reveals recurring patterns of representation and a distinctive political grammar of flag motifs. The first and simplest flags were Lone Stars, Palmettoes, Crescents, or some combination of these. Star flags, the emblem of separate state action, usually displayed a white or blue background and added extra stars as hope for support from other states was kindled. Crescent and palmetto banners were commonly deep blue or scarlet and more likely to incorporate other symbols or slogans than star flags. The *Mercury* offered more than a dozen examples of unadorned star flags, but just one each displaying a solitary crescent or palmetto. Visually, these less radical images needed adornment. Symbolically, they required qualification. Each was drawn from the iconography of the American Revolution, but clearly the Lone Star was the most radical sign of the three. The crescent, symbol of the defense of Charleston, was the most conservative image. That may explain why some flags balanced stars with palmettoes, or employed a crescent to modify the impact of another sign. Men of perhaps more complex or belligerent politics unfurled more byzantine images. The Zouave Cadets paraded “a Palmetto tree, with a crouching Tiger—the motto of the company, at the base, having in his mouth and paws a wiley serpent—the Abolitionist, or enemy of State Rights—in one corner the Star of South Carolina.”

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159 *Charleston Mercury*, November 12, 15, 1860.

160 *Charleston Mercury*, November 15, 16, 1860.
Cogswell, the Broad Street print shop that issued the 1860 Association’s pamphlets, hoisted “a Palmetto tree with shields bearing the dates 1776 and 1860, branches of spears lashed to the trunk by a blue band, a rattlesnake coiled at the foot in the act of striking, and in the upper corner a star (bearing a crescent) shining through a floating cloud.” This, papers explained, meant to be “emblematic of the position which our State now holds.” For others, a word was worth a thousand pictures. “Dull not by coldness or delay,” warned the banner of one Hayne Street merchant. “There is a point beyond which forbearance ceases to be a virtue,” agreed a King Street photographer’s flag. “ACTION,” summed up a third. Each flag, then, demonstrated patriotism and political sentiment visually, yet they were far from identical.  

Soon a thriving commerce in flags had grown up, and more personalized and intricate designs became commonplace. The Cameron Ironworks hoisted an oversized palmetto and star flag, flanked with a phoenix rising from the ashes and a stylized mechanic’s arm. In front of the Meeting Street theatre hung a French tricolor, decorated with a palmetto, three stars, several bales of cotton, and the legend, “Dieu et Mon Droit.” Down the street, William Hughes’ bookstore displayed an open Bible, a palmetto, and five stars as “emblematical of a Southern Confederacy.” “In the name of our God,” its flag announced, “we get up our Banners.” Near Tom Flynn’s dry goods store, a green flag studded with four stars (for the states favoring immediate disunion) declared, “We can rely on our adopted citizens of Ireland.” Further along King Street, the Carolina Clothing Depot hung out a fanciful portrait of Andrew Magrath, the moderate who resigned his federal judgeship in response to Lincoln’s election.

He is exhibited not only as the expounder of the law, but as a patriot ready to do battle for the rights of his State. His judicial robes are thrown carelessly on a chair, and his right hand grasps a lighted match, which he is in the act of applying to a loaded cannon…. In bold characters the words, “The first gun for State Action,” are displayed. On the reverse we have the Palmetto, green and

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161 Charleston Mercury, November 9, 15, 1860.
flourishing, with two flags crossed—one the old Colonial flag, with the crescent on a blue ground, and the other the arms of the State on a red ground—and the motto (a quotation from Judge Magrath), “The time for deliberation has passed; the time for action has come.”

Here was a message all could embrace. Patriots would rally to his colors by instinct alone. 162

By late November, the profusion of banners and transparencies, especially in commercial areas of the city, had generated a veritable flag war. At first, bolder colors or designs were employed to attract attention. Then flags grew larger: six feet by nine, nine by twelve, ten by twenty. Increasingly, flags were draped across thoroughfares to set them apart from pole-hung banners, and to allow their distinctive patterns or messages to be displayed more clearly. Instead of hoisting yet another palmetto flag, some merchants planted live trees in front of their stores, or suspended them illuminated over their entrances. In front of the Charleston Hotel, in the Upper Wards, and elsewhere, enormous ship’s masts were set up as liberty poles for the slaveholders’ revolution, and elaborate flag-raising ceremonies played out to crowds of thousands. Banners from Nullification days were unearthed and exhibited as holy relics. Poems celebrated flags as the “badge of the loyal, the brave, and the free,” and orators praised the virtues of those who created such emblems. 163 Surely South Carolina was acting in earnest this time.

As important as the characteristics of flags to understanding their place in the secession campaign is where they were raised and by whom. It was no surprise that Rhett’s Mercury office hung out the lone star, but why did the conservative Courier wave a white palmetto (four days later), marked with the motto, “South Carolina has moved—other states will follow”? Was it from patriotism alone that the Charleston Evening News office, weathering the city’s first

162 Charleston Mercury, November 12, 16, 20, 1860.

163 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 20, December 1, 1860; Charleston Mercury, November 8, 21, 27, December 4, 7, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 26, 1860.
printers’ strike, hoisted a “State Rights Resistance Banner”? The flags that local newspapers noticed appeared first on Broad Street—the city’s legal, political, and literary heart—and at wharfside. Then they went up at manufactories like Moses Nathan’s carriage shop, Russell’s Hasell Street foundry, and Wharton and Petsch’s railroad shops. Small shopkeepers along King, Market, and Meeting Streets chimed in, and finally the big jobbers on Hayne and commission houses on East Bay. There were fewer flags in the working-class upper wards. If there were any south of Tradd—home to Charleston’s conservative wealth and power—they escaped notice entirely. There was a precise geography to the appearance of disunion banners, and a corresponding class structure. At first glance, these clues suggest that secession in the Queen City was overwhelmingly a petit-bourgeois revolution.

Before considering that surprising notion, we might ask what practical purposes flags served here. On one side, they promulgated a political message to a broad audience in a mostly commercial setting, demanding allegiance, just as Steele’s ads did. On the other, they drew attention to their bearers as worthy champions of that message, men advancing the community’s highest interests at the risk of their own, deserving of honor, respect, and adherence. But to what end, practically speaking? Certainly, raising a flag brought the state not an inch closer to independence in any practical sense. It could change no minds, achieve no goals. Why so much fuss and effort over bunting?

The role of the political theorist, Tracy Strong argues, is to shout theatre in a crowded fire. That ironic aphorism seems appropriate here. Flags, first of all, allowed Charlestonians eager for revolution a chance to impersonate revolutionaries. The melodramatic colors and

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164 Charleston Mercury, November 10, 12, 1860.

imagery they appropriated, the overblown rhetoric they employed in inscribing and describing their creations suggests that flags were essential props in the theatre of disunion. Consider the appeal one Horatio made to a group of well-heeled firemen in dedicating their new palmetto banner:

May it never be furled, but ever float proudly over our native State and when the time shall come to bear it to the field of battle, thousands of gallant sons will rally round its folds. When on the bloody field, our faces begrimed with smoke, and our hearts pouring out its richest blood, we will turn to it and strike the stronger blow for honor, life, and liberty.\textsuperscript{166}

Perhaps. But most shopkeepers and accountants, mechanics and quill-drivers who portrayed themselves as self-sacrificing heroes in their mind’s eye probably had little desire to take a bullet for the Cause. Flags, among other things, kept said cause wonderfully, necessarily, thankfully fuzzy. That was the only way it could prevail politically, or attract broad-based support. For southerners to cross the boundary to political independence in 1860, dozens and hundreds of such temporary, theatrical performances had to be enacted and encountered first throughout Charleston’s cityscape, announcing claims of political strategy and belief, compelling respect, adherence, and action. Each image announced diversity—and perhaps internal division—yet demanded a unity of thought and action the most brilliant speech could never have compelled. One might not trust the fire-eating \textit{Mercury} or the foot-dragging \textit{Courier}, but who would not salute the bold banners they hung out? And then, was it not natural to seek some sort of consonance of belief and action between those flags—and men—urging others on in support of splendid unanimity? Flags allowed men who might otherwise split hairs over platform and program to resolve/dissolve their differences in a few common symbols. Participants in sports and games—even chess games—project such views, propagate such stereotypes, and demand allegiance to their teams in the same way. What memories and sentiments had the image of the

\textsuperscript{166} \textit{Charleston Mercury}, November 19, 1860.
Palmetto tree (suited so well both to concealment and display) conjured up across the decades since Charleston’s defense in 1778? Certainly, all those necessary to link defense of home and honor with the heritage of Revolutionary heroism. “Will you not rally beneath it,” Sam Hammond asked one crowd breathlessly, “and defend it to the last?” True patriots would flock to the flag, putting aside petty quarrels. Only cowards and traitors would stand aloof, exploiting differences of policy or party for personal gain. Flags obliged citizens to cherish memories of common history and social identity, forgetting differences of class, ethnicity, and politics, rallying on a common point, driving toward a common cause. In this way, they were crucial weapons in forging the united front for secession in Charleston in 1860.

They were also splendid advertising: this should encourage us to reconsider just how disunion came about and what it truly meant. “In politics and in trade,” Emerson reminds us, “bruisers and pirates are of better promise than talkers and clerks.” Charleston’s merchants were determined to do more than talk in the autumn of 1860—but not much more. Before December 20 there was no certainty that separation would come off, less that it would last. Radicals’ record on this issue was poor, their internal squabbles notorious, and any delay must doom their project. Meanwhile, some of Charleston’s brightest political minds puzzling out how to arrange reconciliation with Washington. While politicians schemed, merchants and shopkeepers had to tend their trade, and flags offered an excellent come-on to customers. Why patronize Holmes and Company’s dry goods store? Their red palmetto and lone star had been the first colors lifted over East Bay Street. Why go to the theatre? As much for the performance

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167 Charleston Mercury, November 19, 1860.


which might go on in front of it, beneath its radical banner, as for the show inside. Wherever there was a flag, there was a speech, and an approving audience eager to defend rights and freedoms, including the freedom to purchase from patriotic merchants.

Why else would Claussen’s Bakery abruptly advertise as the “South Carolina Steam Bakery,” under the motto, “Southern Rights! Southern Enterprise! and Southern Independence!” “[W]ith few exceptions,” Claussen’s goods were “strictly of Southern manufacture,” a pedigree entitling them “to the favorable consideration of all who are true to Southern Principles and Southern Interests.” Even revolutionaries have a sweet tooth, but ads offered the same sectionalist come-on to sell yeast powder and toothwash, watches, oysters, sarsaparilla, ginger extract, stationery, liver pills, boots and shoes, dry goods, and more.

Charlton Bird waged steady war against the Palmetto Paint Store in the traffic of “Banners, Flags, [and] Transparencies” themselves. Collectively, Charleston shopkeepers made “true” southerners an offer they dared not refuse. So it was, short days after Tom Flynn transformed his “National Exchange” into the “Southern Exchange,” that the Carolina Clothing Depot, Palmetto Paint Store, Great Southern Gift Book Store, and other Dixie-fied emporiums appeared on the landscape, each a proud “Home Institution” inviting local custom. And, of course, there was Steele’s. Where Northern goods might seek to cheat or undermine, Charlestonians could purchase “Secession Hay” with confidence, puff away on “Southern Confederacy cigars,” or partake blithely of “State Rights Pepper.” To “Encourage Southern Preparations,” W. Y. Paxton explained, militant men should use “Palmetto Hair Wash.” It was the least they could do to advance the cause. Others longed to be “in the midst of the stirring times” in Charleston, if only they could find a commercial angle. “But it don’t pay,” complained one of Cook’s cronies.

170 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 17, 19, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 23, 26, December 12, 1860.
“And that’s the main chance after all.” Win or lose, disunionists looked to turn a profit.

Cynical that may seem, but no more so than the banners some citizens displayed. The workmen of the South Carolina Railroad Company spelled out their vision of independence graphically and hung it up for all to see:

On the left is a cotton field, with negroes picking cotton. In front of the field, ten bales of cotton are being rolled to a place of storage by a lively boy. The Palmetto true is not forgotten, and next claims attention. It is painted in oil colors on both sides of the bunting. At the top appears one large star, representing South Carolina, with a half moon in the centre, and two stars on each side. On the right is a locomotive with a train of platform cars loaded with cotton bales, and in the rear is a train going out loaded with goods of direct Southern importation. The Palmetto is encircled by a rattlesnake with twenty-four rattles. The locomotive is named “Line Street,” the first ever built by the South Carolina Railroad Company, and bears as her standard the Lone Star, the emblem of separate State action.

Politics here abandoned its appeal to the rational entirely: what mattered was that onlookers were encouraged to see in this scene possibilities yet unrealized, and to move from the realm of fantasy toward the attainment of the vision they had conjured up. The imagery commission merchant Robert Adger employed was less busy but equally blunt. Over his warehouses waved the palmetto beneath a rising sun, a ship under full sail, and the motto, “Free Trade.” That was a bourgeois utopia the meanest storekeeper would have fought for.

Said storekeeper seldom showed much inclination to risk all for “Southern Rights.” In 1832 and 1850, Charleston’s commercial men had proven the most reactionary force in the city, perhaps in the state itself. It seems amazing, then, that the grandest flag-raising ceremony of the disunion campaign was orchestrated by the wholesalers of Hayne Street, egregious

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171 Charleston Mercury, September 25, October 25, 26, November 9, 15, 17, 27, December 13, 17, 19, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 21, 24, December 12, 1860; ----- Vander Wiede to George S. Cook, January 19, 1861, George S. Cook Papers, LC.

172 Charleston Mercury, November 16, 19, 20, 1860.

173 Though the same willingness to trade on political radicalism appeared in items like De Coin’s Southern Rights’ Premium Friction Matches. Charleston Courier, April 28, 1852.
conservatives one and all. In this instance, as in many others, flags served as camouflage—as did hats—disguising ambivalence, political timidity, and Unionist sentiment. The man who hung up a palmetto banner avoided a too-close inquiry into his politics: they stood forth for all to see, and none dared question what devotion to abstract symbols meant.

We may quiz what contemporaries did not. What did the machinists Wharton and Petsch mean by flying a blue crescent instead of the lone star of separate state action? Did the dry goods merchants Hayne and Yates intend something different than the shopkeeper Nathaniel Roye? Their banners were identical, except that one called for “Action,” while the other urged “Immediate Action.” Was there not a world of difference—and perhaps deceit—contained in that missing word? A host of fire and militia companies hoisted new radical standards in these days, but most were inveterate moderates or worse, and many showed little inclination to fight when the time came. By muting and disguising uncertainties or opposition to disunion, many Charlestonians—especially its commercial classes and their employees—inadvertently fostered a revolution they had little stake or desire in promoting. Not that they fooled fire-eaters into thinking that the city’s bourgeoisie had undergone a mass political conversion experience, as some historians imagine. Radicals recognized that it was in their interest to keep up pretenses, substituting melodrama for reality, for they had plenty to hide as well. Had they admitted, as many privately said, that disunion meant war, and that war meant rivers of blood and almost certain defeat, how many Carolinians would have stood to the colors?

Forgetting has its purposes. In Charleston, hats and flags both measured men with deliberate ambiguity and imprecision, nurturing “the human propensity” Erik Erikson describes “to create model situations in which aspects of the past are relived, the present re-presented and

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174 Charleston Mercury, November 15, 1860.
renewed, and the future anticipated,” all in palatable form. Here men summoned memories of an honorable past to feed fantasies of a glorious future. Revolution became the fashion of the day. But flag-waving could not contrive social unity for long, nor could it win wars. The wind of secession raised a sea of flags in the city, each shaped by theatre, commerce, and political deceit. In the end, the flawed unity and false hopes it inspired plunged all into the flames of a shattered world.

PART THREE:

FIRE AND SWORD

Is not most soldiering a form of make-believe, but done so seriously, that we come to believe our unnatural roles, and are ready to turn play-acting into reality? We have been rehearsing for so long it is difficult to believe in the reality.

Neil McCallum, *Journey with a Pistol*¹

What forces kindle revolution and move men to war? Among the higher echelons, hopes and ideals may inspire. But revolution and war are not made, ultimately, by generals, politicians, and prophets. They are set in motion by ordinary young men mostly, performing simple, practical acts at street level: choosing sides, suiting up, planting flags, killing.² With regard to the Peloponnesian conflict, Thucydides explained what military historians call initial motivation in three blunt words: fear, honor, and interest.³ Twenty centuries later, on the eve of another equally disastrous civil war, Walter Steele echoed the Greek’s analysis, triangulating in his potent local vernacular: “Politics! Chess! Hats!!!”

Just so: in Charleston on the eve of disunion, politics was a kind of theatre, focused upon fear; chess a species of commerce, trading in honor and its clashing cousin respectability; hats signified a form of homosocial play, rooted in self-interest. Each tangled up with the others, spinning out different trajectories of allusions and appearances. Separately and collectively, those signs held special resonance for particular Charlestonians: men of certain social characteristics and peculiar personal experience. The fellows who rallied to Sam Tupper’s call


in 1860, forming the Vigilant Rifles, were perhaps more attuned than most to the hidden meanings of codes, gambits, and allusions which permeated Steele’s symbols. They knew better how to discover clues in that web of connotations, treacherous though they often were. When they smelled smoke, they knew enough to look for fire.

Who were these Minute Men? By Tupper’s account they were “men accustomed to dangers and fatigue,” who had “equipped themselves at their own expense,” though most were far from wealthy, and only a few owned slaves. They possessed little military experience as volunteer or line militiamen, yet most had stood ready to face “a fiery ordeal” far more daunting on a daily basis. They had been volunteer firemen, mostly, a civic role that qualified them peculiarly to stand in the forefront of revolution: for most of the men who formed the Vigilant Rifles being Minute Men was nothing new at all.

Yet, strange to say, it was just that record of action, so untainted by melodrama or subterfuge, so artlessly unconcerned with commerce, performing a play so deep in the face of forces so terrible, that drove these firemen and their comrades on toward secession and civil war. Whatever their private thoughts and emotions, doubts and fears, these were precisely the last men in Charleston who dared refuse duty’s call. Disunion’s revolution succeeded in the Queen City because just these most stalwart men were most suspect, unable to say no. Perhaps that is the way of most wars.

And so the Old South went to its doom in quite Shakespearean fashion: dragging its heels, denying divisions, choking back doubts. Macbeth and Hamlet were utterly outdone as

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5 Charleston Mercury, December 20, 1860.
would-be heroes hoist by their own petard. In the end, as the story of the Vigilant Rifles and their city of endless contradictions suggests, secession was an invitation to a self-inflicted beheading, quite contingent, stunningly inevitable *felo de se*.\(^6\)

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CHAPTER TWELVE:
THE SAME GALLANTRY DISPLAYED
UPON A BATTLEFIELD

For a terrifying moment in the spring of 1855, everything Charlestonians most feared seemed poised to destroy them, striking from without and within. Mid-March, from the Neck to the Battery, the city was “shrouded” in dense, churning smoke. Enormous fires raged in the parched pine lands five miles beyond the Upper Wards, cutting rail traffic and telegraph communication. “We are breathing smoke, eating smoke, sleeping smoke, and choking with smoke,” the Mercury reported, “and almost begin to fancy that life with us will fairly end in smoke.” Those nearby blazes were only a small part of a vast inferno, driven by gale-force winds, which seemed to be burning up the state altogether. From Edgefield to Newberry to Marion to Chesterfield Districts, one enormous conflagration turned churches, villages, plantations to flame and ash.¹ How long could coastal winds keep catastrophe from sweeping into Charleston? One good gust in the wrong direction, and the slaveholders’ citadel would reap the whirlwind of its deepest nightmares.

Almost a thousand men, white and black, waited on that looming crisis, even as they fought desperate, smaller battles. A lumber yard fire sent ten thousand dollars up in smoke; a bucket factory in Mount Pleasant, a casting shop on the East Bay, a downtown smithery all burned; kitchens, stables and private dwellings erupted in flames; even a chimney next door to the Vigilant Fire Company’s hall took light. The Mary Street railroad depot, full of cotton awaiting transshipment, posed a special hazard: fifty bales burned on the 24th, a hundred more a week later. The Medical College and two hotels only narrowly avoided destruction. In each

¹ Entry of March 9, 1855, Aaron Knight Diary, SCL; Edgefield Advertiser, March 14, 1855; Charleston Mercury, March 10, 12, 14, 15, 16, 1855; Charleston Courier, March 12-17, 19, 20, 1855.
crisis, the crews of Charleston’s thirteen white volunteer companies and the ten city engines staffed by slave and free black crews went “quickly at their work” to subdue their enemy, regardless of personal safety. It was not an especially busy month, it turned out, and insurance covered much of the damage in many of these cases. Still, all knew that a single slip might mean disaster. “Extensive conflagration[s]” struck St. Mary’s and Sandersville, Georgia in March, and major fires in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and elsewhere drove home the need for vigilance and daring. The courage of Charleston’s “gallant firemen” was tested on a daily basis.2

But at just this moment of crisis, appallingly, the city’s other defenders refused duty’s call. Eighteen miles north, Irish construction crews building the Northeastern Railroad had gone on strike, threatening violence and demanding pay. Dozens “flourished bludgeons,” “paraded… in formidable numbers,” and “displayed a hat upon a pole” as the flag of their movement. The railroad called on Charleston’s sheriff, Broad Street lawyer Theodore Gourdin, to bring the rebels to heel, and he had trundled out to their camp early on March 8 with president Thomas Pinckney Huger in tow, demanding surrender. Instead, the cap-wearing workers shook their fists and jeered the high hats back whence they came. Promising a posse to get his revenge, Gourdin talked the mayor into calling out the militia. Three line companies assembled promptly, but “by some cause or other,” they refused to march on the workers’ camp. Nothing of the sort had ever happened in the long history of Charleston.3

There was a host of legalistic reasons for digging in their heels. Battalion commander John Cunningham was nowhere to be found. Militiamen came under the command of the

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2 Charleston Mercury, February 24, March 15 30, June 1, October 29, 1855; Charleston Courier, February 24, 27, March 1, 3, 7, 12, 13, 14, 19, 26, 27, 29, 30, 1855.

3 Charleston Mercury, March 10, 26, 1855. The only scholarly account of this strike appears in Richard B. Morris, “Labor Militancy in the Old South,” Labor and Nation, 4: 3 (1948): 33-34. Historians have missed the fire scare altogether.
governor, not the mayor. Their service was due to Charleston city, not the outlying parishes. More than this, though, grumbling troops must have wondered at the folly of leaving their homes unmanned and civic defenses depleted at a moment when fire might erupt all too easily in their midst. Incendiaries “infested” Charleston, the Board of Fire Masters had warned, “miscreants” bent on “using the midnight torch to carry out their nefarious schemes for plunder.” There was more than fire to fear, too. City wharves had been “repeatedly disturbed” by “fighting and rowdyism” in recent days, and with St. Patrick’s Day looming, boisterous celebration might boil over into riot.4 Local politics also factored in: Mayor Thomas Hutchinson and senior militia officer Major General John Schnierle were old foes. The two had tussled for top office in the city across the past decade, as control shifted back and forth between lawyer Hutchinson’s conservative Hunkers and Schnierle’s proletarian “B’hoys.”5 Refusing the mayor’s command was a grand way to make the south-of-Broad crowd crawl before their imagined inferiors in search of safety. Beyond all this, another argument went unrecorded, if not unwhispered: Charleston’s line militia swept up those too poor to join volunteer companies, too unrespectable to serve in the fire brigade, the most marginal and un-martial of working-class fellows. The city had seen its share of riots and slave panics, but never a work stoppage by unskilled white laborers.6 There was no local precedent for sending soldiers against strikers, and some militiamen must have chafed at the implicit equation made between wage workers standing against “overseers” and rebellious slaves. At any rate, the militia was dismissed.

4 Charleston Mercury, January 30, March 12, 1855; Charleston Courier, March 3, 1855.

5 Eugene Sue, Jr. [pseud.], The Mysteries of Charleston: A Brief View of Matters and Things in General, the Internal Arrangements and Progressive Improvements, Past, Present, and Future, in the Great Metropolis of Charleston, With a Peep into the Various Ramifications of Society in its Several Aspects, Moral, Social, Political, and Financial (Charleston, 1846).

6 In addition to the disturbance Theophilus Fisk kicked up, see the post-Nullification riots described in (Providence, RI) Providence Patriot, November 1, 1834; (Tallahassee) Floridian, November 8, 1834.
The soldiers’ defiance of the mayor redoubled anxieties over strikers’ defiance of the railroad. Worse, when no posse went out to make arrests on March 9, the company’s resistance collapsed. Foremen paid off hands, and scores of armed workingmen headed toward Charleston to play out the next scene of proletarian melodrama. Rumor said the mob was well-liquored and looking for a fight. Controlling all roads leading into the city, perhaps they would call on Charleston’s immigrant workers to rise and riot, as they had two years earlier in the wake of Will Taber’s rash remarks. Or would canny slaves seize this moment of fire and discord to leap at liberty at last? No one knew.

It was, quite unexpectedly, Col. Tommy Simons who saved the day, rallying two companies of volunteer infantry, the Charleston Light Dragoons, plus the Washington Artillery, and rounding up thirty-three strikers without incident. The ring leaders got away, local papers groused, and nine workmen escaped trial for lack of evidence. How much better, though, if the balance had just melted into the woods? Instead, charged with rioting, twenty-four fellows—defended by Simons (mirabile dictu), and arch-Irishman Andrew Magrath—were swiftly sentenced to two months’ imprisonment, plus a five-dollar fine. That lenient penalty aimed to avoid inflaming local discontent. “I mean not to exercise severity,” Judge Thomas Jefferson Withers wimpered. Ireland had contributed much to the cause of freedom, the strikers were young and perhaps misled, and the desire for higher wages was laudable in its own way.8

Regional papers hailed the verdict, and construed Withers’ words to their liking: it was “distinctly understood by Pat in the ditch” and his Yankee brethren, that the rule of law in South

7 Charleston Mercury, March 10, 14, 1855.

8 Charleston Mercury, March 12, 1855; (Washington) Daily National Intelligencer, March 15, 1855; Charleston Courier, March 15, 20, 22, 23, 26, April 9, 1855.
Carolina would stand against “mobocracy,” making no compromise. That local papers had hushed up the worst of the disorder to “further the interests of the road” went almost unnoticed.9

The judge or the strikers or their capture never nearly focused public attention anyway. The city had no shortage of hooligans or men bent on bringing them up short. More worrisome was the mutiny of the local militia, and Simons’ pointed decision to pass over the Irish Volunteers, the all-Irish Meagher Guards, the Emmet Volunteers, and the newly-formed Montgomery Guards when he put out the call to take up the strikers. Suppose those sons of Erin had refused his command—or stood on the other side? The Irishman unmindful of his homeland could not be trusted, one St. Patrick’s Day toast declared. Indeed, replied another, all true men blessed the “sound of fetters breaking” as “the Oppressed of every Nation and Clime” awoke from “slavery’s slumber.”10 Such sentiments betrayed a political recklessness Charleston’s leaders dared not disregard.

How stark the contrast to the city’s volunteer firemen—dedicated to risking their lives at a moment’s notice, putting self-interest and personal safety aside ruthlessly in pursuit of civic duty. “Who will do the deed or die?” asked a widely reprinted poem: “’Tis a fireman of the land.” The citizens who sheltered under his care owed him “Honor,” “Fame,” and “a health” in full measure. Every time Charleston church bells sounded the alarm—an almost daily event in some seasons—men and women rushed outside to cheer their champions on, admiring their courage and perseverance, and rendering up refreshments. The next day, unfailingly, local papers were crammed with notices of tribute and mutual thanks. So, after a minor blaze on Calhoun Street on March 13, the German Fire Company “return[ed] their thanks” to W. C. Smith, the Palmettoes to “Mr. Whitney, Mr. Carberry, Mr. Earle, and Mr. Conway,” the Eagles

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9 (Columbia) *Daily South Carolinian*, April 9, 19, 1855.

10 *Charleston Courier*, March 20, 1855.
to “Messrs. C. C. Graddick, Joseph Church, and J. P. Earle,” the Marion men to E. M. Whiting, the Hope Company to “Messrs. J. P. Earle, F. Conover, and J. F. Church,” the Charleston squad to Sidney Egard, and the Vigilants to “Mr. C. C. Cambridge, E. Jones, and our Treasurer, C. P. Aimar” for the drinks they offered.11

Fire, then, both threatened social order and reinforced social unity in the Queen City. It put lives and property in jeopardy and disrupted the flow of trade and daily life. On the other hand, Charlestonians strove to construct firefighting as a satisfying ritual of reciprocity recognized and duty fulfilled. It became a team sport allowing players to demonstrate skill, character, and masculine derring-do, inviting onlookers to share in the struggle and triumph vicariously, mitigating considerations of class, gender, and race in the common cause. The cause for alarm was simultaneously cause for celebration, reminding men and women of the dangers of social division and the benefits of vigilance, mutuality, and adherence to duty.12

How strange, then, that no one noticed, at just this moment, the most fateful danger of all. On March 12, the Courier devoted only a single sentence to news that the city council of Columbus, Ohio, had resolved “to purchase a steam fire engine” and, a week later, that the inventor of that engine was lecturing in Boston.13 Infant revolutions are difficult to discern at a distance, especially through a haze of smoke.

Fire was the great fear of antebellum America, more terrible to contemplate than any other form of natural disaster or social turmoil. Floods or hurricanes were too infrequent, seasonal, and localized to cause much trepidation. Riots could be put down, vice contained or

11 Charleston Courier, April 30, March 13, 1859.


13 Charleston Courier, March 12, 19, 1855.
shunned. Epidemics of cholera, yellow fever, and other contagions struck swiftly and
mercilessly, but seemed to afflict the lower orders disproportionately.\textsuperscript{14} Omnivorous, satanic, yet
undeniably attractive, fire was an emblem of temptation, disorder, and chaos in Victorian culture.
It struck without warning, spread with stunning rapidity, and respected no boundaries of social
distinction or moral order. “[S]ublime although melancholy,” it menaced everything in its path
and ended by consuming itself.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet fire was seen as a purifying force, too, a God-given aid and comfort.\textsuperscript{16} Fire was
man’s companion, source of light, the foundation of civilization. Without its nurturing flame,
society would be pitched back into darkness, barbarism, and danger. That was what made it so
fascinating and terrible. The epidemics that sundered families and ravaged slums were
malevolent by nature, external threats to society’s well-being. Storms of wind and water blew no
good and bore no kinship to mankind. Even the social disorders to which urban culture gave rise
were seen as the product of foreign or diseased elements within the body politic. Those forces
stood eternally in conflict with human progress, inscrutable opponents in the struggle between
man and nature. In this respect, fire was a different and more dangerous enemy. It was an
internal threat, lurking treacherously on every street corner, within every home. Properly
contained, it might be an invaluable servant and ally. Loosed from control for only a moment, it
knew no loyalties, destroying all it touched. It was impossible to do without, impossible to
master entirely. In planter society, the common characteristics attributed to fire and slavery


\textsuperscript{15} Peter Neilson, \textit{Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States of America, Interspersed with Original Anecdotes, Illustrating the Manners of the Inhabitants of the Great Western Republic} (Glasgow, 1830), 310; Gaston Bachelard, \textit{The Psychoanalysis of Fire} (Boston, 1964), 1-59, 99-107.

blended effortlessly in the nightmare of the brutish incendiary. But whites as well as blacks were capable of treachery, all knew. Across antebellum America, and especially in Charleston, fire came to symbolize a multitude of fears of betrayal, internal division and disorder, passions impossible to hold in check, and a vast retributive justice. When Thomas Jefferson wrote of the Missouri Crisis as “a firebell in the night,” all understood the alarm he felt and the perils he imagined. This was a world in which lakes of fire attained a visual and poetic reality we can scarcely conceive, where warnings of the fire next time conjured a more imminent dread.

The threat of fire was everywhere in the wooden world of colonial America. In the early years of settlement, it had been among Europeans’ most effective weapons of invasion, and the sight of spectacular forest fires, natural or manmade, awed newcomers. Into the eighteenth century, too, the stories and memories of great European fires shaped urban American consciousness. In an age before insurance, fire claimed more than lives and property. It transformed history itself, changing the meaning of the past and the shape of the future both. When a baker’s store burned or a weaver’s loft went up in flames, the work of generations to attain and maintain economic and social status was destroyed. Families lost tools, occupations, prospects, relations, identities. If a family of tailors was suddenly deprived of the trade they had worked for half a hundred years and more, what—and who—were they then? In this sense, fire inflicted a form of social death on the households it struck, turning lives to ashes. Even the streets where fire passed by were not truly spared, for households were anything but independent. Fire transformed social relations at every level, wrecking lives and recalibrating status dramatically in the course of hours. In a world where the pace of change was glacially slow and the scale was small, the connection between fire and revolution was easily made.18

Fires were memorable events in the life of a household, a street, a neighborhood, or a community, and cities up and down the Atlantic coast calculated their development in terms of them. Boston burned in 1653, 1676, 1679, and again in 1760. More than a hundred families were left homeless in the blaze of 1711. Fire ravaged Philadelphia in 1730, New York in 1741 and 1776, and New Orleans several times at the end of the century. These were cataclysmic events in eighteenth-century society, reshaping hundreds of destinies with a single spark. When fire erupted, the whole town turned out to battle the flames: male and female, all lent a hand because all were threatened. All were needed, too, because the methods of fighting fire were so crude. For smaller blazes, bucket brigades formed long lines, filling and passing pails from hand to hand. Dousing a fire in this manner required steady toil, teamwork, and a weak opponent. A few minutes’ head start or a good gust of wind made all that toting and tossing labor lost. But interspersed with these great fires were scores of lesser blazes, where only a few houses or a block or two burned. Each was a potential holocaust averted, all knew. It was easy to believe in Judgment and Providence both when the fire bell rang out. So, too, the same impulses which led colonials to defend their communities against fire drove them into the battle against tyranny which built a new nation.  

In the early republic, the rapid growth of cities transformed the meaning of fire and the battle against it. As urban centers became larger and more densely populated, outbreaks grew

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more frequent and more mundane, too. It was still easy to see the hand of God in a theater fire, but more practical minds simply opted to stay away from such firetraps. There were just too many transient, unpropertied, and socially disconnected people in American cities in these years to expect anything like a community response to fire. So long as they escaped with clothes on their backs, a considerable number of urbanites saw no peril in fires at all: they had nothing to lose by them and no reason to risk their lives putting them out.

Formerly, fires had been seen as endangering community itself. Now, except with the largest conflagrations, that ancient sense of commonwealth endangered went up in smoke. Men and women experienced fire as an aspect of the social relations of production—the water in which they swam—allocating resources and lending support along lines defined by race, gender, class, and personal relationships. As city-dwellers became desensitized to the danger and suffering fires caused, they came to view them as a grand form of public entertainment. “It was like deciding to go to the theater to see a play that had been announced and that could be counted on with certainty to come off,” Gustaf Unonius explained. By the hundreds, men and women rushed to the scene of a blaze so as not to miss a moment of the drama. If they helped to extinguish the flames, that only added to the novelty of the outing. By 1860, most cities had experienced fires far more devastating than they suffered in the colonial era, yet socially and culturally the impact of antebellum blazes was less. That shift lowered anxieties sufficiently to allow a melodramatic view of fires to take hold, and for a new vision of the fireman as hero to emerge. In the years before daguerreotypes and magic lantern shows, “panoramas” of great fires—massive narrative paintings that scrolled across a stage by the use of a roller mechanism—

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were among the most vivid and popular forms of entertainment.\textsuperscript{21} What better way to revel in the emotions fire aroused without the risk of burning up?

Intertwined with that theatrical conception was a growing fear of the lurking incendiary. Some fires were acts of God or nature, others the product of accident or misadventure. There was little to say about Octavia Senet, burned to death when her clothes caught fire: she was a poor blind woman in a dangerous environment whose luck ran out.\textsuperscript{22} In a disturbing number of cases, though, Charleston blazes were both deliberate and man-made. Fire was a superb weapon of revenge: quick, lethal, and untraceable. Rural folk had used the torch for centuries to maintain social discipline and even scores, and they carried it to the cities of the eastern seaboard. Arson was a tactic of class warfare, too, fire the final weapon of every mob. Disgruntled journeymen and apprentices burned shops, factories, ships, and warehouses. Slaves recognized its power, certainly: what a hundred bondmen could not accomplish against the master class, a single servant with a torch and fast feet might achieve.\textsuperscript{23}

Nor was fire as a political weapon reserved only for the underclass. In the 1760s, Boston’s Anti-Stamp Fire Society pledged not to rescue the hated Stamp Tax office should it somehow catch fire. A decade later, Whigs and Tories both burned dissenters’ homes to stiffen support for their cause. This was political terrorism with a human face: by the Napoleonic era, William Congreve’s rocket technology made it possible to devastate cities with fire from miles away. That threat remained potential, for the most part, though American soldiers burned York

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\item Charleston Courier, February 24, 1855.
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(Toronto) during the War of 1812 and British troops returned the favor at Washington. Even those terrors had receded by the Victorian era. After putting his chess-playing Turk into storage in the 1830s, Johann Maelzel toured the United States with a panorama of the burning of Moscow in 1812, a moving picture and morality play both, making the link between politics and fire explicit. As with most Victorian theater, audiences read this melodramatic message self-reflectively, with deep emotion.²⁴

We cannot know how often the disaffected or disfranchised took up the torch to redress the balance of power. More commonly, incendiaries aimed a little lower. With proper stealth and management, fire offered a splendid chance for plunder. Once flames were discovered in a building, the usual course was to move everything of value out into the street, a task neighbors and bystanders aided as a matter of civic duty. From there, it was easy pickings for the light-fingered. Other criminals found opportunities further afield: while half the town was sloshing water and battling flames, or drinking in the spectacle, their homes and stores went unguarded. The connections between play, subversion, and commerce were obvious here to antebellum Americans.

Against the malevolence of fire and men bearing fire, early national communities were hopelessly overmatched. In large centers, watchmen stood lookout for signs of conflagration or patrolled the streets after dark. Most cities imposed curfews to keep arsonists indoors when the citizenry was most vulnerable. With all but minor fires, though, men could only hope to contain the damage. Major streets were built extra wide to prevent flames leaping from one side to the other, and houses of brick or stucco were constructed to offer a makeshift firewall against advancing flames. The well-to-do simply set their houses off, sitting safe behind stone walls or

²⁴ Rules and Orders to be Observed by the Anti-Stamp Fire Society, instituted in Boston, October 1763 (Boston, [1765]); Paul Johnson, The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815-1830 (New York, 1991), 18; Charleston Mercury, February 2, 1839.
within the shelter of apparently decorative lawns and gardens. But even these measures offered only minor protection. “I have seen houses on the opposite side of a street eighty feet wide, take fire from the intense heat of burning houses, Peter Neilson declared in 1830.

When there is a high wind there is hardly a possibility of putting a stop to the mischief, until some large vacant space may chance to occur, and water is very often scarce. A common method practiced, is to blow up two or three houses so as to cause a space where the fire may be arrested, this is done by putting a barrel of gunpowder in the lower part of the house fixed upon, and setting fire to it by means of a train; accidents frequently occur from these explosions, as the crowd have generally very little time to retire to a suitable distance.25

Far into the antebellum era, firefighters spent more time wrecking buildings than saving them, tearing them to pieces with hooks and axes, or blowing them sky high. Nothing could show better the fear fire roused in Victorian communities.

Good firefighters might make good soldiers, as one may see, and in the late eighteenth century, men like Sam Adams, Paul Revere, and Alexander Hamilton offered their services gladly. Their example emulated the original Hero, who invented the fire engine in Alexandria two thousand years before. George Washington was a zealous fireman, too, donating one of the first crude pumping engines—an updated version of Hero’s machine—to Alexandria, Virginia’s Friendship volunteers in 1775. Typically, it was Ben Franklin whose innovations revolutionized fire protection in America. “[An] Ounce of Prevention is worth a Pound of Cure,” he calculated, urging Philadelphians to stop fires before they started. More caution handling coals, more public pumps, and greater care in sweeping chimneys was required. Most needful was the sort of “Order and Method” in fighting fires recently initiated in Boston, where “Mutualist” societies pledged to lend a hand in helping members when fire struck. By 1736, Franklin’s scheme had generated the Union Fire Company, an association of thirty wealthy men joined “for the more ready Extinguishing of Fires, and mutual Assistance in Removing & Securing of Goods when in

25Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States, 310-311.
Danger.” The success of this project inspired the creation of other groups, “one new Company being formed after another, till they became so numerous as to include most of the Inhabitants who were Men of Property.”26 In return for this service, firemen were released from militia duty and other civic taxes.

By the nineteenth century, volunteer companies had displaced the communal system of fighting fires all across America. The new order was a class order, a defense of property by the propertied. Not only was a poor man unable to afford the initiation fees, monthly dues, uniforms, equipment, and time the new companies required. He was simply blackballed by the club-like structure of these groups. The coming of the fire companies was an unmistakable sign of the rising strength of the petit bourgeoisie.

As ever, Franklin’s innovative rationalism soon hitched up with narrow self-interest. By 1752, the success of the volunteer system in Philadelphia inspired him to launch the nation’s first viable fire insurance company. Protected homes were designated with a metal “fire mark,” warning volunteers to go easy with their axes, for fear of chopping profits. The insurance industry expanded in step with fire companies, and one more bar to capital accumulation fell. Now company members and clients could rest easy in the knowledge that, when fire struck, their possessions were protected, both by the toil of respectable, reliable men, and by the premiums they paid. Their capital was watchful, and ever watched.27

Technological advances made the volunteers’ task easier. The first fire engine appeared in Boston in 1678, but nothing like an effective machine came into use for nearly another


century. Early contraptions were little more than large wooden tubs suspended on litter poles (wheels came later, as streets became more passable). Bucket brigades dumped water in, and a suction pump forced it out through a gun-like nozzle, playing it on the flames. Pumps grew larger across the colonial era, increasing pressure and volume, until they outstripped the bucket line’s ability to supply their needs. Widespread adoption of leather hoses overcame this problem, allowing volunteers to draw directly from nearby water sources. By placing the hose butt of one engine in the tub or “box” of the next, water could be pumped from great distances as required.28

On this basis, a new architecture and culture of fire protection spread across urban America. Formerly, firehouses had been little more than sheds built to shelter buckets, axes, and ladders. Now, centrally located frame and brick stations went up to enshrine new engines and the proud, efficient teams who worked them. By 1860, fire stations in most cities were substantial, even lavish clubhouses, sporting everything from stained-glass windows to billiard tables—and chess boards in abundance. The volunteers who made these structures a second home exemplified the boundless spirit of Young America: with patience, skill, and their new “machines,” they might discipline even fire itself.29

When antebellum Americans thought of firemen, though, it was not Franklin or Washington who came to mind. It was Mose Morrison. Tall, brawling, and good-hearted, Mose was the melodramatic creation of Frank Chanfrau, who introduced the “New York Fire Boy” to the Broadway stage in 1848. His presence elevated Ben Baker’s A Glance at New York from


forgettable farce to national sensation. Audiences roared out in joyful recognition at Chanfrau’s first appearance and cheered on their low-rent hero in a score of plays stretching down to the late 1850s. Doubtless some who wandered into Descombe’s Rooms in the autumn of 1857 to see Paul Morphy and Louis Paulsen play chess continued on to Charley White’s to watch Mose and the Irishman or Linda, the Cigar Girl; or, Mose Among the Conspirators. In Charleston, they raced to see Mose in California in the days after the Taber riots and again for three weeks in the summer of 1856—along with such other Chanfrau creations as Timothy Toodles, Ragged Pat, and Solomon Shingle, “the People’s Lawyer.” By that time, Mose had become the best-loved comic creation of Victorian America, a genuine folk legend.

Mose went to China before he was done, but it was A Glance at New York that made him famous. Although historians have paid casual attention to the play—mainly to sketch Mose as an outlandish caricature of a “Bowery B’hoy”—they have generally misunderstood what his character signified to antebellum Americans and what the play was about. Middle-class men, they imagine, came to laugh at Mose, as he blundering up against the customs of respectability. Working-class types came to laugh with him as he rescued bourgeois “greenhorns” from the perils of the big city. Scholars have typed Mose a Bowery loafer, a proletarian hero, a pugnacious “gutter bum,” even a coded symbol of black identity. All of this falls wide of the


31 All sequel and “fan fiction” scripts are lost, but see Thomas P. Gunn, Mose Among the Britishers, The B’ hoy in London (Philadelphia, 1850), and the Bowery Theater Playbill, December 17, 1849, Harvard Theater Collection, HU, summarizing “Mose, Joe, and Jack,” for variant incarnations of Mose.

32 For examples of scholarly interpretations of Mose, see Zurier, American Firehouse, 54-55; Peter G. Buckley, “To the Opera House: Culture and Society in New York City, 1820-1860” (Ph. D. diss.: State University of New York
mark. A fresh glance at *A Glance* helps explain the meaning of volunteer fire service in antebellum Charleston and decodes much of what the Vigilant Rifles aimed at.

The play is classic comic melodrama, a series of set-pieces strung together to illustrate character and discharge emotion. The plot revolves around a rural boy’s encounter with the big city, which beats him at every turn. New York is a place of contrasts—“five minutes’ walk will take you from the extreme of wealth to the extreme of poverty”—and in the first act country mouse George and his city companion Harry are pitted against the sharpers Jake and Mike. There is no contest here, and that is half the humor: whenever Harry leaves George’s side, the con men appear in various guises to prey on the newcomer’s gullibility. George is less victim than incompetent, we see, forever confusing a short con with the main chance. There is no gambit he will not accept—not even recognizing it as such—ever imagining he can see clearer than those around him the relations of power and exchange value of objects at stake. Presented with a lost wallet at a big discount, the ninny cheers, “Egad! Here’s a speculation.” He can recoup earlier losses at the expense of the apparently honest workingman who mistakes its true worth. But the hayseed is snookered once more: to roars of approval, the wallet proves worthless. It is only later that George sees his ploy as an incompetent counter-gambit, almost casually exploded—and even then he fails to learn his lesson. As George mourns that “All is not gold that glitters,” antebellum audiences could only shake their heads, sure that he will chase fool’s gold just as errantly the next time the bait appears, to his inevitable, witless sorrow.  

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bourgeois lesson, to deal honestly when dealing with crooks, was one they knew, if they did not always perform well.

There is nothing quite villainous about George’s behavior. He never sets out to swindle anyone, taking his chances as they come. The trouble is, he takes very bad chances, and the character he presents seems unmanly and two-faced. Jake and Mike do not plan to cheat George either: “I saw how willing he was to fork out mopusses,” Jake explains, “so I came the Elephant Dodge on him.”34 This was nimble triangulation, shrewdly appraising play. The amateur had tried a clumsy gambit on an artful stranger: who did not admire the master stroke that turned the tables?

How low George might stoop “to make a few shiners,” we can only guess. For con man Jake, there are proper limits to enterprise. Confounding men was fair, kidnapping animals foul. “Stuff watches, drop pocket-books, or do anything in a genteel way, but never condescend to smug dogs.”35 This is a respectable shyster, proud of his craft. By that standard, Jake is a model of bourgeois self-control, George unable to curb his lust for profit. Audiences knew better than to feel sorry for a fool’s defeat. They laughed at greed and carelessness both. Someone from the upper tiers must have shouted, “Caveat emptor.”

But no roguery for Mose, who drops in as tour guide and savior to these middle-class boys—saving the play in the process. Outwardly, Mose is rough: wearing a stovepipe cocked forward, a fireman’s red shirt, suspenders and breeches tucked into his boots, chomping a cigar tilted jauntily skyward, he looks like no one’s idea of a gentleman—except his own. But here as elsewhere, the hat is the man: Mose stands at a crossroads of class identification. Why does Harry find his old schoolmate wandering near the swank Astor House? “I heard that you held

34 Ibid., 12.
Broadway in such contempt, that you couldn’t be persuaded to cross it,” he jokes. True it was, Mose admits, but “I’ve got over that now.” A fight with a fire boss, where he was “lammed… with a spanner,” has convinced Mose “not to run wid der machine anymore.” The decision is painful, though Mose shrugs it off: he plays “a fair game, ov course,” and expects to be treated likewise. “I aren’t been well used, so I’m goin’ to locate somewhere in this quarter, if I can find a good boardin’-house.”

Boardinghouses on Astor Place? Mose is a neophyte of a different sort, quite unaware of the divide between proletarian culture and respectability. Where will this fish-out-of-water wind up? From the first, Mose is an admirable and manly figure: though his manners are rude, honesty and fair play mark him as respectable. For audiences enamored of self-made men and anxious to rise in the world themselves, this diamond-in-the-rough was a wonderfully sympathetic, even heroic figure.

The balance of the play celebrates ambiguous identity performed and resolved. First Mose and his compatriots go on “a little spree,” improbably disguising themselves as women to sneak into a female “bowling saloon.” Here, gender conventions are parodied with humorous results. The women are decidedly unfeminine: wearing “plain white pants and blue blouses, and little black caps… all smoking cigars.” Yet they are women still, curvaceous and coy. Decked out ludicrously, the men fail miserably in passing for women, too. “I can play pretty if I’m a mind to!” Mose promises, but in the end he can’t. On impulse, he kisses a woman (a daring piece of comic homosociality and gender inversion). “A man!” she screams, triggering the

36 Ibid., 9-10.

37 Ibid., 12-13. In this respect, Mose is close kin to Sam Weller, the working-class hero of Dickens’ *Pickwick Papers*, and a rowdy progenitor of Charlie Chaplin’s beloved (and chivalrous) Tramp. For contemporary images of Chanfrau as Mose, see “Sykesy Take De Butt,” Frank Chanfrau File, Harvard Theatre Collection, HU; “Frank Chanfrau,” Theatrical Photographs Collection, UGA.
statement of self-declaration that sent theatres rocking. “Yes, sir-ree, I am a man, and no
mistake,” Mose crows, “and one of de b’hoys at dat!”

Mose and his men prove that point in spades that night, fleeing the women and landing in
“Loafer’s Paradise.” “If I don’t have a muss soon, I’ll spill,” Mose declares en route to that bar.
He gets the “a regular knock-down and drag-out” he craves, but emerges a respectable figure
once more. Historians have missed this point altogether. First Mose denounces fancy “foo-
foos” and “outsiders,” too shiftless “to come the big figure,” and pay their own drinks and
lodging. Then he pitches into Jake, launching fisticuffs to sustain, not undermine order. For
middle-class men who joined anti-abolition mobs in these years, or feared the encroachment of
“foreign” ideas and values, Mose’s action here was perfectly understandable—even if a little
eager for a “muss.” That just proved him brave, bluff, and independent—a man’s man.

Contrast this scene with Mose’s next appearance, where courtesy saddles him with a
foundling. The hero’s speech here became a classic of Victorian theater, driving to the core of
manly character and moving the tender-hearted to tears.

Dis baby puts me in mind when de fire was down in Spruce Street; dere was a lot
of shanties burning; I had de pipe, ’cos I rolled de ingine dat night—and I saw a
woman cryin’ and a hollerin’. Seys I, “What’s de matter, good woman?” Seys
she, “My baby’s in de house and it’s burnin’!” Seys I, “What!”—I turned my cap
hindside afore and buttoned my old fire-coat, and I went in and fetched out de
baby to her. She fell down on her knees and blessed me. [Wipes his eye with
sleeve] Ever since dat time I’ve had a great partiality for little babies. The fire-
boys may be a little rough outside, but they’re all right here. [Touches breast]

38 Baker, A Glance at New York, 12.

Melodrama: Stage, Picture, Screen, ed. Jacky Bratton, et al. (London, 1994), 199-213; Leonard L. Richards,
“Gentlemen of Property and Standing”: Anti-Abolition Mobs in Jacksonian America (New York, 1970). As this
quotation suggests, the Mose plays appealed to petit-bourgeois sentiment, not merely the rowdy culture of “jolly
More than this, the notion that minstrel shows and other forms of overdrawn performance were working-class
entertainment is quite in error. For elite Carolinians’ fondness for such shows, see Sallie Edwards to Catherine G.
Edwards, October 13, 1848, Screven, Edwards, Clarkson, and Heriot Papers, SCL.
Mose is a bruiser, but sentimental, too. In the next scene, we see him soft-hearted again, inviting his “prize lamb” Lize to a “first-rate shin-dig” that evening. She is a “gallus gal” of the working class, a perfect match for her man, but like him obviously made for better things. She works in a shop, reads sentimental novels, admires Christy’s Minstrels, and is devoted to her Mose.40

Meanwhile, Mose resolves the matter of social identity. Though he talked of crossing over from the East Side, leaving old pals behind is not easy. His “spree” has taken his middle-class friends to the roughest of his old haunts. Just so, in coaxing Lize to the upscale Vauxhall Gardens that night, he promises class crossing once more: “some of our boys’ll be there.” How will all this ambiguity work out? When the call of “fire” echoes, Mose tears off to the rescue without a second thought. “I did think yesterday I’d leave de machine, but I can’t do it,” he explains. “I love that ingine better than my dinner.” This fellow may rise in the world—he has all the pluck and virtue needed to succeed in Victorian society—but he cannot deny his heroic working-class nature. Audiences were glad of it.41

Likewise, George cannot change his spots. Bilked repeatedly, he learns nothing by his glance at New York. Finally, when Mose saves his hapless friend, we see the contrast between the two men clearly. It is the outwardly respectable country boy who is the buffoon, the rude Bowery B’hoy the admirable hero. Theatrical expectations have been slyly and decisively subverted.42

In the closing scene, harmony reigns. Mose and his friends dance at the Vauxhall Gardens. The admirable natures of Mose and Lize shine through once more. Audiences howled to hear the restaurant waiter take their almost respectable order:

41 Ibid., 21, 24.
42 Ibid., 24, 26-27.
Lize: A cup of coffee, and nine doughnuts!
Mose: Look a-here—you got any pork and beans?
Waiter: Yes, sir.
Mose: Bring me a plate of pork and beans. [Waiter is going] Say, a large piece of pork, and don’t stop to count de beans.

“[I]n spite of his outré manners,” Harry announces, Mose “has a noble heart.” That closing comment sums the play’s central theme. There was a wide gap between newly-minted bean-counters and those still striving upward, but no essential conflict. Outwardly, Mose is a roughneck, inwardly, a chivalrous hero. As if to prove his character for bravery, loyalty, and fair play once more, he rushes out as the curtain falls, aiding his fire-pal, fallen into a “muss” of his own. Mose was ever ready to the rescue.43

Magnificent Mose is a comforting creation, central to the debate antebellum Americans waged over the character and usefulness of volunteer firefighters, and non-elites generally. Many saw in Mose and his fellows no more than an excuse for rowdyism, and they had plenty of evidence to back them up. In the early republic, fire companies had attracted the “best classes” and largest propertyholders of the community—those with the most to lose when fire struck. By the 1830s, though, such men had fallen to the status of patrons or abandoned the service altogether as younger, less prosperous types filled the ranks. At mid-century, volunteer companies across the nation had become petit-bourgeois and working-class institutions populated by young, single men looking to make their way in the world and have a good time doing it. They joined not for the narrow economic motives Franklin espoused, but to be “one of the b’hoys”: celebrating masculine identity, sharing camaraderie, and taking part in tribal competitions.44 To attain a leadership post in one of these companies was “the summit of the

43 Ibid., 30-31.
44 Richard B. Calhoun, “From Community to Metropolis: Fire Protection in New York City, 1790-1875” (Ph. D. diss.: Columbia University, 1973); Clyde Griffen and Sally Griffin, Natives and Newcomers: The Ordering of
hopes and wishes of one-half the clerks, counter hoppers, and quill drivers of the city,” one Yankee declared. “A trumpet in one hand, a spanner in the other and a lantern affixed to leathern belt around his waist” was a true measure of masculine attainment.45

Membership in a fire company both required submission to fraternal discipline and offered fine opportunities to cut loose. Prospective members were scrutinized as much for manly and gregarious qualities as for physical skills. Companies looked for men like themselves: white, solid and respectable--but not overly so. As long as a fellow paid his dues, stood his round, took part in song and storytelling, and answered the fire bell promptly, he was embraced with open arms. The benefits of membership were many. New recruits linked reputations with dozens of established members and patrons, and often gained a helping hand in lifting themselves economically through these connections. Between the tedium of monthly meetings and the thrill of fighting fires, volunteers took part in a steady round of excursions, “Fancy Dress Ball[s],” oyster suppers, and nights on the town. The gaiety of Mobile’s firemen’s parade rivaled New Orleans’ Mardi Gras. Like Mose, marginal men looking to rise up wore the red shirt as a badge of fraternity. Whatever their politics, jobs, or ethnic origin, such men were firemen, and that title bespoke their class, character, and loyalties in a single word.46


46 New Orleans Picayune, October 8, 10, 1857; Charleston Courier, March 2, 1859; Zurier, American Firehouse, 48-51; Caldwell Delaney, The Phoenix Volunteer Fire Engine Company of Mobile, 1838-1888 (Mobile, 1967), 1-2, 16; Minute Book, Winyah Fire Engine Company, Georgetown, SCL; Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company Minutes, UGA.
In too many cases, though, volunteers seemed heedlessly hyper-masculine and out of control, threats to—rather than guardians of—social order. Firehalls became boisterous clubhouses, scenes of drinking, fighting, and idle devilment. Even when duty called, volunteers often looked less interested in fighting fires than in battling each other. In many communities, a monetary premium or token of honor was awarded to the first engine on the scene of a fire, or the first company to put water on a blaze. But these incentives gave rise to wild competition and underhanded tricks as companies strove to succeed by fair means or foul. Rival engines were impeded or even attacked by hired thugs, hoses were cut, and pitched battles broke out between contending companies. Whole neighborhoods came out to cheer on their favorites, much in the manner of sports teams. Gangs of youths coalesced around particular companies, working mayhem on rivals and supporters in hopes of earning a chance to run with the machine one day. The calamity of fire was all but forgotten in the flow of play.47

Most blazes were routine, one-house affairs—when there was a fire at all—but every alarm ignited competition men found thrilling. Workers “would throw down their tools” at the sound of the fire bell, as much to see the spectacle as to help with the rescue. Firefighting was structured between rival companies around games of racing and washing. These were exciting tests of skill and bravado, providing a welcome break from the tedium of wage labor. The first engine on the scene was the toast of the town; the rest took failure as a stain upon their honor. Where streets were unpaved, engines took to the sidewalks so as not to fall behind in the race. Firemen and bystanders were injured or run over with alarming frequency. More directly adversarial were contests that began when one engine pumped water to the box of another

machine. There was no need for a word of challenge to pass between the crews: each company worked madly to preserve their reputation. Volunteers manning the supply engine strove to overflow the box ahead as a sign of superior strength and teamwork. The firemen at the face of the blaze labored furiously to exhaust their challengers and prevent being “washed.” Where three or more engines worked in tandem, the competition grew fierce and the potential for violence escalated. Stories of frustrated companies abandoning their equipment to attack jeering rivals were legion. Enacted against a background of burning buildings, circling smoke, and cheering crowds, play often pitched over into riot.48

False alarms were spread, too, even by firemen, just to get up a contest to settle old scores, and perhaps instigate a brawl. Others went further still, torching abandoned buildings or setting rival station houses alight for the chance to see the engines run. In most cities, fire companies aligned with local political factions and competitions of racing and washing intersected vitally with ethnic and civic conflicts these groups sponsored. In 1850, for example, the friction between Philadelphia rivals shifted into armed combat: aiming to steal the nativist Shiffler Hose Company’s reel and break up the group, the Irish-dominated Moyamensing Hose Company and a gang called the Killers torched buildings, then fired on their rivals with muskets and pistols when they arrived to put out the blaze. Soon both sides were going to fires armed to the teeth. Likewise, when the Lady Washington Engine Company of New York returned from an excursion in 1857, their procession down Grand Street turned into “a general melée.” A “feud [had] existed for a long time between Engine Company No. 21,” escorting the Washingtons,

“and Hose Company No. 14,” positioned across the line of march. When the smoke cleared, five men had been shot and many more clubbed or stabbed. To hear the *New York Times* tell it, this was just part of a fire b’hoys life. More direct—and effective—was the plan of Philadelphia’s Weccacoe Hose Company to destroy the hated Weccacoe Engine Company. They broke into their rival’s station house after dark, chained up the engine, and burned the place down.⁴⁹

Antebellum firefighting, then, straddled a political and cultural landscape linking theater, play, crime, and warfare. Volunteers jealously guarded every inch of that terrain. Although they fought interminably among themselves, when one of their number was threatened, ranks closed tight. Firemen were “associates—friends—brothers,” even as they tried to “lam” each other. Just as Mose rescued Sykesy, in 1856 Nashville’s volunteers left their equipment at one of the worst blazes in the city’s history to free a fireman arrested by the police. “[A]s one,” the annual report of that year noted proudly, “the whole Department rushed to the spot, and he was released and carried triumphantly back to the line.” Such incidents of lawlessness were bad enough, but when volunteers extorted bribes in exchange for their services, threw their weight behind a political faction (inspiring the term, “machine politics”), or threatened to strike, civic order trembled. By the mid-1850s, critics painted firemen as ruffians and criminals. As fires grew larger, more frequent, and more costly, banks and insurance companies pressed city bosses to rein in volunteers. First Cincinnati and Providence, then a wave of other cities moved to consolidate or disband companies in favor of paid, municipally-controlled fire services. In place of dozens of swearing, sweating, ungovernable men, each unit would focus on a horse-drawn, steam-driven engine, tended by a tiny crew of professionals. The advantages were obvious. “It

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never gets drunk. It never throws brickbats, and the only drawback,” one reformer boasted, “is that it can’t vote.”

In the eyes of volunteers’ partisans, though, such criticism seemed an ungrateful overreaction. For “respectability and worth as producers and artisans, in point of moral character as citizens”—indeed, in “all the relations of life”—firemen were equal to any group of men. Doing away with volunteer service attacked manhood and democracy both, David Dana charged. Instead, firemen “should be drilled to military discipline” and held to the highest standard. The first step, his timely book argued, was to educate volunteers and the nation to the fireman’s heroic contribution. In this task, again, melodrama proved crucial.

Consider the 1858 lithograph, “Torchlight Procession around the World,” depicting America as a bold fire lad: what better symbol of the nation’s youthful vigor and democratic spirit? “Firemen are the sentinels of society,” agreed Alexander Meek. To the chess-playing, firefighting judge, “the courage, the chivalry, the heroism of our firemen” were undeniable. Croakers complained of rowdyism, but ignored “[t]he disinterested benevolence, the unselfish devotion, the philanthropic purposes” of these “soldiers of peace,” “looking to no recompense but a consciousness of well-performed services.” To combat “the malignant incendiary,” the fireman must be “firm, prompt, and resolute; vigilant, faithful, and active; energetic, laborious, and untiring; chivalrous, public-spirited, and philanthropic.” When danger and chaos swirled all around, the fireman strode forth to save life and property.


51 David D. Dana, The Fireman: the Fire Departments of the United States, with a Full Account of All Large Fires, Statistics of Losses and Expenses, Theatres Destroyed by Fire, and Accidents, Anecdotes, and Incidents (Boston, 1858), 12.
“Make way! make way!” is cried through the crowd, and the long ladder is brought and placed against the window. One gallant form rushes up the rounds, and dashes into the blazing edifice. He is lost to the sight! The streams of water play in to protect his way; but the crumbling wall reels and totters, and is about to fall. Great God! shall he perish in the ruin? No! He reappears with the form of the lost one in his arms; he leaps upon the ladder, and descends amid the long, loud shout that hails his safety and his triumph!

Even without a standing army, Meek declared, “our country would be safe in her firemen—her sword in war, so they are her shield in peace.” Sam Tupper could not have said it better.

The popular lithographers Nathaniel Currier and Charles Ives—New York firemen both—vivified Meek’s stirring sentiments. Their artist Louis Maurer’s 1854 series, “The Life of a Fireman,” depicted four heroic scenes. “Night Alarm” shows volunteers pulling together, wheeling their engine out of the station house to battle the foe. In “The Race,” two teams of firemen strive to reach the fire first. There is manly competition here, but the goal is clear: to perform duty and extinguish the flames. The destination is pictured in “The Fire,” all hands pumping in unison and working the hoses with military precision. In “The Ruins,” the cycle is complete. The firemen have won the battle and return to their daily pursuits. With all its trials and dangers, their service has been rendered freely for the common good. This was a rousing, sentimental portrait, visually quoting the melodramatic themes the Mose plays promoted so effectively. Manhood here is a settled fact, mutually celebrated. No wonder at least one company of Charleston volunteers called a special meeting just to buy Maurer’s prints.

Four years on, a new set of lithographs reprised the success of these pictures. The American Fireman shifted the focus from group deeds to individual character, but the moral


54 Currier and Ives: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1: 22; Rawls, Currier and Ives’ America, 366.
remained the same. The titles—“Always Ready,” “Rushing to the Conflict,” “Facing the Enemy,” and “Prompt to the Rescue”—told the story, suggesting strong links with the heroism of military service. The fireman these prints portrayed was young, brawny, and handsome—Mose without the rough edges—resolute and gallant. While others fooled time away with tilting or chess or political factionalism, the fireman was urban America’s Galahad.

Antebellum cities struggled with the divided nature of volunteer fire service, alternately brawling and stoic. But not in Charleston, until the eve of disunion itself. “Charleston,” declared Louis Tasistro in 1842, “excels every other city in the United States in the organization of its fire department.” By mid-century, its membership differed from other cities’ “vastly” in regard to harmony and unison. You never see any of those disgraceful rows, quarrels, riots, &c., indulged in by companies of some cities… which so degrade a Fireman in the estimation of the community.” In contrast to the North, “where an alarm of fire is the certain prelude to a riot,” a spirit of camaraderie prevailed among the Queen City’s volunteers. “No fire riot has ever been known in Charleston,” John Honour asserted. Here, fire and crisis had drawn volunteers into an apparently solid column.\(^55\)

That was the nominal theme of the 1841 portrait Charles Meyer painted of the leaders of Charleston’s white fire companies posed in front of the Fireproof Building. Though their hats and military-style uniforms vary considerably, the men who wear them look much the same: placidly confident, well-groomed, respectable. There is a “spirit of courtesy” and mutual respect

about the scene. Like those they commanded, “all seem to be anxious to discharge their duty quietly and peaceably, feeling the truth of the old maxim, that ‘Union is Strength’.” Whatever ethnic or political differences divide them, all are brother firemen, models of character and achievement. Looking solidly bourgeois, the first men of the department ranked among the first men of the city: three some-time mayors, half a dozen aldermen, prosperous merchants and shopkeepers. Collectively, they combine the heart, daring, and dedication of Mose with the good order and respectability Currier and Ives idealized. “A country where so many estimable citizens are willing to risk their lives for the safety of the community,” Tasistro thought, “need never stand in fear of invasion by a foreign foe.”

In politics and much else, though, it was not foreign foes but internal divisions that plagued South Carolina. A closer look at Meyer’s painting shows a different scene, readily apparent to residents in the 1840s. There is a precise lack of order or hierarchy in this picture. The mayor, fire masters, engineer, and company leaders are mixed up without expected signs of precedence. Indeed, outsiders might think the picture had been turned inside out. Instead, it was a clear representation both of the problems Charleston’s fire department faced and of the victory volunteer companies had recently won over city officials. Painting expressly for the firemen, Meyer applauded their manhood and respectability and symbolized their new civic power. Mayor Jacob Mintzing and his underlings look quite deflated--bowed down below the level of firemen and storekeepers—and, indeed, they had been so humbled.

Meyer composed his portrait in the wake of the greatest fire in Charleston’s history and the biggest controversy over firefighting, which split the community into angry camps. Since 1670, fire had afflicted the seaport all too often, and Charlestonians were among the most active

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and progressive voices for fire protection in the colonies, enacting a stringent fire code and importing some of the first British pumpers. In 1736, William Pringle established the first fire insurance society in North America. But such measures did little good. Pringle’s project went up in smoke when fire devastated the city’s commercial heart in 1740.57 Smaller fires punctuated the colonial era, too, throwing residents into a panic over murderous slaves, plundering seamen, and the Judgment of God. They prayed for forgiveness, burned arsonists alive, and kept a watchful eye on neighbors and strangers, to little effect. In 1778, 1796, and 1812, “extensive” and “tremendous” conflagrations leveled parts of Charleston. Across the 1820s, a series of fires along the wharves, on lower King Street, and in private residences nurtured fears that rebellious blacks were trying to torch the city. By mid-century, the artist Charles Fraser declared, there were few buildings that did not “rest upon the ashes of former ones.”58 Antebellum Charleston inherited a history of catastrophic blazes and a deep fear of the social damage fire could do.

Charlestonians seemed a people besieged. For more than a century before secession, a sentinel kept watch day and night from the bell tower of St. Michael’s Church, scanning the city for smoke or flame. Throughout the 1700s, residents fought fires as a community, posting ladders at central points, keeping one fire bucket per room, and requiring households to “place a light in a window toward the street for the benefit of those going to [a] fire.” The city Intendant and Board of Fire Masters directed activity at the scene of the blaze, instructing the Engineer on

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58 Fraser, Charleston! Charleston!, 156-157, 192, 205-206; Aptheker, American Negro Slave Revolts, 190; William W. Freehling, Prelude to Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1816-1836 (New York, 1966), 61; Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States, 310; Charles Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston (Charleston, 1854), 96.
how to use his explosives. The Fire Guard, drawn from local militia, turned out *en masse* to protect property and preserve order, weapons at the ready. Residents black and white pitched in to protect homes and workplaces, and perhaps earn a reward in the process. Merchants paid premiums to those who rallied, and the black sailor who saved St. Michael’s in the blaze of 1796 by climbing the steeple to extinguish sparks won freedom itself. 59

But behind common action lurked nagging doubts. When fire struck, was it accident or arson? Were incendiaries watching in the shadows? Were thieves poised to plunder goods and property? Would city slaves see fire’s turmoil as the moment for treachery? Should marginal whites go to ground to avoid being blamed for the outbreak, or stand in the forefront of firefighting to escape retribution? Across the social spectrum, each time the fire bell rang, Charleston’s dream of civic unity vanished. Conflagration threatened political crisis.

The local response to danger paired superior organization with modern technology. By 1793, the legislature had incorporated Charleston’s first volunteers, the Vigilant Fire Company, drawn from the city’s commercial classes—those most endangered with loss by fire. A second squad, the Charleston Axemen, formed in 1801, but their tactics soon came to seem unhelpful. Blowing up buildings and chopping them to pieces was thrilling, quasi-military labor, but it was also quite destructive, and not so effective either. Other axe companies formed in later decades, but these were short-lived ventures of scant means and popularity. By 1830, Charleston had fallen in love with the hand-pumped fire engine—safe, mobile, and technically advanced—equipping ten slave companies with new rigs under white supervision. Five volunteer engine

companies formed as well, at least partly in response to the exemption from militia service they received. Composed largely of foundry workers and mechanics from Wards Five and Six, the Eagle volunteers incorporated in 1818. A year later, the Vigilants transformed themselves into a forty-man engine crew, enlarging their ranks to one hundred members in 1830. In 1826, the Charleston and Phoenix companies obtained charters in response to the arson panic of that year, followed by the Aetna volunteers in 1829. Coupled with a realignment of the Fire Guard, Charleston could boast one of the most modern and sophisticated systems of fire defense in the nation.\footnote{Acts of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, From February, 1791, to December, 1794, Both Inclusive, 2 vols. (Columbia, 1808), 1: 294-296; Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, Passed in December, 1820 (Columbia, 1821), 26-27; Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, Passed in December, 1825 (Columbia, 1826), 32-33; Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, Passed in December, 1830 (Columbia, 1831), 31; Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years' Residence in the United States, 311.}

Yet the plan had two flaws: too little water and too many leaders. The pressure to establish engine companies came from the bottom up, as part of the broader voluntarist and associational impulse which swept the city in these years. Meanwhile, Charleston’s Board of Fire Masters made few provisions for structural growth and reform. Board minutes show more concern with keeping sufficient gunpowder on hand than with providing the new engines with adequate supplies of water. In truth, that was a vexing task throughout the antebellum era, and far beyond their narrow mandate. Charleston had been built on a shifting, sandy foundation, and the best engineers could not devise an effective plan of water supply at anything like a reasonable cost. Volunteers arriving at the scene of a blaze in the 1830s had the option of exhausting the few shallow wells in the neighborhood or trundling their engines back and forth between wharves and flames. No wonder blowing up buildings seemed more effective.
Nor were the simplest tactical choices or coordination easily achieved. Too often, the alarm bell was “a signal of general dismay and confusion,” Fraser recalled, “when the conflict of authority, the multitude of advisors, and the crowd of idle lookers-on” made danger doubly “appalling.”\textsuperscript{61} Charged with protecting the city against riot or insurrection when fire broke out, the Fire Guard’s conduct was especially worrisome.

At an alarm of fire, a few, very few of the members of the companies on guard assembled at their rendezvous, imperfectly armed, scarcely a handful in point of numbers… doing nothing, assisting no one, protecting nothing, until the bells ceased, and then they returned home. Scarcely able to defend themselves, from the want of numbers, discipline, arms and ammunition, in case of sudden attack… they surely could afford no protection either to the lives and property of others. It was looked upon as a farce, and was the veriest humbug in the world.

Briefly put, poor men from beat companies refused to “leave their homes, entirely unarmed, to go through the streets” to meet an unknown enemy with weapons roughly thrust into their hands, “dangerous only to those who handled them.”\textsuperscript{62} Better to turn a deaf ear and let the matter slide. Thank heaven no one worried much about slave revolt.

To direct the city’s diverse and expanding manpower and equipment, the Board of Fire Masters puffed up prodigiously. Following election as intendant in 1832, Henry Pinckney packed this group with supporters, many lacking training or experience in fighting fires. When flames erupted now, thirty-odd city officials and company commanders ran around shouting orders, cursing the engineer, and working at cross-purposes. Since volunteer companies were technically independent organizations—and this was much of their appeal—they followed directions or tried their own tactics according to the mood of their elected officers. With so many generals trying to direct the battle, it was only a matter of time before disaster struck.\textsuperscript{63}

\textsuperscript{61} Fraser, \textit{Reminiscences of Charleston}, 95.

\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Charleston Mercury}, November 14, 1859.
That was the message Charlestonians sounded across the 1830s as increasingly “distressing” fires ravaged their city. Lack of unity and discipline threatened the common welfare, they warned.

While the Firemen are subject to the conflicting and counter orders of twelve or fifteen individuals (many of them far from being well versed in the duties they are appointed to execute) and liable to be changed from one station to another, contrary to the more experienced judgment of their own proper officers, they can never execute their duties with proper confidence and facility—for nothing impedes or distracts a body of men more, in times of difficulty, than to be directed to do any one thing in two different ways, or by half a dozen persons. It is, then, almost certain either not to be done at all, or if done, rendered nearly useless by the delay such confusion is sure to create.

The South Carolina jeremiad appeared in countless guises.

All too often, only “individual exertions” staved off disaster, but these sufficed to let citizens dismiss their fears for a time. Then, in the spring of 1835, everything fell apart. In February, an “awful conflagration” erupted in a brothel on State Street, spreading south and west until it threatens to consume “the whole breadth of the city.” St. Phillip’s Church went up in “a pillar of fire,” and more than fifty houses were lost, most “occupied by persons in moderate circumstances.” The Congregational and Episcopal churchyards—dead ground, literally—halted the flames. “Had the fire crossed Church Street,” the Courier declared; “no one can tell where the ravages would have ended.” The worst of it was the firemen’s failure to fight the blaze effectively. “All was bustle and confusion,” a ‘Citizen’ charged, “no concept of action—no understanding between the Fire Masters.” What else could be expected without “complete reform”?

63 Charleston Board of Fire Masters Record Book, SHC; Neilson, Recollections of a Six Years’ Residence in the United States, 311; Fraser, Reminiscences of Charleston, 95.

64 Charleston Courier, February 16, 1835.

65 Charleston Courier, February 22, 1830; February 16, 19, 1835; Charleston Mercury, February 17, 1835; Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, the Union Man of South Carolina, ed. James P. Carson (Washington,
In June, a second “great and calamitous” fire struck. More than nine hours the Market
district burned, for the third time in three years. A thousand people were left homeless. Again
the press seethed. The late fires had opened people’s eyes to their “true and alarming situation,”
writers declared. “[S]ome vile and wicked incendiary” had set the blaze, but “want of decision”
and “jealousy of power” among the volunteers caused the damage. The “imbecility” of the city’s
response “arises altogether from the absence of all subordination,” an ‘Old Officer’ charged.

Now it is difficult to tell who is head man. If an order is given, say by the the
Intendant, will the man with a red pole extend the order? and will the man with a
trumpet, that prevents him from being heard, obey the order—if two Fire Masters
meet, who that has seen two scavenger birds tugging different ways at a piece of
meat, does not see a resemblance. And then the Fire Engine Companies, and
Hose Companies—who orders up reliefs to aid them—who assigns them a post,
and enforces the execution of the duty assigned? Who combines the efforts of the
Engines, the Axemen, the Engineer, the laborers, all to one well-conceived
object? Why, they are all “independent,” all are commanders in chief.

“We have too many discordant authorities, too many independent Companies,” he chided, “too
many jealous of command, too few wise enough to be proud of being simply useful.” All agreed
that fighting fires “requires all the concentration and plan necessary to fight a battle.” None
could agree on who should direct that plan.66

The consequence was catastrophe. On the evening of April 27, 1838, fire swept out of a
fruit store at King and Beresford, spreading northeast through the commercial core. The dryness
of the weather made the city a tinderbox and high winds and scarce water created ideal
conditions for disaster. From Beresford north to Liberty, from St. Phillip’s to East Bay, the city
burned through the night. “We sat on the top of the house a long time,” James Petigru recorded.

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66 Charleston Courier, June 8, 9, 11, 1835; Charleston Mercury, June 8, 9, 1835.
“looking on the ocean of fire that spread before us, and a more terrific scene the imagination of bard or painter never suggested for the idea of the infernal regions.” By morning, a “sea of flames” had passed over a third of the city, burning five hundred stores, houses, churches, mills, hotels, halls, and warehouses in “the busiest, liveliest streets.” The loss was reckoned over three million dollars, ruining dozens of businesses and reducing scores to poverty. Two of the city’s three insurance companies were smashed at a stroke.

Economically, the fire was not without its benefits, as many recognized even at the time. The city and state underwrote a massive rebuilding loan that transformed King and Meeting Streets and put scores of shops and firms on a surer footing. But with six dead, twenty injured, and hundreds homeless, the city was devastated. “Charleston may be said to be no more,” Petigru mourned.

Once the initial shock and appeals to Providence passed off, old accusations returned with a vengeance. Following a mass meeting in a rainstorm on May 4, Pinckney issued stringent restrictions on the construction of wooden housing. But this was soon read as an attack on “the poorer class.” Homes and jobs both had vanished for many of Charleston’s mechanics, and landlords profited by their loss, sending rents sky high. Now, rumor said, “the capitalist wishes to get the poor man’s property” by making the cost of rebuilding prohibitive. Nor did the rich deny the charge. Not only did advocates of cheap wooden buildings endanger the city and depress property values, ‘Orosius’ charged: they threatened to turn the downtown into “a monopoly of rookeries, dramshops and receptacles of straw for their disciples to lie down upon,”

67 Charleston Courier, April 28, 30, May 1, 1838; Carson, ed., Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, 197.

68 Pease and Pease, “The Blood-Thirsty Tiger”; Fraser, Charleston! Charleston!, 216-219; William M. O’Leary to Daniel O’Leary, August 26, 1838, Henry Calvin Conner Papers, SCL; Carson, ed., Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, 196. The social benefits of fire are considered in ibid., 186.
cattle that they were. “If the rich man erects a house which is an ornament to the City, and an honor and comfort to himself,” a ‘Native’ asked, “ought he to be subjected to be burnt out by a miserable hovel alongside of him that can be run up in a week? On the rich fall the burden of the support of the City, and they ought to receive the protection of the authorities in power.” Others aroused divisions by claiming that the “poorer classes” had set the fire in hopes of looting, or that fire victims were actually “vagabonds” seeking to fleece the propertied elite. By mid-May, Charleston’s working-class west side—untouched by the great fire but threatened economically—was incensed by such arrogance.

Civic miscues heightened tensions. Although the council praised two wealthy citizens killed fighting the blaze (even promoting a memorial in their honor), they snubbed a third casualty, “the poor and humble, but gallant [John] Peart.” His contributions and funeral went unacknowledged by simple oversight, some pleaded, but to the fireman’s champions, this only proved the callousness of the ruling elite. Like most volunteers, Peart was “nothing but a mere mechanic” to them, quite beneath notice. To ‘Broad Axe’, that “contempt and indifference” showed “in glowing colors, the Republican principles” of the council and its supporters. Following on the heels of the uproar Fisk had raised a year before, such threats were not taken lightly.

Amid these complaints and swirling rumors of cowardice in suppressing Fisk and fighting recent fires, Pinckney searched for a scapegoat. The root cause of disaster was government mismanagement, critics charged. Without proper wells and cisterns to supply water

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69 Charleston Courier, May 3, 5, 8, 15, 16, 25, 1838; Thomas Smyth, Two Discourses on the Occasion of the Great Fire in Charleston, on Friday night, April 27, 1838, delivered in the Second Presbyterian Church on Sabbath, May 6, 1838 (Charleston, 1838); Memorial of the City Council of Charleston, Praying Enactments to Prevent the Erection of Wooden Buildings in That City [Charleston, 1838].

70 Charleston Courier, May 17, 22, 1838.
to their engines, Charleston’s volunteers had no real chance of quelling a big blaze. But Pinckney and his cronies ignored that inconvenient fact, blaming firemen for the city’s calamity. Backtalk and confusion had done the damage, they crowed. A complete overhaul of the fire department was in order.

But Pinckney’s plan was doomed from the start. It combined two major reforms, each politically suicidal. First, it proposed to enlarge the base of available manpower by allowing free blacks to form volunteer engine companies. Second, all firemen—black and white—would come under city control. The Board of Fire Masters would grow to include the captains of volunteer companies, but its powers would shrink sharply. The Board alone would make policy, strategizing plans but having no direct role in fighting fires. Likewise, the mayor and aldermen would be cut off from any practical powers or duties at the scene of a fire. Instead, executive functions would be concentrated in the hands of the City Engineer, formerly the Fire Masters’ lackey. At a salary of $2,500 per annum, he would become responsible for maintaining Charleston’s engines, hoses, and explosives, overseeing training and coordinating efforts when fire broke out. When the council passed Pinckney’s plan in 1839, it seemed that Charlestonians had finally solved the problem of divided powers they found so vexing and dangerous. Instead, they had sparked a political firestorm that gutted all efforts at central control.

The new ordinance created the first professional fire department in the United States—

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71 Charleston Mercury, May 7, 1838; [Henry L. Pinckney], A Report, Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities, from the 4th September, 1837, to the 1st August, 1838. With suggestions for the Improvement of the Various Departments of the Public Service. Presented to the City Council, August 6, 1838 (Charleston, 1838). On Pinckney’s tattered reputation, post-Fisk, see Carson, ed. Life, Letters, and Speeches of James Louis Petigru, 197; Charleston Courier, July 16, 1837.

72 Memorial and Proceedings of the City Council of Charleston, on the Subject of Securing the City from Fires (Charleston, 1838); A Report from the Board of Fire-Masters and also, A Report by the Mayor in Relation to the Ordinance to Re-organize the Fire Department. Ratified February 11, 1839 (Charleston, 1839); [Pinckney], Report from the Board of Fire-Masters; idem, A Report, Containing a Review of the Proceedings of the City Authorities, from the First September 1838, to First August, 1839 (Charleston, 1839).
equipped, controlled, and paid by Charleston’s city government—almost two decades before the Rhode Island and Cincinnati reforms. It lasted less than five months. By mid-summer, Pinckney’s plan was rejected and the volunteers had gained *de facto* control over all matters of fire protection. Yet public opposition was hardly intemperate or anti-modern. Nor was this simply a turf war. At stake, firemen declared, was more than Charleston’s safety from fire. Its citizens’ freedom was now imperiled.

Such hyperbole contrasted sharply with volunteers’ usual demeanor. Rendering dutiful, obedient service, even in the face of calamity, had been their proudest boast. When the legislature rolled back firemen’s exemption from jury duty in 1833, no word of protest was heard. More alarming was the proposal to organize free black engine crews. The boundary between white volunteers and the slaves who composed the city companies had been clear-cut. Allowing free blacks to form their own units, with officers, constitutions, customs, uniforms, and equipment, would to blur that line. Here again, though, volunteers made no public challenge to innovation. Whether they would have dug in their heels eventually, we cannot say: the legislature axed this portion of Pinckney’s plan before it was put in motion.73

Likewise, firemen gave no hint of opposition to the council’s scheme to clarify the chain of command. All agreed that better coordination was needed in fighting fires. Transferring authority from a set of panicked politicians and quarrelling committeemen to a single skilled leader could only promote order—or focus blame. Either way was progress. Making company captains Fire Masters obviated the need for an engineer-general, many thought, but they held their tongues on this point.

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73 *Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, Passed in December, 1831* (Columbia, 1832), 46; *Acts and Resolutions of the General Assembly of the State of South-Carolina, Passed in December, 1833* (Columbia, 1833), 56. The only exception to this stoic silence was the outburst by “An Old Fireman,” in *Charleston Mercury*, May 21, 1838.
What outraged volunteers was the notion that the Council’s hand-picked man would soon be sticking his nose into their companies’ business: inspecting engines, reviewing exercises, poking around stationhouses. This was an affront to independence, a blatant attempt to substitute “the eye of the taskmaster for the high spirit of generous rivalry” which guided their efforts. Firemen were “freemen,” never forget, “determined not to submit to any violation of our rights.” They petitioned the council to reconsider its decision, citing the injustice of political “molestation and interference.” When the aldermen tabled their request, the volunteers’ worst fears seemed realized. Pinckney’s clique left no choice but resistance.

In an extraordinary mass meeting chaired by Vigilant captain Charles West on March 21, 1839, firemen put aside competition and divisions, standing against the civic ordinance. “We deny the right of any one without our consent to enter our Engine houses, examine our Engines… or in any manner intermeddle with our property.” This gathering capped a week of protest rallies where resolve waxed and waned. Most hesitant were Charleston Engine Company volunteers who voiced displeasure but stopped short of active opposition. They would go “strength and zeal with their brother Firemen” in rescuing property, provided that their labors were “duly appreciated and honoured by the constituted authorities.” More than that, they did not say. The still-unchartered German Fire Engine Company was more assertive, resolving to sustain their compatriots in resistance, though they felt “not as yet entitled” to take “a positive stand” on the issue. Other squads were more intransigent. Aetna and Phoenix volunteers flatly refused to obey orders given by the Chief Engineer. The Vigilants went furthest, declaring the Council’s actions “uncourteous and disrespectful,” their policies “arbitrary and unjust.” Pinckney aimed to install his engineer as overlord, but they would not have it: “we cannot, and will not, consistently with our rights and chartered privileges, obey that officer,” they swore.

74 Charleston Courier, May 5, 1838.
That oath established a baseline of militancy. To tolerate the council’s decision was unmanly cowardice. A “crisis” had been reached: a “firm and decisive stand” must “unite them in opposition to authority which they cannot properly recognize.”\textsuperscript{75} A generation before Lincoln’s election, then, scores of Charlestonians rallied on a different sort of secession, determined to defend property, local custom, and imperiled manhood. That the threat they perceived came from within rather than without made it doubly dangerous.

The trouble was, where volunteers saw elite conspiracy, the city council found working-class revolt. In their meeting of April 6, aldermen disclaimed “any intention” to offer discourtesy to the firemen or “invade or interfere” with their chartered rights. By their construction, the new ordinance was both legal and fair. The volunteers spouted defiance. What choice did that leave lawmakers? In the event of any “overt act,” Pinckney was authorized to dismiss rebellious firemen, tear up their charters, seize their halls and equipment, and organize new companies in their place. Yet even that ultimatum was an act of compromise: councilor Isaac Holmes had tried to force an immediate mass dismissal for insubordination. That put Charleston in its gravest social crisis since the riots of Nullification. If the mayor gave the order to seize the volunteers’ engines and stationhouses, who would enforce it--and how? Unless the city found a solution before the next fire broke out, Charleston might burn altogether.\textsuperscript{76}

Only differences of social class now prevented a dozen duels. Instead, posturing as champions of order and freedom, each side backed the other into a corner. Anxious to jolt his political fortunes, Pinckney promoted James Gadsden, a Calhoun crony, for the engineer’s post. Dismantling that position now would wreck his hopes for the governorship. Supporting Pinckney’s plan, Alderman Richard Yeadon hoped to heal old wounds of party and keep

\textsuperscript{75} Charleston Mercury, March 25, April 10, 1839.

\textsuperscript{76} Charleston Mercury, April 10, 1839.
Charleston safe for trade. Caving in to the volunteers’ rebellion would scotch those gains. For the firemen, too, there was no going back without renouncing claims to status as citizens and freemen. Stalemate seemed complete.

Then, ironically, on the anniversary of the Great Fire, the ever-divisive Mercury defused the crisis. Eager to pillory ex-Nullifier Pinckney and his conservative pals, and always glad to twit the Courier, the Rhetts took up the firemen’s cause. In a series of biting editorials, they lashed the council, announcing that public opinion had turned against them. Engines “could not be worked without water,” the paper jeered. Gadsden had better earn his handsome pay solving that central problem than “watch[ing] at the keyholes of the Engine houses.” When volunteers answered an alarm on April 19, laboring with customary “energy” and “zeal” against the flames, the council’s threats lost support. The “crime of the Fire Companies” was wholly imaginary, the Mercury declared. For all their grievances, they did their duty without hesitation. There was, however, “a deepening conviction through the City generally that the late action of the Council is in many respects reprehensible” and unmanly. At this salvo, Pinckney and Yeadon threw up their hands: let the blessed people decide. The aldermen scheduled a referendum—in the dead of summer—to solve the question. The fix was in. On July 1, Charleston voters scrapped the April reforms overwhelmingly.\footnote{Charleston Mercury, April 12, 13, 16, 20, 22, 23, 29, July 2, 1839.} The council reinstated the old system of company-based service. Mose—and Fisk—must have smiled.

With control of the Board of Fire Masters, a chastened city government, and electoral support, the volunteers had gained a new power and presence in Charleston, at the scene of fire, in the streets and the press, at the ballot box. A year later, Pinckney was turfed out of office, Gadsden was gone, and savaging the offending council had begun. Henceforth, firemen would be a crucial force for political action in the city, electing a chief from their own ranks and
keeping aldermen on a short leash. Any Charlestonian gazing on Meyer’s group portrait could see their power at a glance: the chief engineer is a nonentity pushed off to the edge of the painting. Mayor Mintzing is more marginal still, a face peering down from the steps of the Fireproof Building—and hatless, too. At the center of the picture stands a powerful triumvirate: Fire Chief John Schnierle, leader of the German volunteers, Fire Master William Kirkwood, late of the Phoenix company, and Charles West, militant captain of the Vigilants and leader of the firemen’s rebellion. Deciphered for modern eyes, the painting is no bland symbol of social unity: it celebrates a memory of recent political rupture through melodramatic tableaux, safe in the knowledge that internal crisis could be overcome, villainy vanquished, and order restored. Not least here, too, petit-bourgeois respectability put men of honor in their place, almost cheekily declaring the course and character of Charleston politics at street level for decades to come. Meyer made a good bet, mostly, but even his heroic volunteers could not down the crisis to come. Indeed, they were just the men most vulnerable when the Axemen finally struck.

Over the next two decades, volunteers grew in numbers, public presence, and political importance. “The passion for joining fire-companies in Charleston appears to have grown quite into a mania,” Louis Tasistro noted in 1842. There was good reason. The firemen’s victory over the council provided clear proof of manhood and independence. The young men of the town flocked to their ranks, drawn by military-style uniforms and drill and masculine camaraderie. By the time the Mose plays reached Charleston, the ideal of the bluff and daring fire boy was already well established. Where other cities’ volunteers brawled and battled, the Queen City boasted “one of the best organized” departments in the nation. Not only were its recruits “unsurpassed… for energy, promptitude, efficiency, and indomitable courage.” They were also unequalled for “the high moral character of the members generally,” and the “spirit of courtesy”
which united the squads. “Rowdyism is a thing unknown,” the *Baltimore Sun* marveled.

There are no “Screw-bolts,” “Gumballs,” “Killers,” “Blood-hounds,” and such-like cognomized organizations…. When necessity requires, [Charleston firemen] go quietly to work—no cries of “down with the section,”—“go it, Bull’s Eye,” &c. No rowdyism or fighting—all passes off quietly and efficiently. 78

Fire service here seemed almost religiously respectable. 79 To gain admission to an engine company became a touchstone of masculine attainment, especially among young men of the mechanic and commercial classes. For such as these, joining the toy-soldiery of a volunteer militia company was all but impossible. Boys “who desire to be useful” would shun “the gold trappings of a militia uniform,” in any case, the *Mercury* warned. The fireman’s brave deeds spoke louder than the rifleman’s empty brag. The chronicle of their warfare against “the devouring element” was “more glorious than the victories of a thousand battles,” David Gazlay agreed. Before their showdown with Pinckney, volunteers had earned “naught but abuse” for their public service. Now they were objects of popular admiration. “Troops of children” Tasistro noted, appeared “neatly dressed in appropriate and elegant costumes,” emulating the volunteers, “and provided with all the implements of a regular engine company epitomized.” 80

They rode on the engines in the annual parade, and dozens of their adult kin and neighbors


79 Henry A. Murray, *Lands of the Slave and the Free: or, Cuba, the United States, and Canada* (London, 1857), 213. Readers may wonder about the role of organized religion in antebellum Charleston. Chess mania, or volunteer fire service, or participation in disunionist activities, I wish to suggest, served the same functions and offered the same opportunities evangelical revivals did elsewhere. Cf. Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York, 1978). Few of the fellows I discuss—the young men who made secession happen—left much evidence of religion as a powerful influence in their daily lives or political decisions. Stuffy Tupper is an important exception. Although he was a pillar of the Baptist Church in Charleston, he lived a double life. “I ask myself even now if I am willing (or desire) to yield up the world & live a christian’s life,” he told his wife. “I cannot answer Yes.” Samuel Y. Tupper to Virginia Tupper, May 27, 1850, Samuel Yoer Tupper Family Papers, SCHS.

trooped along behind, cheering their champions. With luck and pluck, sturdy boys would become worthy men, and firemen, too. To run with the machine became a pursuit of honor and respect.

By 1860, volunteers’ engine houses dotted the city conspicuously, and their parades, drills, and fraternal meetings were a central feature of daily life. Fighting fires apart, they considered themselves “a social organization” like other clubs or volunteer militia groups, and their numbers grew accordingly, topping 650 active members in 1859. Four new engine companies assembled in the decade after the great fire: the Marion volunteers, up on the Charleston Neck, in 1839; the Palmettoes, meeting north of the Market, in 1841; the Hope company, west of King in Ward Four, in 1843; and the Washingtons, in the heart of the working-class Sixth Ward in 1849. These were smaller, poorer units than the older organizations—the Marion and Washington engines were still ranked as “second class” on the eve of disunion—but their adherents were fully as devoted as volunteers in longer-established units. If anything, they made a fetish of youth and proletarian vigor. The Marions’ engine house might not have a comfortable “library and reading-room” to match the chandeliers and plush armchairs of the Aetnas’ grand hall on Queen—it was just a two-story wooden building—but their members drilled as smartly as any company and were ever quick to turn out when the alarm sounded.81

Even among older units, clustered around the commercial Third Ward, important divisions persisted. A generation after its founding, the German company still drew overwhelmingly from its ethnic base, though members no longer conducted meetings in their native tongue. Eagle and Aetna volunteers took pride in their mechanic roots, deriding Phoenix “dudes” as “the White Kid Company”: who else would think of parading a silver-plated fire

81 Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, S. C., Ending 18th May, 1859 (Charleston, 1859); Charleston Mercury, February 22, 1855.
Outwardly, the Aetnas were a strict temperance bunch, though brother firemen lauded their “liquids sufficient to set the world in a blaze.” Other groups celebrated convivial reputations quite carelessly: a run, a fire, and more than a few toasts made a grand night. Within each unit, ties of kinship, class, ethnicity, occupation, culture, and aspiration fused to create distinct personalities. Men gravitated to their own kind—real or aspirational—in choosing a fire company.82

Understanding what kind of men joined the Vigilant company helps explain their decision to recreate themselves as Minute Men in 1860. Formed “to prevent, if possible by most strenuous exertions, the too frequent calamities occasioned by fire in the city of Charleston,” from 1819 the Vigilants aimed to stand in the front rank of civic defense. Their charter permitted volunteers to hold up to one thousand dollars’ worth of property, establish their own rules of government, and sue in their own name. Forty men could hold membership at any time, each granted exemption from militia service. The company’s constitution established monthly meetings of no more than two hours’ duration, set dues at three dollars per annum, and required “exercises” on a quarterly basis. The project was wildly successful. In 1822, the Assembly expanded company membership to sixty, raising it finally to one hundred men eight years later. When the firemen’s charter came up for renewal in 1836, politicians increased its allowable assets to a whopping ten thousand dollars. By 1860, the Vigilants were the largest, wealthiest,

82 A. Toomer Porter, Led On! Step by Step: Scenes from Clerical, Military, Educational, and Plantation Life in the South, 1828-1898: An Autobiography (New York, 1898), 56; Charleston Courier, April 28, 1860; Marshal’s Report of the Excursion of the Invincible Fire Co. No. 5, to Charleston and Savannah (Memphis, 1857), 7. By 1858, things had got so uproarious among the Marions that they voted that “only the officer in charge hereafter shall have the power to invite members of this Co to the corner to drink on the Co expense and even he shall not do it unless after returning from a fire of some note.” Entry of May 7, 1858, Marion Fire Engine Company Minute Book, Fire Companies Collection, CM.
most self-respecting fire company in Charleston, perhaps the most socially honored fraternal society in the whole city.\textsuperscript{83}

Not just anyone could or did join the Vigilants. Three members nominated each recruit, vouching for their man’s character. The company voted on recommendations, privately casting white balls to affirm the choice or “black-balling” undesirable candidates. As with volunteer militia companies, new men supplied their own dress and fire uniforms (commonly purchased at Vigilant Charles F. Jackson’s King Street store), paid monthly dues, and were expected to attend monthly meetings. Records for volunteer companies drawing membership north of Calhoun Street, like the Washingtons, suggest that attendance at fires and meetings was steady, but dues payment was a shambles.\textsuperscript{84} Not so with Vigilants. In gaining entry to the company, willingness and ability to fight fires was hardly more important than similarity of background, social capital, and economic stability. It was not unlike joining the local chess club.

Quantitative analysis bears this out.\textsuperscript{85} Between 1855 and 1860, one hundred fifteen men signed the fire company’s constitution—only two or three comparatively well-known in Charleston, the rest merely hard-working and hopeful. As Table 12.1 shows, four out of five Vigilants for whom information is available (87.8\% of all members) were young, ranging from seventeen to twenty-nine in 1860. These clustered heavily in their early twenties, and were overwhelmingly single. Only four volunteers—all company officers—topped forty. The old man at 43 was Sam Tupper, married, with two children. Almost exclusively, volunteers were


\textsuperscript{84} Accounts for 1853-1861, Washington Fire Engine Company Account Book, SCHS.

\textsuperscript{85} The discussion here draws on data collected in my PCH Database, from federal census records, city directories, military service records, newspapers, manuscript collections, immigration, naturalization, and death records. Originally compiled through manual searching of records and trudging through cemeteries, it has been checked and supplemented by use of various commercial databases.
### TABLE 12.1
VIGILANT FIRE ENGINE COMPANY MEMBERS’ AGES, 1860

<table>
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<th>Number</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
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<td>17-19</td>
<td>22</td>
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<td>20-24</td>
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<td>79.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>90.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>95.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
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Total: 101 100.00

*Source: PCH Database*

### TABLE 12.2
VIGILANT FIRE ENGINE COMPANY MEMBERSHIP BY BIRTHPLACE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>101</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vermont</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 111 100.00

*Source: PCH Database*
native born. Fully 101 of 111 Vigilants whose birthplace can be traced were South Carolinians, nearly all Charleston boys (Table 12.2). As to the remainder—five born in the North, two in Ireland, and one each in Germany, England, and Spain—they shared two characteristics. These were older, propertied or professional men, and most had quit the Vigilants and left Charleston by the eve of secession. Sam Bennett of Maine had good reason especially: the lumber mill he owned along the Ashley went up in flames mysteriously a month before Lincoln’s election. He, like other northerners, perhaps saw a sign in that disaster and headed home to Boston.

Paying no taxes, owning no property, working for other men in mostly menial positions, volunteers like W. B. Cowperthwait, Wade Hampton Evans, or Charles Quigley belonged to a distinctive caste of bachelor-clerks. Fewer than one in ten Vigilants for whom we have information was married in 1860, and those were the oldest members of the company, occupying Louis LeBleux was a solid young fellow on the eve of secession: in addition to his elderly mother, his household included of a Pennsylvania-born wife, and a seven-year old son, plus a home worth five thousand dollars. Twenty-eight years old, LeBleux had found steady, lucrative work building the federal Customs House, two minutes’ walk from the Vigilant Fire House. Easily, he could have fallen into the middle-class ways of his brother-in-law: “father of an immense family… of brats, a serious air, a quiet demeanor, and a lively walk, something business like.” That fellow was driven by a simple impulse: “Wife and children need money, need clothing and to gain confidence and obtain work one must become serious and show signs of being a “Man”—hein!” LeBleux faced similar issues—all married men did—but he modulated them through his tie to the Vigilants. 86

86 Philip Chartand to Polly C. LeBleux, June 18, 1860, Barbot Family Papers, SCHO.
Plus, he had a dog for which he paid two dollars in tax to the city annually. Perhaps that seemed—and was intended to seem—a luxury for a man not quite able to afford a horse and carriage, or something more extravagant. Still, it was money well-spent in comparison with Sam and Virginia Tupper’s more troublesome property. Tupper’s wife’s slave had been in the habit of stealing their daughter’s pin money, “which amounted to something considerable,” and finally sealed her fate by slapping the child. “I had to give Sarah a severe whipping this morning,” Tupper wrote in 1854, banishing her to his mother-in-law’s plantation in punishment. The decision was “disagreeable,” not least because it caught him between twin imperatives: Sam’s father, wealthy old Tristam Tupper, “almost insisted” that his son send Sarah to the Work House, Sam told his wife, yet he could not do it “without your assent.” Either way, there was little hope of change. “She is of a bad family,” he explained, “her brother Monkey has been lately detected in the act of stealing a quantity of Dry Goods from a store in Ha[y]ne Street,” was tossed in jail, and would soon “be whipped in the market or transported.” Still, life was not all trouble and vexation for Sam and Virginia: in the same letter, Tupper purred that the board of directors of the Firemen’s Insurance Company were well-pleased with his conduct as president, “unanimously” raising his salary by almost a third to “$4500 per annum.”

Ambitious fellows knew enough to stick close to a man like that, even if they did not traipse after him to Sunday services at the Baptist church. William Gilmore Simms thought Tupper amiable and agreeable, “a worthy and intelligent Gentleman.” Economically and politically his ties to Charleston’s solid men were impeccable. He was delegated regularly to represent Broad Street on political issues and at commercial conventions. Indeed, Tupper was the youngest of the Committee of Twenty-Five selected to bring John C. Calhoun’s body back from Washington in 1850. When brother Tut married Lizzie Boyce, Sam could not help but

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87 Samuel Y. Tupper to Virginia Tupper, October 15, 1854, Samuel Yoer Tupper Family Papers, SCHS.
crow that the bride was “so rich that folks will say the Tppers are going to monopolize all of
Old [Ker] Boyce’s money.” That desire to improve economic opportunities surely motivated
men like Charles W. Westendorff, inspector and secretary at the rival Charleston Insurance and
Trust Company, or Anthony Barbot, Jr., both of whom became Vigilants. Barbot’s eldest
brother Charlie, who worked with Tupper as secretary/treasurer of the Firemen’s Insurance
Company, joined the Charleston Chess Club instead, along with his middle sibling Louis.
Conversely, Westendorff drew three other brothers and cousins into the Vigilants—a fairly
common occurrence. There were three Chases, plus pairs of Albergotties, Boinest, Brownes,
Carters, Cleapors, Flynns, Humphreys, Jacksons, Joneses, Kingmans, Lockes, Pritchards,
Ryans, Smiths, and Thomases. Fully one-third of all members stood beside blood kin—quite
literally as a band of brothers. Many more were linked by marriage ties. We do not know when
John Tylee--a King Street clerk of “great industry & application to business,” by Tupper’s
account--began mooning over Viney Flynn. Whether that romance preceded, accompanied, or
followed the New Yorker’s admittance to the ranks of the Vigilants, staying on good terms with
the Flynn boys, John and William, young clerks with a successful Northern-born merchant
father, must have been essential to both projects. Perhaps the marriage of John’s sister Carrie
into the Flynn clan helped.


89 Samuel Y. Tupper letter of reference for J. W. L. Tylee, November 17, 1866, Tylee and Willis Families Papers, SCL. Tylee and his wife trod a hard and tragic path in the years after Appomattox. See especially J. W. L. Tylee to “My Dear Children,” September 27, 1879, Carrie Tylee Flynn to J. W. L. Tylee, August 31, 1881, Tylee and Willis Families Papers, SCL.
### TABLE 12.3

VIGILANT FIRE ENGINE COMPANY MEMBERSHIP BY WARDS, 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database

### TABLE 12.4

VIGILANT FIRE ENGINE COMPANY MEMBER OCCUPATION TYPES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>65.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Mercantile</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Job Listed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total:</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>100.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database
Other Vigilants formed or drew upon other ties. Did the “ancient & honorable” Vigilant bachelors who called themselves the “S. T. C[ommittee]” in 1870 exist before secession? Its roll contains familiar names, and its tale of woe sounds stereotypical: one by one, its valiants fell from sexual temperance (was that the meaning of the unexplained initials?) into that “crime too horrible to be judged,” the Vigilants’ “worst enemy Matrimony.” The defection of one “active & energetic member” into the ranks of married men was a “crime… too enormous” to fathom, theyjested. The “desertion” of another who was “the right hand” of their squad left the whole “almost disbanded membered.” With the defection of a third who “promised to go forth & do battle against all the seductions of fair women,” chivalrous homosociality all but petered out.90

Most Vigilants in 1860 lived away from the richest or rowdiest areas of town, clustering west of King Street, in respectable Ward Four (39%), close by the State Street engine house in Ward Three, or south of Broad (table 12.3). Of ninety-seven Vigilants for whom we have residency information (84% of volunteers), eighty percent lived below Calhoun Street, just one in the Upper Wards. At home or at work, then, answering duty’s call usually meant just a short sprint when the fire bells rang.

Firemen’s occupations shaped residency and company membership both (table 12.4). Vigilants were lower-ward men because they held lower-ward jobs, clustering in the commercial district in Wards Three and Four—King, Meeting, East Bay, Hayne, and Broad Streets—or below. Two of three volunteers were clerks, almost uniformly without real or personal property. Bookkeepers, salesmen, bill collectors, and accountants, these were low-wage, white-collar fellows looking for advancement in life. Nearly all others clustered as middling men of mercantile accomplishment, minor professionals—a teacher, a lawyer, a doctor—a handful of shopkeepers (including hatter H. H. Williams), or men involved in the construction trades. It is

90 E. C. Chuperin, untitled memorandum, [1870?], Vigilant Fire Engine Company Records, SCHS.
easy to assume that most of these last earned a living cycling through burning and rebuilding; plumber Robert Minniss won a good bit of business, for example, repairing the city’s fire engines. Most Vigilant stoncutters, bricklayers, and carpenters, though, labored together near wharf side in Ward Two where the new federal Customs House was going up. That was how they knew Louis LeBleux and fellow Vigilant Charles Barbot, an assistant on the project, and probably several Vigilant clerks working on the East Bay as well. Others bumped into Barbot at the chess club, along with Vigilants Emilio Balageur, John Humphreys, and William Waters, along with Vigilant members’ kin like Hiram Olney, Alexander Duffus, and Tupper’s rich brother-in-law, commission merchant Cornelius Burckmyer.

As with the Charleston Chess Club, the Vigilant fire hall brought together a mix of young pen-pushers and older bosses, professionals, and craftsmen, united by complex ties of fraternity, nativity, propinquity, and common cause. Notably, though, as with the city’s chess players, wage-earning Vigilants never worked for Vigilant bosses. In some measure, firefighting offered an alternative social order to that most clerks inhabited in the workaday work—even if non-clerical firemen dominated company leadership.

For the most part, firemen’s living arrangements in 1860 derived from their age, wealth, and occupational characteristics (table 12.5). Nearly three out of four volunteers for whom we have information (86% of Vigilants) were single men living with their parents or boarding with others like themselves. Eight more boarded in a household headed by a fellow Vigilant, or a member of the Charleston Chess Club. Just ten percent were home owners or household heads. Of this group, a tiny two percent were both. Once again, unsurprisingly, household heads and property holders dominated company leadership.
TABLE 12.5

VIGILANT FIRE ENGINE COMPANY MEMBERSHIP BY RESIDENCE TYPE, 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household Head, owns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, owns</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Head, rents</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives with kin</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with VFEC member</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with CCC member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with VR member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>99</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.00</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* PCH Database
The Vigilants, then, attracted young, single, unpropertied, clerical types living with family or boarding close to their engine house. A profoundly different group—older, more likely to be married, propertied, living a little further afield, tending a variety of mercantile, retail, or craft trades—assumed leadership roles. For the most part, though, fire company service did not bring this diverse group together. Social or kinship ties pre-dated Vigilant membership in many cases, drawing men into a common cause. Consider the cases of five young men who grew up in three households next door to each other on Church Street in the early 1850s. By 1859, George Ingraham, Thaddeus Cay, Robert Roy and Sidney Aveilhe had gone their separate ways, living in various spots around the lower wards, boarding or residing with parents. Yet these men looked and lived much the same: all were single, propertyless, South Carolina-born clerks aged nineteen to twenty-four, and all had joined the Vigilant Fire Engine Company. The following year, they all migrated to the Vigilant Rifles, along with Sidney’s elder brother. Thirty years old in 1860, Peter Aveilhe belonged to a slightly senior cohort than the others in this clerking-firefighting clique of neighborhood boys. Perhaps that is why he never served as a firefighter in his twenties, becoming a leader of the Charleston Chess Club instead.\footnote{Cay, Roy, and Sidney Aveilhe would later transfer together to Charleston’s Washington Light Infantry, serving together, alongside many other former Vigilants, until Cay was killed in 1862. Roll of Honor, vol. 200: 40, 59, 146. Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Va.} As we have seen, doing battle across the board was much the same thing.

Joining the Vigilant Fire Engine Company gave promising, propertyless young men embarking on a career in commerce a chance to rub shoulders with local leaders in their field, and with prominent men in allied occupations they might one day need to call upon. At the same time, they did not have to—or could not—associate here with the bosses who ran their lives. By the late 1850s in Charleston, the convergence of paternalism and proletarianization had proceeded far enough to make it unusual, and doubtless unpalatable, for wage-giver and wage-
taker to put aside class differences outside the realm of production and meet on something like an equal footing. But that did not stop a clerk from viewing other men much like his employer as brother firemen to be embraced, role models to be emulated, and patrons from whom to solicit support. Given its occupational structure, the chances that there would be no overlap between employers and employees among the Vigilants are remote. But this hybrid of clerks and bosses did not come together accidentally: the admission procedure seems to have created this pattern deliberately, and after 1858 it was clerks alone who joined the company with any consistency of numbers or pattern. We cannot rule out the possibility that clerks were packing the company with their fellows against the votes of more well-heeled brothers, but given that these admissions occasioned no exodus of more elite members, the mixture of men and class seems to have been both deliberate and palatable—just as it was for Charleston’s chess players.

The potential Babbitry of both clerks and bosses’ decision to join the Vigilants is obvious. But the desire to enter a respectable forum dedicated to the construction and celebration of masculinity across class lines probably tugged more strongly. Charleston firemen daily demonstrated “the same gallantry displayed upon a battlefield,” and the Vigilants stood second to none on that account. Their achievement provided members, collectively and individually, with social capital and proof of honorable manhood no other organization could provide. That was why, in the wake of the disastrous riots he provoked in 1853, Will Taber deigned to dine with the Vigilants at their annual banquet two months later. Called to respond to the company’s toast to the press as the “dread of tyrants, but the main stay of a Commonwealth,” Will swallowed hard and answered sweetly. That penance done, after a few more rounds, up popped Washington Albergottie, a fair-haired young clerk on the rise in the Vigilants, toasting Taber in return. “Nobly has he vindicated himself from the base slander and calumny which
have been heaped upon him,” the boy cried. “Young Charleston rightly appreciates him, and will sustain him in any position he may assume.” “[U]nbounded applause” greeted that sentiment—enough wine will do that—compelling Taber to answer the compliment “with a few appropriate and feeling remarks.” To the Vigilant Company, he raised his glass: “its name is the synonym of brave watchfulness over the lives and property of others, as well as a true index of the character of the men who compose it.”92 That ritual of ring-kissing was delectable to the rows of tipsy accountants and shopkeepers who smiled upon poor Taber. What other group could command such fealty?

Clearly, the Vigilants offered a broad road to honor and respectability for young men unable to attain those goals by other means in the difficult 1850s. All Charleston firemen longed to be seen as manly and respectable, both as a measure of social status and as proof of worthiness for advancement. This comes through clearly in their constitutions and proceedings, their dress and public behavior, in self-presentation (or, better, self-promotion) in the city’s press.93 As with volunteer militia units, the structure of the fire companies was a carefully modulated hybrid, uniting corporate, political, quasi-military, and social functions. Monthly meetings were usually brief, routine, and focused on various forms of self-celebration. There were dinners and parades to be coordinated, prospective members to be examined and inducted, old comrades to be praised or saluted in parting, elections and competitions to be held, newspaper announcements to be

92 Charleston Mercury, February 10, 1854.

93 See, e.g., Constitution of the Charleston Fire Company of Axemen, Instituted in Charleston, South Carolina in 1801. Revised December 3, 1801 (Charleston, 1833); Constitution of the Vigilant Fire-Engine Company, of Charleston. Instituted A. D. 1819 (Charleston, 1831); Rules of the Alarm Fencibles, of Charleston [1832], Fire Companies Collection, CM; Rules of the Fire Company of Charleston Neck, as Amended and Adopted November 10, 1835 (Charleston, 1835).
written up. Trivial though they may seem, these activities provided a crucial ritual of mutual recognition and reaffirmation—a complex, glorified form of hat-tipping. Each man in the hall belonged there: they dressed and acted the part of responsible, reliable, gregarious men, blending civic service and bourgeois leisure. This was one more example of the game of corporatism, the theater of respectability which so obsessed antebellum Charleston. Mose would have found it dull, but understood the impulse nonetheless.

More to his taste was the revelry which followed. Virtually every meeting concluded with a convivial “supper or punch treat,” ex-Phoenix company fireman Toomer Porter recalled, and the delights of the “flowing bowl” carried on late into the night. Here was “an interchange of all those social feelings which give zest to life,” the Marions recorded, “and joy in our howl of Triumph.” Yet the rigmarole of the firemen’s meeting was more than a pretext for the business of homosocial carousing. Mechanisms of restraint and release were two sides of the same coin of respectable masculinity. Their deliberate combination here constructed the fireman as “one of the b’hoys” within an unwavering context of manly self-control. The fellow who could not rollick with other men was an Automaton; the man unable to rein in his passions was a brute. Monthly meetings provided volunteers with comforting reassurance of identity and self-worth within the community of men, oscillating between leisure and duty.95

On other days, the engine house became a club house, the Mercury explained, a manly and wholesome alternative to saloon culture. “Here the members of the Company can assemble every evening, and pass the time pleasantly and instructively,” ready for “the alarm of ‘Fire’ [to]
summon them to the more active duties of their profession.” Not a few played chess. Even beyond the station house, volunteers remained on alert. When the call to service broke in on “the feast of reason and the flow of soul” at one firemen’s celebration in 1855, the Phoenix men never hesitated. “[I]n a body they made for the Engine house,” Charleston learned, “and were soon actively engaged in the arduous duties of their calling.” That was the final scene of every Mose play, the central theme of volunteer culture. “Our Firemen never ‘fall back’ at the approach of the flames,” the Courier crowed, “but are ever ready to ‘rush forward’ to attack and extinguish them.” These were gregarious heroes, respectable men, and natural-born Minute Men, too.96

It was precisely the response to danger that set Charleston firemen apart from other clubmen and militia, providing the most tangible validation of masculinity. It seemed natural, too, to construct firefighting as a military experience, to describe the Vigilant captain as “the leader of that noble brigade” which had “so often triumphed over the enemy.” When the alarm sounded, there was no need to resort to melodrama or other forms of play to defend claims of virility. Fears of fraud and insincerity that paralyzed the impulse to act among respectable Victorians were not—could not be—dominant here because the firemen’s action was not self-inspired. They had been called to act, and their response, though yet a performance, was performance of duty. “[A]lthough there are many trying moments during the excitement of a conflagration,” Chief George Bowman told his men in 1859, “and you are the representative of varied interests, your firmness of character and honesty of purpose” were beyond question. Volunteers demonstrated a “faithful, patriotic, and efficient” spirit, commanding general respect. At their best, their acts portrayed an “intrepid,” “gallant and fearless,” even “heroic” character.

96 Charleston Mercury, January 19, February 22, 1855; Charleston Courier, April 29, 1848, April 27, 1860. The culture of the engine house became so strong that one Hope volunteer even chose it as the site of his suicide. Charleston Mercury, June 21, 1855.
Charleston’s “foes of the flame,” the *Courier* summed up, were “not made of the stuff that augurs failure or feeble efforts.”\(^9^7\)

Firemen’s personal readiness and public service were themes less dangerous spectacles rehearsed as well. Four times annually, each company performed a public drill, hauling its engine through the streets past cheering crowds to Citadel Green and taking “target practice” with hoses. Spectators admired the dispatch of the firemen in setting up their machine, the teamwork of pumping, the distance and accuracy of their stream. Opportunities for boisterous phallic humor seem obvious here, though none survive in the written record. When new equipment was bought or new hose needed testing, that offered an excuse for further drill, often accompanied by great ceremony. Imagine the crestfallen Aetnas, who traveled to Augusta in 1857 to compete with host units in “playing” their stream, only to see their hose burst—twice. Or the shame of the Palmettoes, compelled to beg donations for a new engine because their old machine was simply spent.\(^9^8\) What lesson did that foo-foo squad, “unable to come the big figure,” tell about readiness, duty, and manhood? Merchants or wealthy citizens whose property had been saved by the exertions of a company sometimes donated hoses, nozzles, or trumpets in public rituals that almost amounted to religious consecration. What saved these rites from melodrama was the knowledge that within days or weeks they would receive a real baptism of fire. Unlike the city’s militiamen, volunteers were not simply playing at their profession. When fire companies drilled, Charlestonians measured the manly appearance and calm deportment of the volunteers most of all, as they were meant to. In such signs their city’s safety lay.

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\(^9^7\) Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston*, 96; *Charleston Mercury*, April 28, 1859; *Charleston Courier*, April 28, 1858, April 28, 1860.

\(^9^8\) *Charleston Courier*, April 27, 28, 1855, December 20, 1859; *Charleston Mercury*, May 25, 1857. Strikingly, this northern-built engine was only two years old. *Charleston Mercury*, November 4, 1857.
Personally rewarding and publicly reassuring, these hyper-masculine displays nurtured visions of the volunteer as benefactor and sentinel, too active to be considered genteel, but all the more admirable for that failing. Firemen encouraged this image with a wide range of charitable and gala recreations, from the grand Firemen’s Ball each December at the Hibernian Hall, to Firemen’s Night at the Theater, in support of worthy causes. Volunteers helped sustain the Calhoun monument, an assortment of ladies’ charities, and a raft of public lectures. They took care of their own as well. The Firemen’s Charitable Association provided for aged and indigent veterans and their families through company donations and a judicious portfolio of investments. Beyond these pensions, members bolstered claims to respectability by purchasing stock in the Firemen’s Insurance Company, the lucrative venture Sam Tupper led from 1850 onward. Offering shares only to volunteers and their kin, by 1860 it had was Charleston’s largest local insurer, a fixture of stability in the heart of Broad Street.

Firemen constructed the achievements of longtime members as occasions for self-congratulation, too. Private encomiums frequently inspired a “well done” from the city press, and a portion of the veteran’s honors invariably reflected on the men who praised him. Thus when the printer Oran Bassett stepped down as treasurer to the Aetna company in 1855, he attributed his success—and the engraved silver pitcher his colleagues bestowed—to their “ready cooperation, unswerving friendship and brotherly feeling” in the pursuit of duty. Even in death, the fireman’s standing was affirmed, and that of the men who mourned him. Young Sam Carter was “just verging on the threshold of manhood” when he died in 1860, yet his Eagle Company

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99 Charleston Courier, April 26-27, 1848, December 28, 1853, March 24, 1855, April 28, 30, 1858, March 2, April 28, 1859; William D. Porter, Oration, Delivered before the Calhoun Monument Association of the Military and Fire Departments of Charleston, Upon their First Celebration in Honor of the Birth-Day of Calhoun, at the Charleston Theatre, March 18, 1854 (Charleston, [1854]).

100 Charleston Courier, April 26, 27, 1848, December 28, 29, 31, 1853, January 6, 17, 1854, April 16, 1855, April 28, 30, 1858, April 5, 28, 1859; Charleston Mercury, April 8, 1856.
brethren mourned him as cut off from “a bright and prosperous future.” Filled with “honorable and useful aspirations,” surrounded by “endearments and associations,” distinguished by “amiability,” “sincerity,” and “unsullied integrity,” this was a man to be admired, a fellow like themselves.

As a fireman, he was always prompt, and shrunk from no danger when duty called. As an associate, he was loved and respected; and as our hearts can no more be cheered by his presence, we will cherish his memory and emulate his example.101

Mose was not a better model. The firemen’s response to a member’s passing likewise paid tribute to his worthy character—and theirs. Ordinarily, a company draped its hall in crepe and turned out in mourning, the secretary left a blank page in his minutes, and a memorial was printed in local papers. A leader’s death prompted even more elaborate response. From the moment a man became a volunteer, then, his claims to respectable masculinity were advanced down to the end of his days.102

That bourgeois self-image shines forth from the daguerreotype Osborn and Durbec made of the Phoenix Company’s officers in January, 1861. Few group portraits survive from antebellum Charleston, but this is a gem: eight men cluster in a parlor setting, thick rugs and heavy furniture clear signs of Victorian gentility. Their stance is easy and affable, the mood gregarious, yet they look ready for action at a moment’s notice. They wear helmets and dress uniforms close-buttoned. Most clasp trumpets. It is impossible to tell which of these faces belongs to Charlton Bird, the military goods merchant whose store stood between Osborn and Durbec’s studio (next to the Charleston Chess Club) and Steele’s Hat Hall. We only know that he was the company’s First Axeman, a prestigious post. Nor can we discern which man was

101 Charleston Courier, June 16, 1855; Charleston Mercury, October 6, 1860.

102 See, e.g., Charleston Mercury, February 8, 21, 1855, October 8, 1858; Entries of December 21, 1853, June 21, 1854, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.
George Tupper, Sam’s accountant brother, serving the Phoenix as Third Director. None of these solid, mustachioed and bearded heroes looks remotely like a shopkeeper or a clerk. And that is the point: the setting, props, and uniforms these men wear served to off-set occupational and class identities. Other signs—their hats in particular—provide clues of time, place, and association which prompt a more flattering reading of who they might be. Generations after the volunteers and their photographer posed this picture, we still construct it automatically as a glimpse of respectable manhood, a snapshot of dignity and fraternity.\(^{103}\)

Charleston firemen were anxious to project that image of unity and decorum in the public sphere precisely because elements of rivalry and discord kept popping up in their ranks. Conflict flares immediately and persistently from the minutes of the Board of Fire Masters from the late 1840s onward. In February, 1849, the “White Fire Companies,” deeming themselves “fully competent” to handle any blaze, urged “the entire abolition of the Negro Fire Department.” They were a “great expense” to the city, a “great annoyance” to white volunteers, both on parade and at fires. There should be “no necessity of having Negroes on any pretext at fires,” petitioners harped. Four months later, though, a special committee chaired by Sam Tupper dismissed this brag, noting how “remarkably subordinate and effective in their operations” slaves had been.\(^{104}\) The Vigilants even took a black company under their wing, in return for getting first chance of being supplied by it at fires. And what was the alternative? Five hundred-odd poor whites drafted into firefighting companies to service volunteer units? Was there not enough griping about relations between line and volunteer militia companies already? Replacing slave firefighters with white draftees seemed a recipe for class conflict.

\(^{103}\) Fraser, *Charleston! Charleston!*, 245.

\(^{104}\) Entry of February 23, June 5, 1849, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.
Grumbling over black firefighters’ jackets, spanners—even the names that they disobeyed painted on their engines—continued for years. Slaves complained about the “tardiness and incompetency” of free blacks, and vice versa. Meanwhile it was mostly the white managers of black companies who caused trouble. They showed “casual disinterest” at fires, wandered off before blazes were extinguished, showed up drunk or not at all. They forgot their hats. Conversely, when the fire bell rang, black men of the middle wards knew to rush toward the corner of King and Wentworth: soon the undemanned Truck Company would trundle past, looking for strong men to pull ropes. Firemen they were not, but sometimes they behaved as such, standing a ragged turn on the pumps, cheering wildly in hauling an engine back to its station, pausing before rival company houses to jeer—even offering “insolence” and supposedly accidental violence to white volunteers or civilians.\textsuperscript{105}

Nor were white firemen any less troublesome. “Justifiable, laudable Pride” motivated each man, but collectively it often looked like their brother firemen—always the men of another company—were pure hell-raisers. They ran on sidewalks. They argued and refused to be managed at fires. They broke open station houses, stole black companies’ engines and raced the streets. They gathered late at night to scrub their engines, someone shouted fire, and soon the whole city was in an uproar.\textsuperscript{106} Judged by national standards, Charlestonians were firefighting church-mice, but that was not how they perceived themselves. Stations, engines, and hoses were not up to snuff; behavior at fires was anything but orderly; relations with black companies could hardly be worse. And then there was the so-called Liberty Company, a group of firemen who

\textsuperscript{105} Entries of November 19, 1849, June 28, 1850, February 19, April 16, September 17, November 19, December 21, 23, 1851, April 21, May 26, June 16, June 16, October 20, 1852, February 16, March 21, 1853, January 11, April 19, 1854, October 17, 1855, December 16, 1856, March 28, June 17, 1857, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.

\textsuperscript{106} Entries of October 15, 1849, June 16, November 3, 1852, March 21, 1853, April 19, 1854, June 20, July 15, 1855, May 21, June 25, July 2, 1856, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.
had seceded from the Marions, bought a worn-out engine from the Hopes, and showed up continually at fires in the early 1850s, asking no pay or premiums, although the legislature and the Board of Fire Masters had declared their group bogus. Give them an inch, Fire Masters worried, and disgruntled men would secede from every company, clamoring for charters of their own. Even worse was the crowd of axemen who milled about uselessly behind the engineer’s lantern at every blaze. Before the Great Fire of 1838, most buildings were wooden, and so there was a need for scores of axes to bash things apart. By the mid-1850s, though, such service was redundant—each engine company already had two axemen—and Axe company members had to bear the taunt that their real aim was to avoid militia service. On top of it all was the ignominy that engine companies earned sixteen dollars an hour once the fire bell rang, and even black companies won pay and premiums, yet axemen rendered service gratis. Who could be surprised that the Palmetto Axemen, their treasury “entirely exhausted,” tried to cross that middle ground between honor and respectability by purchasing a fire engine and seeking authorization to use it as “a last resort”? Of course the Board of Fire Masters rejected their plan, as they did all others to create new units. The company went bankrupt and collapsed in 1859.107

The aging, ill-defined Protection Company fell the year before. No members meant no money; no engine meant no members. Men wanted to be Mose, and whether that meant upwardly mobile Mose, or Mose quite happily “in a muss,” he needed a “masheen” to run with, love, and defend. Across the late 1850s, Charleston’s volunteer engine companies demonstrated a sense of discipline and a taste for disorder both, much to the distress of head Fire Master Sam Tupper. To be sure, Charleston boasted the “best organized [fire department] in the country,”

107 Entries of June 16, November 3, December 15, 1852, July 20, October 19, 1853, April 19, 1854, March 17, 1858, February 16, May 25, 1859, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL. An entry of April 21, 1858 warns of “Boys Engines” attempting to take part in the annual parade—a more minor, but telltale concern.
valiants bonded as “a band of brothers.” His own Vigilants stood foremost, rejecting all premiums in the quest for fraternal unity. Yet there were squads almost deliberately seeking to “break up the harmony of our unrivalled Fire Dep[artmen]t,” he feared, “producing discord,” spreading “ill feeling and jealousness,” and exerting a “mischievous influence” among loyal volunteers. Equally vexing was the civilian problem: how to battle the “riotous conduct of negroes & others who frequent the pumps”?\(^\text{108}\)

Tupper was a battler—veteran of the Seminole War, leader of a company embarrassingly rejected for service in the Mexican War, and “a ‘brick’ of the ‘highfalutin’ order,” according to contemporary firemen. But he was almost the perfect anti-Mose, a little too old, well-off, uptight, married to money and eager to lead Young Charleston toward almost any goal. All duty and no dash, he was unhandsome and teetotaling, a Baptist in a town that mocked low-born piety, an insurance king in a crowd that disdained close calculation.\(^\text{109}\) What chance could he have to rally his troops to save his city from fiery disaster? Tupper tried to rein in subversive rowdies across the decade. But he did not calculate on the threat the dwindling Charleston Axemen posed, just as disunion loomed up, much less grasp the counter-gambit their choices aimed at hundreds in the Queen City on the eve of their most revolutionary act.

From Tupper’s perspective, the most persistent offenders to the department’s good order came predictably from the Upper Wards. Dominated by immigrants, mechanics, misfits, and men seeking to dodge militia duty, these units lacked tradition, numbers, and the caution which grew from an understanding of social consequences. In 1856, the Marions broke down in a full-

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\(^{108}\) Entry of November 3, December 15, 1852, June 20, 1855, May 21, 1856, April 21, December 15, 1858, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.

scale engine-house riot, “bringing disgrace on the company,” but at least they tried to police themselves. By contrast, the “great insubordination” of the Aetnas—a defiantly working-class unit—was outdone only by the Palmetto Engine Company. Racing through the Market at night, uncoupling the supply hoses of rival companies at fires, refusing to be governed by the Board’s decisions, they were as riotous as any Bowery B’hoy. “Knock them on the Head with your spanners,” Palmettoes shouted at the rival Hope Company, seeking to defend their hoses, “shoot the sons of Bitches.” When Tupper brought them to heel, they offered up loud-mouthed members as sacrifice, men “desirous of bringing the Company into disrepute.” But these fellows loved disrepute. They took inspiration from Duncan Cameron, the brawny Scots blacksmith who served them as director: in 1857, he lammed John Newell, a gas fitter with the Washingtons who tried to stop the Aetnas from shutting off their water supply. Months later, à là Mose, a young Palmetto clouted a company manager “over the head with his spanner” as much to assert manhood as to fight fire. When the Fire Masters demanded punishment, the Palmetto president thumbed his nose. Yet Tupper held trump card: threatened with loss of their company’s charter, the rowdy volunteer resigned, and the Palmettoes promised to “discontinue” further “improper or disorderly conduct.”

If only: two months on, the Palmettoes had deposed their president for kowtowing, and were back before the Board for another assault against the leader of a city engine: “his Drag Rope was cut and his negroes assaulted and knocked down.” Tupper tipped his hat: “the striking was done under… peculiar circumstances,” he allowed, letting the b’hoys off with a caution “against the use of violence at fires.” How the Palms must have hooted. A short interval of good conduct put them in better graces with the Fire Masters, but only gave other squads the

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110 Entry of May 4, July 2, 1856, July 15, October 21, 26, November 3, 1857, May 19, June 16, August 18, 1858, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.
chance to act up. Soon the old Charleston engine—hauling by “parties not connected with [the] company & unacquainted with the Regulations of the Department”--was racing around town.111

As much as they spoke of a common manhood and brotherhood, then, Charleston firemen could agree on no single version of respectable masculinity. Divisions, structured along lines of race, class and wealth, appeared between companies on a host of issues, great and small. To outsiders, these quarrels might seem tiny and trivial. To volunteers, they threatened achievement and identity altogether.

One touchstone of this problem was Mose himself. In January 1854, Frank Chanfrau’s troupe arrived at the Charleston Theater, just after the Taber riots. Days earlier, the house had been “filled to excess” for a performance in benefit of the Firemen’s Charitable Association. The mayor and city council, plus the whole fire department had paraded from the Four Corners to the theater to see the “tragedy of *Virginius*.” That piece dragged noticeably, the *Courier* thought, but the real performance was offered by the volunteers themselves. Taber’s indiscretion split all of Charleston, dividing firemen, too. Propertied volunteers were conspicuous in the roster of deputies the council appointed to keep order in the streets during the holiday season. Other b’hoys stood with the workingmen who intimidated John Heart. On this evening, though, volunteers closed ranks, showing that “they had not ceased to be good, order-loving citizens.” In case anyone missed that point, at the play’s end, the “large and fashionable audience” was treated to a reading of “The Fireman’s Address, the composition of a young gentleman of our city.” Faint heart never won fair lady, the orator reminded, to general applause. Surely

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111 Entry of November 17, 1858, May 25, June 15, July 20, 1859, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL.
volunteers were anything but timid. No text of this panegyric survives, but the enthusiasm it attracted suggests familiar themes: gallantry, public service, respectability, manliness.\textsuperscript{112}

All of those qualities were central to that diamond-in-the-rough Mose, but his appearance on the Charleston stage divided the city once more. “Immense applause” and “roars of laughter” greeted Chanfrau’s other extravagant creations, the rebel-outlaw Jack Sheppard and the bibulous sailor Toodles, though not all admired his performances. What the \textit{Courier} found “gratifying and delightful,” Taber’s \textit{Mercury} declared “low” and even “Satanic.” “Jack Sheppard is not only a vile play, but a dangerous one,” ‘Sheridan’ declared. Its performance had been banned in England for nurturing class conflict. Its approval at this juncture in Charleston was worrisome. Making “heroes of Thieves, Pickpockets, and Drunkards” could only incite violence. Chanfrau played to the rabble of the gallery, the \textit{Mercury} agreed, not the self-respecting general audience. So, too, \textit{The Toodles} was “one of the coarsest and most vulgar productions that imbecility, in its most besotted moments ever drivel forth,” Taber ranted. The editor was seldom one for understatement—that was the root of his troubles—but it is hard to believe that he was only lashing out at a character in a play here. The line between stage and street was always hazy and for Taber to see the sort of wretches who had so recently assailed him lionized in melodrama must have been galling.\textsuperscript{113}

The appearance of the “veritable and original Mose” to lead the hoi polloi in self-celebration was the last straw. All of theater-going Charleston was waiting for Chanfrau’s masterpiece, some with anticipation, others with dread. The \textit{Spirit of the Times} called \textit{A Glance at New York} “genteel comedy,” but the social turmoil that gripped the city ensured that, rather

\textsuperscript{112} Charleston \textit{Courier}, December 29, 31, 1853.

than a symbol of respectability and duty, Mose would focus class tensions. The *Courier* urged audiences to “come along” as the firemen’s hero ran with the machine, and they came in droves. Taber and his cronies reviled him. Two weeks after Chanfrau’s departure, some unknown “gentleman of this city”—perhaps he of the “Fireman’s Address”—tried to set the record straight, foisting a “New Drama in 3 Acts” upon the theater. In this opus, “the true character of the Fireman” would be “faithfully delineated” through the dutiful actions of Frederick Jerome. Fussy Fred was no kin to freewheeling Mose, alas, and stiff-necked morality seldom sells tickets. If any b’hoy felt flattered by this vinegar portrayal, most were bored silly by intermission. There was a world of difference, they might have explained, between acting and action. *The Charleston Fireman; Or, the Meeting Street Heiress* sank after a single show.¹¹⁴ Still, the propertied had made their point plain: in art as in life, volunteers would earn the support of their betters only so long as they watched their manners and kept their place.

For a time it seemed that edification had driven entertainment from the field, at least as far as the portrayal of firefighters in Charleston was concerned. Then, “One Thousand Nights” after his last appearance, Mose and Chanfrau returned to the Queen Street stage, reigniting old conflicts. For nine performances, audiences cheered “the Greatest Triumph of the Season,” greeting the fire boy’s fresh antics with “tremendous applause.” Still-smoldering Taber saw Mose as yet “discreditable to the stage,” calculated “neither to mend the manners nor improve the heart.” In a week or two, Chanfrau would be off to his next whoop-up, leaving Charleston’s conservative men to cope with the rollicking and disorder he encouraged. Bitter as he was, Taber was hardly alone in these judgments. If the upper-ward mechanics of the Washington and Palmetto companies most admired Mose in a muss, the soft-handed Phoenix folks were perhaps

¹¹⁴ “Mr. Chanfrau in Charleston,” *Spirit of the Times*, 23 (1854), 584; *Charleston Courier*, December 28-31, 1853, January 9 (quote), 1854; *Charleston Mercury*, January 4-7, 9-12, 14, 25, 1854.
more eager to pose than pitch in. Theater managers seem to have anticipated those divisions and
the conflict they caused: two days before Chanfrau’s arrival, they trotted out the “Fireman’s
Address” once more.\textsuperscript{115} It was good for business and gave the b’hoys pretext for a night out,
though it could not conjure social unity.

Even rituals specifically constructed to create harmony broke down in the 1850s.
Between March and May, each company called out active and retired members for a parade
through the center of town, followed by ardent speeches, a lavish dinner, and an evening of
merriment. Here was a festival of bright memory, proud service, and fraternity. In each case,
the company engine was decked out in bunting and flowers, and the ranks resplendent in dress
uniforms. But how many times were celebrations interrupted by the alarm of fire, especially on
the anniversary of a high-toned squad like the Phoenixes? Such jests were annoying, but also
hinted at deeper frictions. When the Germans, Aetnas, or Vigilants marched in 1859, they turned
out more than eighty men each, well-dressed, self-respecting, hauling modern equipment. The
Charleston and Washington companies mustered barely half that number, the Hope squad even
less.\textsuperscript{116} Fewer members meant less prestige, less money, the threat of oblivion. Once enrolment
fell below thirty men, a company forfeited its charter. Members and companies sought to escape
that death spiral, both embracing and lashing out against strategies of secession.

To jump ship or stand fast? After six decades of dedicated service, the Charleston
Axemen missed dissolution by the presence of a single man in 1859. Few thought they could
carry on much longer. As numbers fell, camaraderie suffered and factionalism welled up. When
the Charleston Engine Company had faltered, for example, the tailor Charles Jackson,

\textsuperscript{115} Charleston Mercury, April 5, 7-12, 14-19, 22, 1856.

\textsuperscript{116} Charleston Mercury, June 1, 1855.
bookkeeper M. T. Bartlett, and plumber Robert Minniss led a defection to the Vigilants.\textsuperscript{117} Likewise, when ailing Alexander Cameron stepped down as president of the struggling Palmetto engine company in the summer of 1858, membership split into rival cliques. Eventually, treasurer John Symons, an East Bay rigger and stevedore, prevailed over vice president John Pundt, a German-born foundry boss. But his victory was short-lived. The Palmettoes’ engine was completely “worn out,” company coffers were empty, and Symons could do little to halt the unit’s fall. In October, Pundt’s backers staged a coup. Symons had resigned, they told a closed meeting, electing their man to fill his place. Symons cried fraud in local papers, to no avail. Pundt purged Symons’ supporters, begged money for a new engine from public donations, and nurtured pride and discipline among his men. In 1860, his company won more premiums for being first on the scene of fires than all except the Marion and Aetna squads—and those groups had unusual geographic advantages. Such measures bred cohesion within fire companies—once dissenters were pushed out—but also fostered hard feelings between units and a suspicion of difference of all kinds.\textsuperscript{118}

Denying and dispelling conflict became the central purpose of the annual Firemen’s Parade, though by 1860 that procession only served to focus and deepen animosities. Held on the anniversary of the great fire of 1838, the parade was supposed to commemorate the reorganization that followed (and, tacitly, the volunteers’ victory over the city council). Certainly it pointed up visually the united power of the firemen. In a civic culture mad for processions, even the fourth of July could not rank with the spectacle of Charleston on April 28 each year. Then volunteers became “the most respectable people in the community,” Henry

\textsuperscript{117} These were would-be leaders without many followers, serving as Charleston Engine Company directors in 1854. \textit{Charleston Courier}, January 11, 1854.

\textsuperscript{118} \textit{Charleston Courier}, April 29, October 6, 7, 1858, April 28, December 20, 1859; \textit{Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, S. C., Ending May 21\textsuperscript{st}, 1861} (Charleston, 1861).
Murray thought. “[T]heir engines are brilliantly got up, and decorated tastefully with flowers; banners flying; the men in gay but business-like uniform, dragging their engines about, and bands playing away joyously before them.”

Such festivities were decidedly theatrical, from the costumes, props and staging down to the day’s three-act structure. Throughout the morning, station houses became “sites of busy preparation,” the Courier noted, “gaily decked and surmounted with a profusion of standards, banners and emblems.” Crowds gathered steadily through the day. Shops closed early. By afternoon, “the streets and pavements were wedged and blocked by a multitudinous mass of moving curiosity and eager interest.” Up and down Meeting, Broad, and King, streets transmuted into a multi-level theater of pit, private box, and tiered galleries. In addition to “the vast concourse of pedestrians… there were men and boys on houses and tree boxes, and women in carriages, coaches, omnibuses, windows, doors, porticoes, balconies, and all other available resorts of observation.” Up on Citadel Green, the firemen and their engines formed ranks in company with volunteers visiting from other cities. At three o’clock, the parade set out through the commercial district. The Fire Chief and his assistants led the way, followed by the mayor and city council at an appropriate distance, the fire companies arranged according to the date of precedence of their charters, and finally the city police. On this day, engines were transformed into fanciful pageant floats. Marching bands and transparencies dotted the procession. It was a grand scene of unity, diversity, and fraternal masculinity.

Parade routes varied from year to year, but always traced roughly the same route marched by the Young Men’s Secession Association--by no accident. In 1858, the firemen moved off

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119 Henry A. Murray, Lands of the Slave and the Free: or, Cuba, the United States, and Canada (London, 1857), 213.

120 Charleston Courier, April 28, 1858.
south from the Green along Meeting Street, down to the public market. Here they wheeled about, marched up to Wentworth and over to King, then down its length to the Four Corners. Passing the Fireproof Building and City Hall, they turned left, parading down Broad to East Bay, reversing finally to form a massed procession at the city’s central quadrant. Audiences thrilled to the spectacle of civic unity: behind the chief “in bright yellow coat and white pants” came the mayor and all the aldermen, bearing staffs of office. Next trooped the Charleston Axe Company, silver weapons gleaming, dressed all in white.

The Eagle [engine], gaily festooned, its company in red and white, were followed by… the Vigilants, in white, looking back on an honorable career, the burnished copper air vessel of their engine surmounted with a gorgeous pyramid of roses, from whose apex little flags fluttered in the breeze. The Phoenix, tastefully decorated, its handsome company in gray and white, pulling a beautiful rope of blue and white, came behind the music. And they were followed by the Charlestoners, veteran foes of the devouring flame, in white coats with red facing, and behind them marched their companions in many a well-fought battle, ready then to tear off those beautiful wreaths and go to work. The Marion, with their Swamp Fox amid flowers, followed, drawn by men whose strong arms were at the command of noble hearts, looking finely in their green and white uniforms. After the band came the steady Germans, their “General Schnierle” dressed with exquisite taste…. The Palmettoes in their picturesque uniform preceded the Hope, her men in blue and white, and next came the Washington, in red coats and white pants with black stripe at the side—the three equal to any fire. The Palmetto Axe Company brought up the rear.

It was part civic celebration, part hyper-masculine theater, part fashion show. Once the parade reached the Four Corners, city councilors inspected the volunteers. More important, they were scrutinized all along the route by fellow citizens. “The general representation and array of our faithful, patriotic and efficient in all their companies were most gratifying,” the Courier declared in 1858, “and the neatness and well-trimmed appearance of uniforms, and all equipment of men, and of engines, and implements were such as to invite and challenge the closest inspection.”

On this day, shopkeepers, mechanics, and quill drivers donned gallant costumes, puffed up, and

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121 Charleston Courier, April 28, 1858.
portrayed themselves as respectable, even heroic citizens. Here manhood, not buttons or tassels, was weighed. The ranks marched a little straighter as they passed muster once.

Finally it was time to test the strength and prowess of the “Southern Knights of the Nozzle,” working as a team. Along the length of Broad between King and Meeting, measurements had been marked off. One by one, squads from each company wheeled their machines into the Four Corners and set to pumping, trying to top each other for the distance they could blast water through fifty feet of hose. This “playing off” competition tested strength and coordination for firemen, and tried the mechanical power and integrity of their engines. It became the supreme measure of each man and his crew and their machine. Expert companies often came from Columbia, Savannah, or further afield to compete in the Charleston “tournament,” and wealthier units like the Phoenixes sometimes paid return visits. For volunteers, playing off served a function like tilting among the gentry, and even shared something of the social vision it admired. As companies strained to outperform each other, the distance of their spray measured masculine prowess. The Vigilants and their supporters were annoyed when their hose burst in the 1859 trials, but their “Little Giant” still beat every company but one by their pumping. Conversely, how did the Phoenix company feel after rolling out “Little Frank,” only to be bested by eight other squads? Some “sudden and unaccountable derangement or displacement” must have occurred in the engine, the Courier suggested. Any alternative was too embarrassing to contemplate.122

Ceremonies and contests so charged with social meaning did as much to heighten tensions as to dispel them. More threadbare companies like the Washingtons had a keen sense of the social distance which separated them from wealthier groups. When the Phoenixes drew their

122 Charleston Courier, April 28, 1858, February 14, 1860. On pumping contests as chivalric tournaments, see Charleston Courier, May 9, 17, 18, 19, 1860; Charleston Mercury, May 15, 18, 19, 1860.
engine in the 1859 parade using four matched gray horses, instead of hauling by hand in time-honored fashion, no one missed their meaning. So, too, the aggressive character of the pumping contest was obvious to all. Charleston’s police took part in the festivities expressly “to maintain order” and restrain rivalry.  

Touchy questions of potency, identity, and reputation hung in the balance.

Whenever volunteers answered the call of duty, those issues focused attention. It was the competition between companies in responding to fire which Daniel Smith remembered of antebellum squads.

Then from every engine-house emerged its engine racing to the fire, starting with few men at the ropes but gathering others as they ran. For the first water thrown upon the fire meant a small prize and a great pride. The small boys might pull at these ropes, but had to fall back when the fire was reached. The engines were worked by hand with double banked brakes, and the men above stood on “knife boards.” “First water! Who? Who? Three cheers for the ‘Phoenix’!”

By 1860, fire in Charleston had become a recreation as well as a “fearsome foe,” a competition between teams of respectable men, and a source of levity, too. “I find it hard to remember what put out the fires,” Smith jested. “I think it was the noise.”

It was hardly the cooperation. Across the 1850s, competition and conflict between engine companies grew sharper, pointing up divisions of wealth, class, ethnicity, neighborhood, and race. Unfailingly, most fires broke out in or near the tumultuous Upper Wards. Inevitably, by the time most volunteers had rallied to the alarm and dragged their engines across town, the Marion b’hoys of Ward Six and two or three slave companies were on the scene. Annoyingly, there was usually little fire left to fight, less pride or prize to be won. Let the Upper Wards protect themselves, some declared. Suppose the “valuable property” of the commercial district

123 Charleston Courier, April 28, 1859.
124 Smith, A Charlestonian’s Recollections, 67.
or residences south of Tradd vanished because lower ward engines were off battling a blaze at some tinderbox tavern on the edge of town?  

Such questions present the problem of the South Carolina jeremiad in yet another shape. The promise of public service and declarations of internal unity were steadily undermined by the intense localism percolating below the surface of voluntarism here. To some, lower ward engine companies seemed interested in defending only their own neighborhood stores and houses: the Neck could burn to ashes for all Broad Street cared. To others, the boisterous journeymen and mechanics who filled out groups like the Hope and Washington companies were just working-class parvenus, unable to sort out civic duty from social climbing. Each side eyed the other warily, doubting loyalty and common cause. When the firebell rang, how many could be counted on to answer it? By 1860, no solution to incipient conflict was in sight. The Marions took twice as many premiums as any other company that year, all for fires in the upper wards. The Eagle, Phoenix, and German companies—among the city’s oldest and wealthiest units—won none at all.  

Those divisions dovetailed with political animosities. On election day, engine houses became polling places—often the only spot to vote in that ward—and company members watched close to see that the balloting went on to their taste. Election notices appealed directly to firemen for support and candidates strained to win volunteers’ votes. Company members trumpeted their preferences on the appointed day, cheering those who voted appropriately, castigating those bold enough to challenge their choices. Under these conditions, liquor and testosterone

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125 Charleston Mercury, June 20, 1855.

126 Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department… 1861 (Charleston, 1861); Charleston Courier, October 5, 1858, July 18, 1859.

127 Charleston Courier, September 26, 1860.
combined to turn the exercise of franchise into a running skirmish. Lower ward station houses became havens for the Broad Street Clique. Outlying companies backed radicals like James Eason or John Carew. Nothing like unity could come from this process.\textsuperscript{128}

As vexing as internal conflict was the attempt by slave engine companies to “emulate” volunteers. Some thought “outdo” was closer to the mark. Not only did black firefighters adopt the club culture of their white counterparts, even fashioning distinctive uniforms in some instances. They also took to racing volunteer companies, and found special pleasure in being first on the scene of a fire, even if they won no prize. Likewise, slaves played favorites among white units, preferring to work in tandem with some companies and scorning others. Partly, this was a consequence of patronage; partly, it was a judgment on the respectability and prowess of volunteer squads. By 1852, the Board of Fire Masters had issued new rules to curb the white infighting such behavior sparked and put impudent blacks back in their place. The first volunteer company to reach a blaze, they ruled, was to be supplied with water by the first available city engine. Only if slave firemen were already playing on the flames when whites arrived would they be allowed to avoid unheroic supply service. Nor were city crews allowed to select which volunteer engine they supplied, or change partners without the chief’s approval. The following year, a strict new dress code for slaves was imposed: “a plain, dark blue jacket, just covering the hips, without binding or facing, black horn \textit{buttons}, black leather belt, and \textit{black flat} crowned tarpaulin hats, with the number of the Engine painted on the front in \textit{white}.” Only Peter Desvernez’s company, manning Engine Number Nine, was allowed its special colors, in token of elite service. For all, however, badges were abolished. Henceforth, hats alone identified men as firefighters. Whether these reforms reined in slave companies’ self-assertion seems doubtful.

\textsuperscript{128} The conflict elections caused led the Marion Fire Company to refuse the use of their hall as a polling place after 1858. \textit{Charleston Courier}, July 18, 1859.
Racing and washing continued unabated, and some squads—the Third, Fourth, and Seventh companies in particular—always seemed to lag behind the rest. In January 1861, the stationhouse of Peter Desvernez’s company mysteriously burned to the ground.\textsuperscript{129} Locals called it arson.

As this incident suggests, the threat of incendiarism also turned companies against each other. Fire in Charleston was an opportunity for revenge, robbery, even revelry to some, and local newspapers and private citizens were seldom slow in warning that arsonists walked among them. Who such creatures were, was difficult to tell—“a prowling character,” “[s]ome cowardly, base-hearted plunder-desiring wretch,” “an incarnate devil”—all of tellingly indeterminate color. How many such recreants there were, none could say, but the toll of damage from fires mounted steadily across the years. “The city is in a commotion about fires,” the Hayne Street merchant Isaac Bennett noted in the summer of 1850. “The Irish are setting them with the view of getting more work, also to plunder.” By June, he reckoned, their efforts had torched a million dollars’ worth of property along Meeting and Hayne, capsizing the South Carolina Insurance Company. Police and vigilantes redoubled patrols, but other major blazes broke out in November 1850, and in November and December, 1851. By the summer of 1852, so many fires had been set across the commercial district and along the wharves that city insurance companies offered a $1,000 reward to catch the culprits.\textsuperscript{130} Still more fires followed.

In the summer of 1855, another rash of blazes, again “put on the Patricks,” split the city. The mayor and local insurers doubled the bounty against arsonists, without success. Know-

\textsuperscript{129} Entry of January 19, 1853, Board of Fire Masters Minutes, Records of the City of Charleston Fire Department, CCPL; \textit{Charleston Courier}, January 7, 1854; \textit{Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department...}, 1861.

\textsuperscript{130} Isaac S. K. Bennett to John C. Faber, May 29, 1850, John Christopher Faber Papers, SCL (quote); Isaac S. K. Bennett to John C. Faber, June 5, 1850, John Christopher Faber Papers, DU.
Nothing fortunes soared, though some blamed the shadowy party itself for the outbreaks. “I honestly believe,” declared Alexander Pegues, “that as a general rule, every abandoned character, every black leg gambler & every midnight assassin in this country is a member of that secret order.” Perhaps these villains were lighting fires to stigmatize the Irish and promote their partisan goals: it was impossible to know. Likewise, when a blaze erupted behind the Aetna company’s engine house that summer, Charlestonians puzzled over the coincidence. Was it an accident, or the work of a thief to create a diversion, or bored neighbors hoping to watch the engines roll? Had some Aetna himself lit the match to win an easy premium, or just to pass the time? Or was it struck by some rival fireman, hoping the flames would spread? Incendiariism was a constant and growing fear in Charleston in the years leading up to secession, but almost no one thought rebellious slaves were the chief offenders. Immigrants, working people, and marginal men came in for the closest scrutiny—exactly the sort of fellows who filled out the ranks of line militia and upper-ward fire companies. Had they not run with the machines, many firemen might have been prime suspects for arson instead. In 1860, when first Steinmeyer’s mill burned in March, then the West Point Mill went up in November, and the Eason foundries narrowly escaped destruction the day before, finger-pointing was everywhere. In these and other cases, volunteers came in for close inquiry and heavy blame.\textsuperscript{131}

Across the summer and fall of the secession year, Charleston papers, and the \textit{Mercury} especially, created and played upon fears that the city was threatened by abolitionist and rebel slave “incendiaries.” If not for the work of the police, the watchdog South Carolina Association, an alert citizenry and, of course, Charleston’s volunteers, John Brown’s dreams might yet be fulfilled. Any fireman, though, would have recognized such talk as nonsense. No wave of slave-

\textsuperscript{131} Charles W. Heyward to Louis Manigault, September 3, 1855, Louis Manigault Papers, DU ; Alexander H. Pegues to James H. Thornwell, September 25, 1855, James Henley Thornwell Papers, SCL: \textit{Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, S. C., Ending May 21st, 1861} (Charleston, 1861).
inspired arson had been mentioned in Charleston’s press for more than thirty years. Why now? From May 1860 to April 1861, Charleston firefighters were called out to sixty-one fires; the Board of Fire Masters assigned causes to all but five of these incidents. In twenty-one cases, accidents of various sorts started fires. Another seventeen calls were false alarms or required no assistance. The remaining sixteen reports laid the blame on “incendiaries”: three in July, two in August, one in September, four in October, two in November, one in December. By themselves, these figures do not suggest much of a crime wave, and seem less impressive when the lone September blaze is dropped out—antislavery arsonists probably did not aim at torching a black family’s King Street dwelling—and the “no alarm” October incident where “combustibles” were found inside a Rutledge Street home. Notably, no deaths or injuries resulted from any fires attributed to incendiaries during this period, and only two incidents involved property not fully insured for material losses. One was the blaze involving the King Street “colored” family, who lost an impressive $350 by fire. It is easy to suspect white envy here. The other was a conflagration at Eason and Dotterer’s Columbus Street foundry, which broke out among the company’s patterns about four o’clock in the afternoon on November 12, destroying “over $1000” worth of property. First on the scene, the Marions had little trouble putting out the blaze. Rather than deducing that some workman had caused the fire through carelessness, improperly storing patterns at day’s end, marshals put it down to a “supposed incendiary”—though what his method or motive might be went unsaid. If there was an arsonist—no other fire report offers the adjective “supposed”—he was probably a disgruntled worker, not a vengeful abolitionist. When the massive West Point Mills at the foot of Bull Street went up in smoke the next day, consuming $115,000 worth of property—more than half uninsured—no one shouted arson. A brushing machine, all agreed, had caused the loss. For men who knew most about fire, the
Mercury’s fantasies about torch-bearing Yankees or vengeful slaves were beyond belief.132

When Charleston firemen thought of subversion in the secession year, it was not black or Yankee incendiaries they called to mind. It was the men of their own ranks—the Charleston Axemen—who seemed most determined to harm the social order. Across the 1850s, their ranks had shrunk steadily, and their reputation declined. In the heyday of the pumping engine, their unit possessed neither the machine nor the meritocratic culture of engine companies. The only symbol of their labors was an axe—and that bespoke destruction, not salvation, and was easily stowed in a closet. Axemen’s meetings lacked that central symbol of technology which shaped other units’ gatherings. The Axemen’s hall did not look like a fire hall. Its meetings were too small, elite, propertied, and old to be a fireman’s gathering; its hijinks, if such there were, never aroused the least concern for Fire Masters or the public press. Standing together uselessly—almost like ghosts—whenever the fire alarm summoned them, the Axemen looked certain to be axed from the Fire Brigade by 1860.

But then they struck a master stroke, saving themselves, and almost murdering the fire brigade with one swing. Across the late 1850s, northern and mid-western cities had incorporated steam fire engine companies to rein in rowdy volunteer companies and runaway costs of fire-fighting, too. Instead of hundreds of riotous men battling blazes under their own company rule, and billing local government for hours and premiums, cities from Boston to St. Louis to New Orleans bought new horse-drawn steamers, disbanding volunteers. Now fires would be fought by a handful of paid professionals, city employees working together, but judged individually, earning a paycheck and rendering up respectability in return. The Age of Mose was at an end.133

132 Annual Report of the Chief of the Fire Department, of the City of Charleston, S. C., Ending May 21st, 1861 (Charleston, 1861).
From Hartford and Cincinnati to New York and Mobile, the shift from hand-pumping to steam came top-down, enacted by city councils exasperated by volunteers and costs run amok. In Charleston, though, the drive for change came quite the other way round. There is no hint in the records of the Board of Fire Masters, the city council, or local newspapers of any desire to create a steam fire engine company. All parties understood that such a creature would be utterly antithetic to the culture of firefighting in Charleston, and—superior or not—must uproot a system which structured daily life and personal identity for hundreds of men. What would it mean if the fire bells rang and scores of clerks, tradesmen, and shopkeepers only looked up idly, sniffed for smoke, and went back to work? The idea seemed impossible until, late in 1858, the embattled Axemen commissioned James R. Taylor, a machinist at Cameron’s ironworks in the Upper Wards, to design and build a southern steam engine.134

From their drawings, the squarish machines Taylor dreamed up look more like clumsy threshers than the classic steamers of the Gilded Age. But they worked quite well—exceeding the best distance and volume of the best hand-pumped engine by fully one-third.135 That they might be crewed by ten men or less appealed to tax-conscious Charlestonians, too—and most admitted that it would be better to have a couple of these units employed than the ten city engines manned by scores of uproarious slaves. But when the Axemen asked the Fire Masters for permission to become a steam engine company in 1859, the answer was no.136


134 Acquiring a steam engine took almost two years. *Charleston Courier*, September 24, 1859, August 11, 16, 23, September 17, 1860.

135 Cameron and Company steam engine drawings, 1859, Box 3, Folders, 11 13, Fire Companies Collection, CM.

136 *Charleston Mercury*, July 20, 1860.
That no had good reasons behind it, it seemed—simple conservatism leading the way—but all Charleston political officials, from the mayor to the fire masters on down understood that interfering with the culture of the fire house meant touching the third rail of local politics. Whatever money might be saved, whatever racial exuberance reined in, could not stand against the shouts that echoed from every fire hall as men learned that a steamer was coming to town. It is a measure of the power of volunteer firemen’s culture in Charleston that local politicians treated the advent of a steam engine like welcoming the plague to the Queen City.

Yet the Axemen would not give up their fight. They built their engine, hauled it out to Citadel Green to try its prowess, asked to display it and compete in the annual parade. They were refused.\(^\text{137}\) There was no more hated machine in all the city: other companies voted resolutions against it, disdained to march alongside it, refused to cooperate with it at fires. The “introduction of any Steam Fire Engine” must lead to “the total demoralization” of Charleston’s fire brigade, they declared.\(^\text{138}\) They would not have it: the first threat of a general strike in the antebellum South arose in the Queen City on the eve of secession as wage-earning white men determined that they would not work beside a machine that was set upon destroying their claims to mutuality, masculinity, and dollars that meant more to their personal budgets than they dared say.

That powerful threat explains why the Axemen’s engine remained, unused, in storage down to the end of 1860. Hook up a hose, turn a valve, point a nozzle and a man might blow a fire away in minutes with this new system. But that same blast must destroy all the culture of

\(^{137}\) *Charleston Courier*, November 17, 1859, September 3, 1860.

\(^{138}\) *Charleston Mercury*, December 19, 1860; *Charleston Courier*, December 12, 1861. Note, however, that when the Augusta Fire Department purchased a northern-built engine, Charleston’s Aetna and Phoenix companies stored it in their halls during transshipment. That slight compromise of principle may have emboldened the Axemen in pushing for their own steam engine. *Charleston Courier*, October 15, 1859.
men who dressed up alike, ran together, pumped and shouted, drank and cheered. Turn that
valve once, and the Hopes and Phoenixes and Vigilants and more were surely washed away.
And what gallantry was left to warfare—against the elements or man—when the soldier became
a mere machine-tender, servant and fodder to the engines others built?
CHAPTER THIRTEEN:
ONE WIND LIFTS MANY FLAGS

So much for gallantry: the Vigilant Rifles were half-way drowned—and quite upstaged—before their day began. Leading up to December 19, the Mercury and Courier ran prominent notices, instructing members to form up at “Vigilant Hall”—formerly the Vigilant Fire Engine Company’s hall—at three o’clock on a Wednesday afternoon, in dress uniform with white gloves.¹ Those ads aimed more to draw crowds than guide principals. For weeks past, Charleston had heard that the Vigilants were the cream of its Minute Men, a smart-stepping, sharp-dressing bunch. Their offer of service to Governor Gist in the wake of Lincoln’s election had electrified young and old, spurring others to rally in emulation of their bold spirit. This would be their first parade, trooping through the main streets, guided by the radical Washington Light Infantry, to accept from the hands of Mayor Charles Macbeth a company flag sewn by their mothers, wives, sisters, and sweethearts. It was supposed to be a pleasant piece of political melodrama, enacted in the city’s commercial heart—the place most Vigilants knew best—heroic play, ritual, and theater all rolled into one.

But the wind blew wrong and proud plans went flying. Wednesday morning was cold and windy, and by mid-afternoon it was pouring down buckets. From offices, stores, and homes all over the middle wards, grey-clad youths emerged, shielding themselves with umbrellas, greatcoats, and anything else that came to hand, sloshing through pools of water as they headed toward State Street. Once inside the Hall, recruits wiped off and formed up, damply spruce in their new uniforms. Made to order by Vigilant fireman Charles Jackson, and topped off with French fatigue caps “with the initials ‘V. R.’ in gold embossed,” this outfit had already attracted

¹ Charleston Mercury, December 18, 1860.
the attention of the local papers: single-breasted “gray jackets, trimmed with scarlet, dark pants and blue cloth cap, black belt, &c.,” all done up with palmetto buttons. The handsome sight of these martial men should have been attraction enough for Charleston, even as familiar with serenades, flag-raisings, banners, and parades as the city had become. Other processions featured bands, fireworks, or similar gimmicks to draw a crowd. But the Vigilant Rifles must have figured that curiosity—plus their ultraist politics and social ties—would bring out big numbers eager to cheer local boys defending home values. Nobody figured it would rain so hard.

Marching over to Meeting and up north of Hayne only took five minutes, but the Vigilants were wet through by that stage, their feet unheroically soggy. There, under the colonnade of the Charleston Hotel, waited the men of the Washington Light Infantry, commanded by Broad Street lawyer Charles Simonton. When all had gone wrong in 1855 on the Northeastern Railroad, the WLI stood in for line militiamen unwilling to break that strike. Again in October they had offered their services to the Governor as Minute Men. Now the city’s most loyal volunteers stood ready to escort Charleston’s radical vanguard to its moment of military christening—and shivered. The Washingtons had made their own dash through the downpour by ones and twos from homes and shops to their Meeting Street hall—looking, to the casual eye like a regiment in retreat. Toweled off, they had drawn arms, and moved out to rendezvous. Now they stepped into the rain again, formed up deliberately alongside the Vigilants, and faced south.

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2 Charleston Mercury, November 24, December 10, 1860; Charleston Courier, November 20, 1860. Articles describing the group’s plans fully appeared in local papers that morning—unusual in that most local secessionist activity was reported after the fact. Charleston Courier, December 19, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 19, 1860.

3 This offer was not publicized at the time, and rumor misconstrued it. Charleston Mercury, October 23, 1860. No record of this letter has come to light, so dating their offer is difficult. The safest thing to say is that the Washington Light Infantry offered their services as Minute Men shortly after Sam Tupper began drilling the Vigilant Fire Company to become Minute Men.
Marching back down Meeting, past the Four Corners, the men of the two companies moved at a precise pace, as if defying the elements. Certainly there were no cheering crowds to hurry or hinder their progress. The sky was dark, the rain drenching, and all the paraphernalia of secession they passed by quite sodden. Whatever celebrations the knots of men and women huddled in storefronts and doorways sent up were muffled by the downpour.

Meanwhile, dozens of Charlestonians decked out in their best—volunteers’ family members mostly—bundled into carriages or padded through puddles, heading toward the Vigilants’ destination, just south of Tradd: the thankfully ample portico of the South Carolina Society’s hall. Not more than three dozen men and women could have crowded onto that building’s stairs and balconies by the time the Vigilants came into sight, but the rest must have been glad to dry off indoors and take in the proceedings from an upper window. When finally the Washingtons and their charges drew up in front of the hall and made their salute, the effect was underwhelming. One hundred fifty-odd bedraggled men, rain running down from sagging shakos and blue caps, dripping from brave mustaches and bushy beards, dragging jackets, shirts, and trousers into a decidedly unmilitary droop, looked nothing like the sharp edge of revolution fire-eaters crowed about. For one thing, without rifles or bayonets, the white-gloved Vigilants looked like sopping serving men. That lack of armament was one reason the WLI escorted them that day, but the contrast between the companies cannot have helped much.

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4 All newspaper accounts describe the weather as “very unfavorable” or “a drenching rain storm.” Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, December 22, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 20, 1860.

5 As of mid-December an order for rifles had “gone forward,” thanks to the donations of honorary members and sympathetic Charlestonians, but the company was still unarmed. Charleston Mercury, December 11, 1860. Leaders even appealed to their congressman, hoping to secure arms from the federal arsenal in Charleston (!), without success. Samuel Y. Tupper and John M. Harleston to William P. Miles, December 10, 1860, William Porcher Miles Papers, SHC. Neither did things get better for other units after secession. Thomas F. Drayton to J. J. Pettigrew, et al., [February?] 28, 1861, Pettigrew Family Papers, NCSA.
Regardless, all parties had arrived at the designated place at the correct time, and carried off their duties as required.\textsuperscript{6} That was all any could ask. Sheltered from the rain, Macbeth droned on about the Vigilants’ flag, the women who had made it, and the obligations of those who stood under its folds. The Vigilants’ leader, Sam Tupper, strode up, thanking the mayor, and offered several minutes’ more of military melodrama. As darkness gathered, rain-drenched would-be soldiers tuned out talk of dedication, duty, and noble deaths for all. At last they took up their flag—a white palmetto on blue background with the fire engine company’s motto, “Perseverando Vincimus” (\textit{By persevering, we conquer}), stitched along the bottom border—and headed out on parade.

It was not much of a parade. The silk they followed was soaked and sinking within a block or two, and there were few folks along the pavement as the companies marched up to Broad, headed right toward “Printer’s Row,” turned onto East Bay, then hustled back to the South Carolina Society Hall through the city’s main streets. Once inside, the waterlogged warriors surely acted as tyros will, once parents and girls had gone (by all accounts, they cleared out before the soldiers’ return), boasting and teasing about their woes and shortcomings, shucking off wet caps and outer garments before heading upstairs where the champagne and stronger stuff was waiting. Nothing had gone quite the way they wanted, but still the Vigilant Rifles had wound up where they hoped, perched behind a drink hoisted in honor of manly performance precisely executed.

Perhaps the rain sheltered Vigilant recruits from full knowledge of how a different performance of political theater had pushed their set-piece to the margins—and transformed its meaning utterly. When they placed the ad that prompted the parade, everyone thought that the

\textsuperscript{6} \textit{Charleston Mercury}, December 20, 1860; \textit{Charleston Courier}, December 20, 1860. Subsequent quotations regarding the parade and festivities are drawn from the \textit{Mercury} article.
state’s deliberations over disunion—the third separatist meeting in three decades—would continue a hundred miles away, in Columbia. Not a few figured that it would all come to nothing, or that after its conclusion extremists would, as ever, compromise somehow, stopping short of breaking up the federal union. Until Pennsylvania swung into the Republican column in early October, it was easy to brag big and cheer disunion. In Charleston, “there were a great many more Separate State Action Men than you can find now,” Christopher Fitzsimmons chuckled. “That thing made them look the danger straight in the face.”7 Temporizing would surely drag this revolution to a halt—just as it killed disunion in 1832 and 1851—and the whole thing would dissolve in a hiss of recrimination. But two months on, all had gone the other way. Backed by the astonishing state-wide growth of Minute Men groups, the small cadre of fire-eaters who demanded independence seemed surprisingly earnest, refusing concessions of any kind. Still, if South Carolina’s history taught anything it was that saber-rattling was not the same as secession.

That lesson looked about to be learned again when delegates to the disunion convention gathered in Columbia’s Baptist Church mid-December had to confront the meaning of their choices. What went on in Columbia is perhaps beyond understanding now, but a few points are clear. Radical voices modulated—just as Fitzsimmons predicted. Secessionists conferred with cooperationists, and unelected unionists like Wade Hampton, too. Hours passed, committees met, and still no final step transpired. And then, at the end of an unproductive first day, a different word went out: Columbia was plagued by smallpox. Where and who and how serious were quite unclear—and so the meeting shifted suddenly to the most un-radical city in the cotton South.8

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7 Christopher Fitzsimmons to James Hammond, October 19, 1860, James Henry Hammond Papers, SCL.

8
To call that migration unexpected or unusual does not nearly come up to the mark. It was unprecedented, shocking, and made some worry that radicalism would fizzle out once more. The wonder is that panicked men did not simply head home, promising to plot disunion’s course another day. But they could not, clearly, without sacrificing honor and wrecking their political fortunes. And perhaps they were not panicked in the least. So, too, the uproar of moving 160 delegates to Charleston at a moment’s notice, along with various wives, children, friends, slaves, and associates, delayed and could well have disrupted the proceedings. Hotels went full almost instantly, and figuring out where the delegates would meet—the South Carolina Institute was too big, echoing, and cold, men said, St. Andrew’s Hall badly cramped but convenient—took quick talking and decisiveness.

Probably there was no “epidemic” in Columbia. Perhaps the cry of disease was pure ploy to break up the convention. Possibly moving the meeting to Charleston aimed at derailing disunion. We cannot say. If so, however, that gambit boomeranged badly.

Betting on disorder looked like the smart play for closet anti-disunionists, certainly. But all of that had to be worked out at street level, as it was through hundreds of lost and seemingly unimportant choices about trains and hotels and baggage and costs when the convention moved, one day before the Vigilants planned to take up their flag. Like a thunderclap, the radical firemen’s big day was transformed into a silly sideshow. There is more than one way to rain on a parade.

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8 This tale is sketched in Charles E. Cauthen, South Carolina Goes to War, 1860-1865 (Chapel Hill, 1950), 68-70; Allan Nevins, Ordeal of the Union, 8 vols. (New York, 1947-71), 4: 359; William W. Freehling, The Road to Disunion, vol. 2: Disunionists Triumphant, 1854-1861 (New York, 2007), 221-222.

9 Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina, held in 1860, 1861 and 1862, Together with the Ordinances, Reports, Resolutions, etc. (Columbia, 1862), 21, 160; Charleston Courier, December 19, 1860.

While the Vigilant Rifles stepped off in the wet and wandered around the lower wards behind their new flag, St. Andrew’s Hall was filled to overflowing as Charleston watched the final act of disunion unfold. Short hours after the well-toasted Vigilants rolled home, wrung out, and slept, convention delegates would rise and vote and break the nation apart. Come evening, the city reconvened at the South Carolina Institute, rechristened “Secession Hall,” staging a melodramatic performance of the decision taken down the street hours earlier. The Palmetto State was out of the Union, and the Vigilant Rifles would have to follow its flag quite sincerely now.

The hindsight of Civil War and ruination obscures how improbable secession’s success seemed at that revolutionary moment. On October 7, 1860, when the Columbia Minute Men issued their call to arms, separate state disunion was a political longshot in South Carolina, promoted by an extremist minority. So it had been for a generation and more. But that tide turned swiftly. By month’s end, the blue cockade was seen everywhere, and Minute Men groups were thriving across the state. They held torchlight processions and raised liberty poles. They celebrated chivalry and menaced those who hung back from their cause. As the reality of Lincoln’s victory sank in, they nursed bloody fantasies about defending homes, seizing forts, marching on Washington. The most radical backed up their boasts by purchasing arms and forming military companies. Everywhere they took root, Minute Men proved crucial to disunion’s triumph.

Charleston shared fully in this transition from temporizing to intransigence. The Queen City was notoriously the most divided, conservative part of the state, yet by December it had become the storm center of the slaveholders’ revolution. The same parades and serenades performed elsewhere were enacted here on an almost nightly basis. The same chest-thumping
and testing of loyalties played out daily. The supposed need to expel Federal troops from the forts in Charleston harbor obsessed young and old alike. But why this should have been so has never nearly been explained. Who were the men in Charleston’s radical vanguard? What drew them together and what did they aim at? How can we explain their city’s astonishing swing from conservatism to separatism in the span of weeks?

By December, 1860, 112 men had signed on with the Vigilants. A few were only honorary members, chipping in cash and rallying support. Seventy-two year old Senator Arthur Peronneau Hayne—long-dead nullifier Robert Hayne’s elder brother—went further, asking for active membership and declaring himself “ready for the saddle.” He had fought the British in 1812, and would risk his “life and property” for South Carolina once more.11 The Rifles waved that letter round the lower wards, shaming lesser men, but tabled Hayne’s request, with thanks. Dozens more unmartial men dressed up and marched, determined to serve somehow—from seventeen year-old clerk Dan Boinest to fifty-six year-old wharf owner Tom Kerr. That range of ages and occupations alone reminds us that there was not one impulse which led men to join the Vigilant Rifles. As Table 13.1 shows, slightly more than half the company’s membership was drawn from the rolls of the Vigilant fire company, or fellows affiliated but not officially signed on. But fully fifty men came in from outside the firemen’s ranks. What drew these men, and why did other Vigilant firemen refuse that radical step?

Examining the origins of Tupper’s company both untangles and complicates the question of volunteers’ motivation (Table 13.2). As with the Vigilant fire company, Vigilant Rifles for whom we have information (109 members) overwhelmingly came from South Carolina. At the same time, however, home state nativity fell off from the more-than-nine-out-of-ten rate firemen demonstrated, and this gap was made up—surprisingly—by non-firemen mostly born in northern

11 Charleston Mercury, December 1, 1860.
### TABLE 13.1

**VIGILANT FIRE COMPANY MEMBERSHIP IN VIGILANT RIFLES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affiliation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VFEC member</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VFEC-linked</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-member</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>44.6</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Total: 112 100.0

*Source: PCH Database*

### TABLE 13.2

**VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY BIRTHPLACE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birthplace</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>88.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York</td>
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<td>1.8</td>
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<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>England</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 109 100.0

*Source: PCH Database*
states. Indeed, non-Carolinian Vigilant firemen were far more likely to join the Rifles than local men. Why did locals hang back from military service—when they were already committed to defending their city through firefighting—at the same moment born Yankees stepped into the disunionist vanguard?

Plotting Vigilant Rifles’ membership in terms of local geography confirms the central role of the fire company and the location of its State Street meeting hall, solidly in Ward 3 (Table 13.3). Yet, of 109 rifle company members for whom we have data, almost half came from the solidly bourgeois Wards 4 and 6 on the west side of town—and none at all from the working-class upper wards. What was lost north of Calhoun was picked up south of Broad, in the city’s best neighborhoods. Overall, though, the Vigilant Rifles came in almost exactly the same proportions from the same areas as the Vigilant fire company—even though membership saw an almost fifty percent change. How can that consistency be squared with so much change?

Lining up the Vigilant Rifles alongside the fire company from which it originated, the difference in ages would have been immediately apparent (Table 13.4). Splitting honorary Riflemen off from active service members is impossible here, but we can assume that this handful of older, wealthy patrons skews the data slightly toward the greybeards, not away. And yet, of the 106 volunteers for whom we have information, men under the age of 25—and especially teenagers—appear more frequently than among firemen. Those in the 25-34 year-old cohort drop off, and the ranks above that age double. We can discount that surge among the middle-aged as a scramble for leadership positions and a desire to provide patronage among the well-heeled. But why the surge among younger men—and where did the late twenty-something set go?
TABLE 13.3

VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY WARD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 109 100.0

Source: PCH Database

TABLE 13.4

VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERS’ AGES, 1860

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>69.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>87.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>93.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>95.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-56</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 106 100.0

Source: PCH Database
So, too, pairing up these groups’ occupational categories suggests that men stood with the Vigilant Rifles for much the same reasons they enlisted in the Vigilant fire company—except that many Rifles had never been firemen, and there are significant shifts in the kinds of work Riflemen did. Who stood in disunion’s radical vanguard?

Mostly Charleston’s clerks and bosses, Table 13.5 shows. Comprising more than half the company, clerks, accountants, bookkeepers, and salesmen were the Vigilant Rifles’ core. Around and above them circled a leadership of commercial merchants, factors, and bankers, monopolizing leadership roles (or offering moral and monetary support as patrons). Beyond this, there were fractions of craft laborers, retail merchants, and men who—mostly against their will, it seems—had no job. That, plus a smattering of other strays made up the spear tip of secession in the Queen City. But why these fellows?

Most Vigilant firemen-clerks became Vigilant Rifles, yet not nearly all did—indeed, compared to the Vigilant Fire Company, clerical worker membership declined. And, at just the same moment, commercial men—factors, cotton merchants, and moneyed types generally poured into the unit, doubling their presence as firefighters. Partly, we may put this down to patronage, not direct participation, but this cannot erase the basic trend here: clerks were dropping out slightly, bosses dropping in.

That same pattern appears sharply when we examine Vigilant Rifles’ housing arrangements (table 13.6). Two-thirds of the membership boarded or lived with parents or close kin, but that number is notably lower than the rate for Vigilant firemen. So, too, the number and percentage of Vigilant Rifles owning their own homes and heading households nearly doubles that for firefighters. It is not difficult to understand why men of property, a few of them slaveholders, stood up to defend their families and their way of life. That is much the argument
### TABLE 13.5

**VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBER OCCUPATION TYPES**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Mercantile</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stevedore</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Job Listed</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>112</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: PCH Database*

### TABLE 13.6

**VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY RESIDENCE TYPE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household Head, owns</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single, owns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Head, rents</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives alone, rents</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lives with Parent(s)</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>48.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boards</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>15.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with VFEC member</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
<td><strong>108</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: PCH Database*
of most historians about how secession arose. But why did so many young, single, propertyless clerks and men like them—with little stake in the fortunes of slave society, and less hope of advancement—rush into radicalism’s front rank? Unraveling that riddle transforms our understanding of disunion’s impulses, meanings, and trajectory.

Turn back to the evening of November 6, a moment before the word leapt from Charleston’s telegraph office up in the Fifth Ward down to the chalkboards outside the newspaper offices on Broad that Lincoln had won the presidency. That unsurprising, dread news lit a fuse that burned fast along questions of slavery, state rights, economic decline, and masculinity imperiled. But that crisis was quite external to the melodrama played out that Tuesday night over on State Street. Current, honorary, and former members of the Vigilant Fire Engine Company had been urged to attend this monthly meeting. Already, for three weeks past—short days after Columbia’s Minute Men published their constitution—Sam Tupper had been drilling the firemen according to William H. Hardee’s Infantry Tactics, the military training standard of the time.12

Now there was Tupper once more, up at the front of the hall, alongside Vigilant Henry Baker, a wealthy commission merchant, surrounded by other rich and powerful men—none previously connected with the fire company. Etsell Adams, the business end of Adams and Frost, the Broad Street commission merchants, was there, along with George Coffin, chief partner in the Coffin and Pringle factorage, and Charles West, president of the Charleston Savings Institution. Ship broker John Caldwell milled about, too, and William Rogers, editor of the Courier. For firemen seating themselves to start the meeting it was obvious that something extraordinary was afoot.

12 Charleston Mercury, November 6, 1860.
Nine years earlier, every one of these men had been prominent conservatives, instrumental in turning the tide against separate state secession. Dozens of Vigilant firemen—plus a large fraction of the yet-unformed Charleston Chess Club had joined them in signing their names to a public declaration against immediate disunion. As recently as February, 1860, Tupper had played a leading role among Broad Street Clique men in nominating a conservative delegation to the national Democratic Party convention that met in Charleston that April. That meeting had been packed with Vigilant firemen, chess club members, and notorious anti-secessionists—including three vice-presidents who would later become Vigilant Rifles.

Declaring his “sincerity of purpose,” Tupper had insisted that the “interest and honor” of South Carolina required the cooperation of the “good and true men of the South” with the “good and true men of the North,” downing fanaticism in both sections. “We will not stand by and see the battle fought without taking our part in the heat and burden of the conflict,” he affirmed, and if “equality in the Union” could not be secured, there still remained “the last alternative of a people who prefer revolution to dishonor.” Calhoun himself never declared the South Carolina jeremiad more clearly. But Tupper’s February triumph only led to the humiliating blow-up of the Democrats in April, which saw him, Tommy Simons, and the rest of South Carolina’s delegation jeered by their own city. Now Tupper led a “large and enthusiastic” meeting of those same conservative men in quite a different direction.

Most surprising, perhaps, on that November night, was the presence of fifty-four-year old Col. Edward Brickell White, the Carolina-born engineer tasked with rearing a new Customs

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14 (Pickens, SC) Keowee Courier, March 3, 1860.

15 Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, February 25, 1860; Charleston Mercury, November 8, 1860.
House down on East Bay Street. Up to this point, on all matters civic and political, White had been studiously silent, even as his lieutenants Louis LeBleux and Anthony Barbot played prominent roles in the Vigilant Fire Company. Now he, Adams and Tupper delivered strong calls “to make such preparations as may be deemed proper for the formation of a ‘Volunteer Rifle Corps’.” Making proper preparations for forming something was rather different than actually acting, as all men knew. But what other action was possible, apart from the play-substitutes Charlestonians knew well? Playing out familiar rituals of fraternal manhood in comfortingly rote fashion, the Vigilants, their patrons and supporters formed committees, nominated members, voted and applauded in timely fashion. There would be rules to write and reports to present, as in any club. Officers were nominated and elections would be held a few days hence. This was a “sign of the times,” the Mercury crowed: the “Firemen are moving.”16

Preparing to move was closer to it, certainly, but more than a few men read the performative signs of potential change with profound alarm. When they reconvened four days later, the Vigilant Hall was packed with men, not nearly all of them firemen. And, it seems, many Vigilant firemen chose not to attend this meeting—called specifically by the “Vigilant Rifles.” Or, if they were present, they did not quite share the “great enthusiasm” of their fellows.17 At any rate, when the call came for men to sign the company roll, melodrama reached its apogee: would men commit to defend their state, tendering their services to the governor as Minute Men--or what were they playing at?

One hundred fifteen men joined the Vigilant Fire Company between 1855 and 1860, reveling in a culture that celebrated their constant readiness to answer duty’s call, and comparing fraternal labors with military service. Volunteer firemen, they insisted, not the pretend soldiery

16 Charleston Mercury, November 6, 1860.
17 Charleston Mercury, November 12, 1860.
of the militia, were the city’s true defenders. Of these Vigilants, all but eleven resided in Charleston on the eve of secession. But when Captain Tupper urged his men to stand together and don the blue cockade, fully forty-four percent refused his appeal. Does that explain why so many non-firemen crowded the hall that night? If would-be Minute Men knew that there would be foot-draggers in their midst, did that spur them to bring along outsiders? We cannot know, though surely non-firemen did not show up alone and uninvited. And why did radical firemen not try to roust their absentee mates?

Absent firemen were quite close by. As table 13.7 shows, nearly half the men who declined to step forward came from the middling wards, though in percentage terms the heaviest losses came from the wealthy neighborhoods south of Tradd. Nativity played an even more powerful role in the decision not to sign up: thirty-eight of 101 South Carolinians chose not to join—more than one-third of all locally-born men. But all of the ten non-Carolinians who remained in Charleston in November, 1860 (save only the Irish-born plumber Robert Minniss) chose not to join. Looking around the hall that night, Vigilant volunteers eager to take their stand must have eyed men like German-born J. A. Baum or Connecticut Yankee Edward Robinson grimly. Or remembered them, absent, with un-fraternal thoughts. Englishman Charles Jackson, owner of one of King Street’s largest dry goods shops, and Marsells Bartlett, a twenty-eight year-old Maine-born bookkeeper working for the Northeastern Railroad lived together up on Radcliffe Street. Both chose not to join. Two doors down lived the Carolinian Cleapor brothers, Philip and Charles, avid firemen and proud Vigilant Rifles both. Did these fellows tip their hats in greeting to each other when they passed the next day, or did their variant choices arouse distrust and enmity? Undeniably, former comrades had broken ranks, choosing different paths.
### TABLE 13.7

VIGILANT FIREMEN REJECTING VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY WARD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ward</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of VFEC Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>57.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 46

*Source: PCH Database*

### TABLE 13.8

VIGILANT FIREMEN REJECTING VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY AGE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>% of VFEC Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>17-19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>31.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>36.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>54.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-34</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 46

*Source: PCH Database*
Other, often unlikely, men seized their chance to become Minute Men that night. Though the nineteen-year old New York-born merchant John Newcomen refused to cross from membership in the Vigilant Fire Company to the Vigilant Rifles, D. Henry Jones, the nineteen year-old New York-born clerk who co-resided with him was glad to stand in his place, despite having no previous formal tie to the firefighters. John Danner likewise volunteered just as his housemate Vigilant Charles Adams demurred. Perhaps these men had rollicked with the fire boys before the matter of Lincoln’s election erupted, or maybe they just saw a chance to advance when another fell back. Nor should we doubt John Newcomen’s commitment to the rebel cause: he eventually enlisted in the Charleston Battalion of the 25th South Carolina Regiment, and was killed at Battery Wagner in September 1863.\(^{18}\)

The age and class characteristics of firemen who chose not to join the Rifles were obvious, too. As table 13.8 shows, young men were least likely to balk at enlisting, but a majority of men aged 25 to 34 who had been Vigilant firemen elected to stand down. Older men were almost as likely to decline membership, though that is more difficult to construe as deliberate avoidance. Occupationally, those least likely to profit directly from sustaining slavery—and those who would have been considered most threadbare by their peers—were also most likely to avoid enlisting with the Vigilant Rifles. Most of those who kept their hands in their pockets were clerks, accounting for almost two out of three firemen who declined to enroll (table 13.9). Proportionally, though, they were far more apt among Vigilant firemen to support the Rifles than elite commercial men or professionals. Only shopkeepers as a category stuck more loyally to Tupper’s cause. Likewise, those most likely to be clerks—men who boarded or lived with parents or elder kin—were also most likely to turn away from the Vigilant Rifles, in

\(^{18}\) Randolph W. Kirkland, Jr., *Broken Fortunes: South Carolina Soldiers, Sailors and Citizens Who Died in the Service of their Country and State in the War for Southern Independence* (Columbia, 1997).
terms of total number of refusals (table 13.10). But, again, proportionally, the story was far more complicated: firemen who were household heads, owning their homes were least likely to reject the call to membership. They had the most skin in the game, one might say. Conversely, those who boarded—overwhelmingly young single clerks—were most likely to fold their arms instead of signing up. Among those who lived in a parent- or kin-headed household, about forty percent avoided enlistment. Broadly speaking, then, those firemen who chose not to enlist in the Vigilant Rifles--mostly young, South Carolina-born propertyless pen-pushing bachelors--looked almost identical in terms of social characteristics to firemen who answered Tupper’s call, or to non-firemen who stepped into the vacant ranks. Outward appearances bedeviled men straining to discern who among them would answer duty’s call and who was merely playing possum. Who would act; who was merely acting?

Answering that question positively must have seemed imperative as the Vigilants’ evening lurched to an uproarious conclusion. Having signed their names to the roll and elected officers, the company voted to submit to Governor Gist their pledge to serve at his command. The Vigilant Rifles were Minute Men at last. The meeting’s adjournment led to informal celebration and conviviality, though secretary Thaddeus Street did not record the minutes of that carousing. What we know is that a group of fellows got hold of a cannon somehow, sometime in the wee hours that night, aimed it down Broad Street toward the Four Corners, and blew out the windows of shops and offices all around. “Fire the guns, boys,” the Mercury cheered—in spite of the “quantity of plate glass in fragments on the sidewalk” the next morning: Georgia and Alabama had to see that South Carolina was in earnest. That prank became ritual, it seems, and the four-man crew of the “East Bay Artillery”--including Vigilant Rifles James Legare Yates and
### TABLE 13.9

VIGILANT FIREMEN REJECTING VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY OCCUPATION TYPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>VFEC Members Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clerical</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>39.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail Mercantile</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craft Labor</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>41.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draying</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Job</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>60.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 46 100.0

*Source: PCH Database*

### TABLE 13.10

VIGILANT FIREMEN REJECTING VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY RESIDENCE TYPE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence Type</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household head, owns</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household head, rents</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lives with kin</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with VFEC member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with CCC member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boards with VR member</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total: 41 100.0

*Source: PCH Database*
Charles William Westendorff—stood ready to fire another shot when the time was right. Their next salvo marked secession.19

Meanwhile, there was the drudgery of drill. Each Saturday night the company assembled for military instruction and barracks parade, gradually taking on a more military air. Tupper’s officers were older, propertied, well-connected men: First Lieutenant John Harleston was a 40-year old married banker with a house and five slaves, Second Lieutenant John Martin a near copy: forty years old, married, an exchange broker, with real estate, cash in the bank, and a single slave. Neither man came from within the firemen’s ranks. The company’s five sergeants, six corporals, secretary/clerk, and armorer (the Vigilants were not shy about ladling out offices) presented more minor attainments: all except Marylander John Torrent were Carolina-born, all save Sergeant James S. Westendorff were single, unpropertied, non-slaveholders. His four slaves marked him as strikingly successful for a twenty-seven year-old accountant. Apart from armorer H. P. Rives, a thirty-five year old machinist, all ranged from nineteen to twenty-seven. All were clerks, salesmen, or bookkeepers, apart from Sergeant Torrent, a stevedore, and Oliver Kingman, a carpenter. Various personal ties linked and elevated these men: Corporal Wade Hampton Evans and Sergeant Julius Petsch Browne worked together in George D. Grice’s King Street china shop; Corporal John Doyle Browne (J. P.’s brother) labored down the street at Fogarties and Stillman’s dry goods shop, alongside Private Nathaniel Fields Smith. Steele’s Hat Hall and the Charleston Chess Club stood about half way—forty paces—in between. Corporal Sidney Aveilhe and Sergeant Rob Roy lived over on Church Street with Aveilhe’s chess-playing brother Peter; their sister had married the charismatic Broad Street Clique politician Michael Patrick O’Connor. Rives lived directly across the street from the powerful E. B. White, who was not elected to the Vigilant officer corps, but still signed on as a private.

19 Charleston Courier, November 12, December 21, 1860; Charleston Mercury, December 22, 1860.
Such connections of kinship, propinquity, co-residence, occupation, employment, and leisure shaped and defined the men who formed up at the Vigilant Hall on November 17 and 24. The word around Charleston was that the firemen drilled in smaller groups every day now, but the seventy-odd men who fell in on Saturday evenings seemed doubly impressive. There were the brothers Albergottie, Baker, Boinest, Browne, Carter, Chase, Cleapor, Humphreys, Jones, Kingman, Owens, Thames, West, Westendorff, and Yates—thirty-seven men in all answering roll call—spread out among others linked by marriage, friendship, occupation, and social ties. Consider the Yates brothers: James was a successful thirty-three year old merchant, still single, but with a tidy sum in real and personal property, plus three slaves, living across the road from chess player Richard Screven. His eighteen-year old brother Charles Yates was starting out in life as a clerk, living at home, just opposite Vigilant Charles West and company patron Tommy Simons. No wonder he signed up. Conversely, there was the case of the Boinest brothers: they and their brother-in-law Theo Smith had been loyal Vigilant firemen, and Wilson Boinest and Smith had done building and brickwork together—quite possibly down on White’s Customs House project where many other Vigilants earned their pay. But when the call to duty came, Smith sat on his hands or was absent altogether. Wilson and his brother Dan strode forth together as they ever had. Whether that act meant to declare personal principles, affirm manly mutuality, or keep the family name from dishonor, is unknown.20

On December 1, the Vigilants were slated to be “put under arms” at last.21 That thrilling moment fell through for reasons unexplained, but at least all recruits now wore company fatigue caps—if nothing else matched. Some bought their hats from fellow Vigilant Henry Williams’ struggling King Street shop, though others went to Steele, Charleston’s “Military Hatter” now.

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20 Charleston Mercury, November 17, 24, 1860.
21 Charleston Courier, December 1, 1860.
There was Edward Grady, the twenty-one year old propertyless accountant--who lived two doors down from Robert Barnwell Rhett himself--ranked alongside some of Charleston’s most prominent east side employers: ship merchant George Ingraham, a leader of the Charleston Port Society; wharf owner Tom Kerr, a wealthy married young man with four slaves, Murdoch Matheson and William Lawton, cotton factors both, well-heeled, married, and masters to eight and thirteen souls respectively. A few other fellows--shopkeepers mostly—could claim slaveholding status in a minor way: tailor Dan Kemme owned four blacks; druggist Joe Blackman had three; Broad Street merchant George Bowman owned four more (table 13.11). All told, 112 Vigilant Rifle members owned 131 slaves between them. More than four out of five owned no slaves at all, and only a few rich men—Etsell Adams, Mayor Macbeth’s son James, and E. B. White held more than ten. A fellow like William Lawton, whose father was a wealthy factor and intimate of the Gourdins, could hope to inherit a share of the seventy souls he held in bondage, but he was utterly unusual in that regard. Of the forty-six Vigilant firemen who declined to join the Rifles, only four were slaveholders of the most minor sort, mustering just eleven bondpeople between them (table 13.12). Here again, the men who became Minute Men mostly look just like those who opted out.

Lacking slaves, real, or personal property, most Vigilant Rifles had poor prospects for shifting from bachelorhood to wedded bliss. Achieving the “unshackled ardour of connubial love” meant first negotiating complex personal ties of masculine friendship, patronage, honor, and respect, judging and being judged across years and decades.22 Perhaps William Lanneau was eyeing fellow Vigilant Edwin Calder’s sister now—he married Isabelle Calder after the war—but more probably he shared his leisure hours with the unmarried clerk Stephen Thomas, his co-worker at Hayden and Whilden’s King Street jewelry store. They both served as firemen

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22 Anthony B. Shackelford to Jane H. Lee, January 17, 1819, James McBride Shackelford Papers, SCHR.
TABLE 13.11

VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY SLAVEHOLDING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaves Owned</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
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<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>90.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>96.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>98.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PCH Database

TABLE 13.12

VIGILANT FIREMEN REJECTING VIGILANT RIFLES MEMBERSHIP BY SLAVEHOLDING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slaves Owned</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Cumulative Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>91.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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Source: PCH Database
together, and both joined the Rifles. Homosocial bonds were strong in this bachelor-dominated subculture, precisely because any young fellow looking to get on in life had to look to older, propertied, well-connected men—the Tppers and Coffins and Whites—for a leg up. Vigilant fireman Washington Albergottie did well for himself: at thirty, he was still just a propertyless clerk, but he had married the boss’s daughter in 1856. Two years later, he named his first-born son after his father-in-law, ship broker John Caldwell. In November 1860, Albergottie and Caldwell sealed the bond between them by becoming Minute Men.

That opportunity to socialize, perform heroic masculinity, and build ties of fraternity and patronage was highly prized. Imagine the confusion and laughter at the end of the evening when the Vigilants dismissed from their drills, doffed their military caps, and shuffled through dozens of hats, trying to retrieve their own. In that moment, as bootless bachelor clerks rubbed elbows with thriving masters of slaves and capital, owning one of Steele’s four-dollar beavers—free and clear—must have seemed more important than ever before. E. William Walter surely knew Edward B. White, if only by tipping his hat—Walter’s father worked in the federal Customs House White was building—but as a twenty-six year old bachelor clerk without real or personal property, he can hardly have seen the architect quite as a peer. Dressing up and marching together as Minute Men gave fellows on both sides of that social divide the chance to try on alternate identities, playing at revolution and comradeship both. If only for an hour, in spite of broad divisions of class and status within their ranks, the Vigilant Rifles presented the appearance of a solid column.

A week later, on December 8, Tupper’s company shifted their drill to the South Carolina Institute Hall, attracting considerable attention. The Mercury complimented their neat appearance, and considered their marching and manual of arms “creditably performed.” That
phrase was especially *apropos* since this “efficient military corps” still had no muskets. Governor Gist promised that weapons would arrive “in a few days,” but those days passed and still the Vigilant Rifles were armed only with play-substitutes. That seemed to diminish the ardor of the Minute Men not at all, though. Tupper drilled them publicly on December 13 and again two days later, preparing for receive the company’s colors and parade the lower wards.²³

In the meantime, individual Vigilants polished their radical credentials with public speeches and letters, political nominations and informal serenades. Lieutenant Martin, Charles West, and Murdoch Matheson stood among the vice-presidents in the mass meeting that welcomed Charleston’s legislative delegation back from Columbia after calling a secession convention. Two weeks later, Etsell Adams and George Black helped lead a public meeting where a roster of Broad Street Clique lieutenants were shamed into pledging their “devotion to the cause of the State,” Mayor Macbeth leading the way. Outwardly, the purpose of the meeting was to receive “suggestions” from “able fellow-citizens and statesmen” as South Carolina’s future course. Having been called out in this fashion, and welcomed “amid great cheering,” what man dared ruin his name by opposing the community? Even then, conservative Kit Memminger dragged his heels: “there must be no step backward,” he declared. But how to go forward, he did not quite say.²⁴ It mattered not—the crowd had the word it wanted, the ceremony of building a united front was performed, so dissent and division were further vanquished.

Tupper’s steady drilling gained the same goal, goading militia units and firemen to mirror his Minute Men. Volunteer infantry followed the lead of the Vigilants and the WLI, offering their services to the governor. The unfortunately named Union Light Infantry declared its

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²³ *Charleston Mercury*, December 10, 13, 15, 1860.

²⁴ *Charleston Courier*, November 17, 1860; *Charleston Mercury*, December 1, 1860.
radicalism by adopting the blue cockade as “a symbol of our unfltering devotion.” Rival fire companies became the Phoenix Rifles, the Aetna Guard, the Washington Artillery and more, sending members ricocheting to and from various units, trying on uniforms, duties, prospects for office, and styles of camaraderie. More marginal men clustered in Charleston’s line militia companies professed their radicalism and affirmed masculine fraternity by signing up with the Palmetto Minute Men, a catch-all group inviting the “Military and Firemen,” as well as Charleston’s “citizens generally” to participate in its rites. Not much by way of responsibility was required here—or in any of these groups—save a public demonstration of personal politics, performing one’s role in “the great game of disunion” appropriately, and tipping the hat to fellow actors. The elements of play, theater, commerce, and subversion so central to Charleston’s disunion movement were hidden in plain sight.

Why any particular clerk, storekeeper, brick mason, or merchant signed up with the Vigilant Rifles--or any other military company--is far from obvious. Civil War soldiers’ memoirs and contemporary letters seldom speak of peer pressure, hopes for personal advancement, or fears of being thought disloyal or unmanly. That is just why we should suspect volunteers as a group of sharing such motives. Certainly, after Appomattox, when their names had been inscribed on the Confederate Roll of Honor, Tom Albergottie, Sidney Aveilhe, Henry Baker, Thad Cay, and the rest had other concerns than unraveling the meaning of their acts:

25 Charleston Mercury, November 29, December 7, 20, 1860, January 11, 1861; Charleston Courier, December 7, 1860; Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier, November 17, 1860. Notably, some groups like the Aetna Fire Engine Company formed into the Aetna Guards, but did not volunteer as Minute Men. Others, like the Hope company took no concerted action at all.

26 Constitution of the Phoenix Rifles, of Charleston, S. C., Adopted, Nov., 1861 (Charleston, 1862); Constitution of the Rutledge Mounted Riflemen, with a List of its Officers and Members (Charleston, 1861); Constitution and Rules of the South Carolina Rangers (Charleston, 1861); Constitution and By-Laws of the Brooks Guards, 1861 (Charleston, 1861); Charleston Mercury, December 21, 1860, January 3, 1861.

27 Study of initial motivation in the Civil War has been dominated by the argument that recruits in 1860-61 were swept up in a rage militaire. James M. McPherson, For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War (New York, 1997), 14-29. For Charleston, I argue, that notion is far too simplistic.
there were reputations to be tended, and perhaps claims for pensions or disability benefits to be tent-pegged. Least useful in the aftermath of defeat was for men to admit ambivalence or uncertainty about their cause. And so historians, from fine motives of their own, have taken at face value the evidence they have found, filtered it through the prejudices of their times, and imagine they have discovered the "face of battle." Not quite.

At the hour of secession, Charleston—and all of South Carolina—and all of the South—was riven with internal contradictions, economic, political, social, and cultural, that transformed the narrow question of Lincoln’s election into an all-pervasive crisis of internal disunion. Rampant Republicans and recalcitrant slaves mattered little in comparison to fears of division within their own ranks. Political peril was merely the highest and most narrow expression of the threat of disloyalty and subversion within the Queen City itself. That is why men put badges on hats, of all things. As to parties, Henry Conner told his son, “South Carolina is badly organized.” Instead of a solid column, the state was split into two hostile, erratic parties, “and it is embarrassing to know how to act.” The Vigilant Rifles might have nodded in agreement. “The Secession party go strong very strong,” and the result might well prove disastrous. “The Conservative party never did nor will effect anything either good or bad,” but perhaps kicking the can down the road was the best sort of solution, if it could be achieved. “Certainly this thing” of oscillating “between poles is exceedingly dangerous,” the merchant banker considered,


echoing the Apostle with a Victorian vocabulary. How to steady double-minded men at the moment of crisis? Connor could not say.

Joining the Vigilant Rifles both expressed and looked to resolve the deep fears of internal division Charlestonians saw all around them. It was a form of play, allowing men to put aside doubts about themselves, their fellows, and their city, sideling social divisions, past antagonisms and party loyalties. Conducted in an allocated space across a designated time—only a few hours at a stretch—men might try on the garb of revolution one piece at a time. Down to the hour of secession, a rifle—the thing they claimed to long for—had not yet been thrust into their hands. The gradual, incremental, ludic character of their actions both attracted men to Minute Men service and held them fast once they entered the field of play. To stop or refuse the next step—from a signature to a cap to a uniform to a flag—meant honor stained, fraternity disrupted, disloyalty laid bare. Across November and December, Charleston newspapers reported that Vigilant parades turned out “seventy to seventy-five” men, well short of the number who had pledged themselves to disunion’s cause. Perhaps those absent fellows had been playing all along: such worries only redoubled the need for drill, discipline, and an end to divisions of all sorts. The state would become “one party,” or it must destroy itself.

The melodramatic strain of such arguments alerts us again to the theatrical aspect of service in the Vigilant Rifles. Performing revolution here meant playing out roles precisely scripted in familiar set-pieces: drills and parades, minor speeches, accepting a flag, after-hours carousing. It was not as though anyone was going to get shot. Even after secession, John

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30 Henry W. Conner to James Connor, October 28, 1860, Conner Family Papers, SCHS.

31 My debt to—and commentary on—the vast work of social movement theorist Doug McAdam and his colleagues should become quite clear about here. Especially valuable to this study has been Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings, ed. Doug McAdam, et al. (New York, 1996); Sidney Tarrow, Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics (New York, 1998); Social Movement: Identity, Culture, and the State, ed. David S. Meyer, et al. (New York, 2002);
Cunningham, Tommy Simons, and other officers had volunteer companies of lesser pedigree seize the federal arsenal downtown and the evacuated forts around Charleston harbor. Tupper and his boys sat things out till New Year’s Day, when they were sent on “secret service” to nearby Morris Island. Lasting three cold, damp weeks, said service was reported on steadily in local papers, along with complaints of men traipsing back to town and going AWOL. The glorified camping trip wound up with a “pleasant affair,” the Courier reported, when the Vigilants presented a “handsome silver goblet” to Mr. F. J. Fowler, Jr., for his valuable services as mess cook. Private Yates made a speech, of course—talking and walking about were central to the revolutionary performance of a Vigilant Rifle—and the honoree, a “courteous and gentlemanly” railroad conductor,” reciprocated. If not yet dead, the age of chivalry was certainly tortured by these un-ironic men.

But what else could they do? The firemen’s boast had been that militia service was small men cutting japes, pretending to a heroic soldiery that involved no danger or dedication at all. It was the volunteer fireman who stood as sentinel and savior, pledged to risk his life for his city at any moment. Yet in 1860, the Vigilant Fire Company found that status threatened both from without and within. Calls for the creation of a paid professional fire department focused on the use of steam-powered machinery promised to throw voluntarism, heroism, and manliness on the scrap heap, turning volunteers into machine-tenders, or rendering them obsolete. Even if that challenge was beaten back for a time, the rise of a disunion movement in Charleston and the threat to slave society Lincoln’s election posed discounted the value of volunteer firemen sharply. Fighting fire was like waging war only until social revolution and the prospect of battle.


32 Charleston Courier, January 9, 1861.
hove into view. Then the tables turned: in the fall of 1860, the ideal of the heroic fireman was supplanted by the stoic Minute Man, standing in the front rank of South Carolina’s defenders, guiding the vanguard toward glorious independence. To fall back from that cutting edge was to announce oneself a shirker, a coward, a traitor, just as “the mighty heart of the city” seemed to beat “in unison.” Especially for propertyless, single young fellows with low-status clerical jobs and a homosocial culture constantly measuring men’s respectability or honor, the pressure to conform to expectations and enact new roles was immense. But performing as firemen or as Minute Men did not entail any great shift of tone, dramatic character, or personal bearing. Not until war erupted.

In the fall of 1860, for Sam Tupper’s men, the best way to get along was to go along. Beyond the centrality of play and theater to political revolution in Charleston, joining the Vigilant Rifles was a form of commercial exchange. At a moment of crisis, it was “the best talent; men of integrity, the loftiest patriotism, and whose interests are strongly identified with the City and State” that were needed. Becoming a Minute Man was a cheap and easy way to lay claim to those qualities, laying up a store of social capital sure to pay dividends down the road. As men donned distinctive uniforms, stood ranked with potential patrons, paraded the city’s commercial streets, they built bonds of reciprocity and obligation with comrades and the wider community. Military service freely rendered at a moment of crisis surely ought to impel expressions of gratitude—whether honorary or material—in time to come. For a struggling fellow like Edmund Petit, becoming a Minute Man must have seemed like a heaven-sent second chance in life. In 1855, he was a thirty-year old insurance broker, having a hard time of it. Though “reliable as far as character is concerned,” credit reporters marked his business prospects harshly: “Caution advised,” “Classed X.” Checks bounced and his brokerage

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33 Charleston Courier, December 8, 1860.
collapsed; by 1860, he was propertyless, married with two children, scratching out a bare living as a bookkeeper on the East Bay. “Has been very much embarrassed for a long time,” went the report, “& his affairs in such a State as to make a debt hazardous.” At thirty-five, Petit’s prospects for upward mobility were nil. But by November, Petit had quite reinvented himself by joining the Vigilant Rifles. Now Private Petit stood in the front rank of Charleston’s men, defending hearth and home. Personal embarrassment faded, fraternal bonds grew. Now the Queen City was indebted to him, and to the fellows around him. The chance to hold that note for once moved more than one clerk into disunion’s forefront.34

For the men of property who drilled at Vigilant Hall, too, the commercial possibilities of political crisis were clear. Whatever else secession meant to Henry Williams, it was a chance to move merchandise at his hat shop. Others understood that whether disunion succeeded or not, it was bad for business to appear apathetic or opposed to the movement’s progress. All true men would “present a united and undivided front” to Charleston’s enemies, “Blue Cockade” warned. To do less was to embrace unmanly “submissionism”—and treason itself.35

Small wonder, that in the October civic election and still more vigorously in November’s disunion convention canvass, all manner of electoral notices appeared selling voters on leading firemen and the “Fireman’s Ticket.” Slates prepared by “Young Charleston,” “Ward Four,” or bearing tell-tale signs and slogans (“Make Way! Make Way!”) promoted a raft of Vigilant leaders and patrons.36 Even men with no political record and more marginal claims to leadership, like Etsell Adams, were put on offer. Strikingly, though, Sam Tupper refused all chances to stand for office, speak publicly, or take part in civic rituals supporting secession. One

34 R. G. Dun and Company, Credit Ledgers, South Carolina, VII, Baker, HU.

35 Charleston Courier, November 23, 1860.

36 Charleston Courier, September 26, 1860.
would almost wonder whether the Vigilants’ captain—a life-long political conservative with strong ties to the Broad Street Clique—was only feigning radical commitment, except that he stood on the leading edge of disunion, declaring himself wholly committed to the patriot’s most practical task, preparing men for war. Politics and speechifying were for those with a lesser sense of what a Minute Man’s duty truly entailed.

Perhaps so: there is nothing in Tupper’s story to suggest a slippery character, or in his conduct after 1860 which can be called foot-dragging. But for men like him with established conservative ties, a record of anti-disunionism, or commercial or familial bonds with the North, pinning on a blue cockade or joining the Vigilant Rifles was not unlike taking out an insurance policy, just in case push came to shove. More cynical men would have called it donning a mask. For those non-Carolinians who rushed to join Tupper’s company in November, their public determination to stand with “the forlorn hope” of southern independence helped to immunize them against charges of disloyalty to Charleston’s cause. But were these unarmed, dressed-up men crowing about their commitment to action only acting? The threat of subversion both drove men into the Vigilant Rifles’ ranks and redoubled men’s doubts about the danger subversion posed.

Play, theater, commerce, subversion: the themes Walter Steele’s hat shop ad explored as defining the politics of disunion in 1860 intertwined everywhere on Charleston’s streets, and in the radical choices of the Vigilant Rifles. The decisions men made and the performances they enacted were driven by a confluence of clashing impulses, aims, and motives which proved the Queen City anything but united. They were impelled by honor and its rival respectability, required to carry out duty’s dictates regardless of personal cost. And once they had taken the first small step, who dared halt or retreat for fear of losing status, esteem, and fraternal support?
Men were driven by fear, confronting threats from outside and in, doubts about their own neighbors and themselves, concerns that they would be marked down as flawed patriots or disloyal men. They were lured by self-interest: the chance rise in the eyes of their peers, to gain a military title and a more manly reputation, to accumulate the trappings and tales of soldiery at minimal cost, and perhaps to raise their social and economic prospects once the crisis had blown over. And they were comforted by a pervasive, reckless, world-shattering miscalculation: surely it could never come at last to war.37

How, then, was secession accomplished? At the moment of bells and cannons and hats thrown aloft, newspapers and politicians crowed about the unity and determination of the Palmetto State, twin keys to the South Carolina jeremiad. Those were, quite conspicuously, qualities Charleston sorely lacked across the antebellum period right up to the final moment. Indeed, slavery’s citadel was a place of relentless hectoring and suspicion, kaleidoscopic political and social divisions, and endless subterfuge, overcome finally—and only momentarily—against all expectations. Disunion succeeded and soon turned to the catastrophe of civil war because ordinary white men—mostly young, single, propertyless fellows of narrow prospects, like the Vigilant Rifles—chose to dress up in outlandish outfits and perform foolish rituals, promising to respond to the call of self-aggrandizing men like Sam Tupper, Edward White, and Tommy Simons—and, finally, measuring up to their word. That is what honorable men, respectable men, doomed men, and fools can be counted on to choose. “The readiness is all,” Shakespeare reminds us. But nobody sent for these men: they came, quite witlessly, if not of their own

37 See, especially William J. Grayson, James Louis Petigru: A Biographical Sketch (New York, 1866), 146. Among secondary treatments of this issue, the best is Steven A. Channing, Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina (New York, 1970), 279-281. His examples are easily multiplied.
accord, then certainly for their own purposes. Though few could have said well what those were, even unto the end. 38

Still we should not discount their choosing, calling it reckless. The men of the Vigilant Rifles and others who followed their lead worked hard to carry themselves to the precipice. Struggling over the proper place of men like Will Taber and Theophilus Fisk in their society, contesting about honor and respectability as rival modes of self-portrayal, falling into the manly melodramas of Mose and Walter Steele, delighting in and retreating from the subversion of gender relations Paul Morphy’s chess playing unleashed, taking up the commercial possibilities of secessionist parades, flags, and ceremonies, these men donned masks, performed roles, earned social capital, played at revolution, down to the moment soldiering turned real. Then their ranks split, finally, a moment too late. In politics, or fashion, or comedy, timing is everything. Charleston mayor William Porcher Miles said as much in 1856, deriding the popular manias that defined the world he knew:

[T]he breath of popular favour is evanescent, intangible. You cannot regulate it by any certain laws. It puffs in one direction today, another tomorrow…. It is impossible to grasp or analyse it. It whirls some man, woman, book, fashion, or custom high up into the region where famous things hang suspended above the toil and struggle and trampling and dust below—and suddenly—presto!—it dashes them down, frequently without rhyme or reason, down into the mire of oblivion. But such is human life and the philosopher takes it as he finds it. 39

So it must have seemed in Charleston in 1860—we think ourselves similarly powerless to confront the challenges of today. But the men of the Vigilant Rifles did not blunder into the decisions which wrecked their world, nor was their path to the precipice in any way inevitable or foreordained. These men made their own history, not just as they pleased, to be sure, but

39 William P. Miles to Robert D. Shindler, November 8, 1856, William Porcher Miles Papers, SCHS.
steadily, incrementally, disastrously. Their failure to choose otherwise is a parable for oppressive regimes and deceitful ways of life everywhere.

Why, man, they did make love to this employment.
They are not near my conscience. Their defeat
Doth by their own insinuation grow.
’Tis dangerous when the baser nature comes
Between the pass and fell incensèd points
Of mighty opposites.  

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40 Shakespeare, Complete Works, 713.
EPILOGUE:

HISTORY, n. An account mostly false, of events mostly unimportant… brought about by rulers mostly knaves, and soldiers mostly fools.
Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil’s Dictionary*

Eventually the Vigilant Rifles got their guns, and their members found occasion to use them, though not at Fort Sumter, and not as the Vigilant Rifles. Mustered into the Fourth Brigade of South Carolina Infantry, the Vigilants were stationed out of harm’s way on Morris Island during the crisis of April, 1861. Thereafter, they returned to the city and were dispersed among a host of units. Officially, the Rifles became a company of the 1st South Carolina Militia Artillery, under Tupper’s command, patrolling the lowcountry to no purpose. Whenever the Yankees approached, alas, these Minute Men were always a minute too late to engage them, safely out of harm’s way.

Other men found different routes to Appomattox. From the beginning, not a few volunteers thought Tupper too punctilious, or saw the shift from firefighting to military obedience as a threat to personal independence and manly self-portrayal. A fraction told their captain what they thought of him and transferred out—often to other artillery units dominated by Charleston firemen. In or out, all moved in lockstep toward the ruin of their world. Etsell Adams, master to twelve slaves and senior partner in a thriving commission merchant business,

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3 Of 81 men listed on an undated “Roll of ‘Vigilant Rifles’”—apparently from 1862—only eight original Minute Men were not missing or transferred out.
rose to the rank of corporal in the 12th South Carolina Volunteers (SCV) before he was wounded and captured on the second day at Gettysburg. Private James Baker, a cotton broker with a personal estate worth ten thousand dollars—before the war—fell into Yankee hands during service with the 1st SCV along Virginia’s North Anna River in May 1864. Edwin Calder, a collector of Federal customs before secession, mustered in as a private with the 25th SCV, fighting Federals for nearly four years before his capture at Fort Fisher in 1865. Clerks William K. Browne and John Humphreys, and the engineer-architect Edward B. White all fought hard in the siege of Charleston. The pen-pushers, both privates, suffered wounds, disease, and capture, like so many of their fellows. White rose to the rank of colonel, in charge of heavy artillery in the Charleston area, just before the city fell in 1865. Despite their diverse backgrounds and motivations for joining the Vigilants, all one hundred twelve men fought for the Confederacy in one capacity or other, many in fierce and bloody battle. A good fraction died—Wash Albergottie, John Blackwood, George Duffus, Fred Stevens and more—usually quite unheroically, of typhoid, dysentery, festering wounds. Was it better to wind up like chess player David Ramsay—quite alone among his former club members—signed up as Major and shot down atop the ramparts of Battery Wagner, defending against inevitable checkmate? There is a photograph, too, of Walter Steele posed with his younger brother, dressed proudly for his journey to war. Notably the hatters displayed no hats in this picture: there was nothing these grim-faced men were playing at now. War was in earnest, a price would be paid, and William never came home.  

The rest of the fighting chess club, firemen, Vigilant Rifles, and more returned to a shattered economy and a revolutionizing social system, fully as emancipated as the freedmen

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4 Cartes de visites, 1861, Walter Steele Papers, SCHS. Information on military service and its aftermath is drawn from PCH Database
who walked King Street now—at last undefeated—unwilling to tip their hats. Those Confederates did not know, or would not say, how the war and the way it humbled them had lifted them up at last, and freed them from a despicable, horrid way of living. They and their land had been washed in blood, nonetheless, by their deliberate decisions, and the refusal to choose more courageously. The tragedy is that generations hence, the sons and daughters of the Vigilant Rifles and their fellows yet misapprehend the folly of their elders’ choices, and the grace of their own salvation, still a mile off yet.

In recent years, Civil War historians have devoted increased attention to experiential aspects of conflict, seeking to understand how common soldiers saw and felt the ordeal of modern warfare, exploring how social origins, political ideology, culture and psychology impinged on and were affected by the decision to fight for the Blue or the Gray. That effort has yielded a mixed bag. A similar approach to the problem of disunion opens vast horizons. How did politics, chess, and hats—or a hundred other triangulations—affect groups and individuals in Charleston, or in other corners of South Carolina, or in other southern states? Answering that question carefully must yield a history of secession more complex and quite different from current understandings. Ultimately this analysis of the tiny, forgotten band of clerks and merchants in French fatigue caps must prove a minor piece in an immense puzzle, the shape of which we can now only faintly guess. Call it a Carolina Montaillou, Rockdale, or Ballymenone,

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a place full of southern Wangs and Hus and Blighs and Menocchios, all mixed up together—victims and villains and protagonists trading roles promiscuously. For now, we cannot know how vital or unimportant the Vigilant Rifles’ story truly is. Yet even minor details of a single puzzle piece—blue cockades, lanterns, and parade routes, chess games, photographs, stovepipe hats, clerks with bills, and would-be soldiers with no guns—may prove keystones of interpretation, if only we will pay them heed.

Perhaps: this study has never aimed too squarely at analysis. Explanation turns too easily toward machine-stamped functionalism, robbing revolutionary moments of variant potentiality—and history of its fun. Ambiguity and contradiction are things to be explored, admired, and cheered, I have tried to suggest, precisely because ruling regimes almost always find them so bedeviling. Let us conclude, then, on a more romantic, if inevitably crueler, note than most works might, appropriate for a study of melodrama and byzantine gambit both.

On the evening of December 11, 1861, while the men of the Vigilant Rifles were off playing soldier somewhere, the Queen City burned. In a lot behind a sash and blind factory near East Bay Street, a group of slaves—refugees from coastal plantations—had kindled a fire, just as the wind began to rise. Some called it carelessness or bad luck afterwards. Others shouted arson. Within minutes, the factory was ablaze and the blacks had scattered. Strong southwest winds sent sparks rocketing across the city’s commercial district, wheeling and spinning in the darkness. The gas works exploded. Five churches went up like torches. Secession Hall and St. Andrew’s Hall both vanished. Fire roared through Broad and Tradd and Meeting, racing across

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the heart of the peninsula. For a time it looked as though the sea of flames would turn south and roast the chivalry one and all, straight down to White Point Gardens.\(^7\)

The fire brigade turned out, commanded now by Vigilant Rifle Moses Nathan. It was not Charleston’s finest fight. Units were depleted and disorganized, manned by fellows too old or young to do the best service. They were poorly trained and properly terrified of the danger they faced. City engines fought the blaze as well as they ever had, but it was nearly twenty-five years since anyone had seen such a crisis—indeed, Charleston never saw a blaze so vast and ferocious. Some thought that slave firemen could have pumped harder, hesitating to ask why they seemed to lag. And, strange to say, that night no unit came in for more praise than the hated Charleston Axemen. They had hauled their steam engine out to battle the flames—defending the great homes of the lower wards with notable success. Some said they had saved the day altogether.\(^8\) But that was going too far, perhaps in the interest of irony.

By morning, the slaveholders’ citadel was in ruins. Eight million dollars’ worth of property had burned. More than five hundred families were homeless. Northern papers called that a good start. Sam Tupper’s insurance company went bust, along with dozens of other businesses. Soon destitute men and women began trudging out of the city, headed anywhere. That vanguard of a vast exodus would transform the Queen City into a ghost town by 1865. When Union troops marched into Charleston, they saw the same black scar cut through the city’s commercial heart, untended and unhealed. Throughout the downtown where today tourists stroll and quaint ways are quietly cherished, buildings were smashed and social ties torn asunder. So

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\(^7\) Charleston Mercury, December 13-19, 1861; Charleston Courier, December 13-19, 1861.

the playful world of the Vigilant Rifles reached its melodramatic denouement. How could it have turned out differently? 9

But careful players know when to watch for a counter-gambit. Short months after Appomattox came word from the upcountry: men and women were gathering in local fairs once again, dressing up as knights, and running at the ring. In Charleston, on State Street, men convened shortly to sing the “Song of the Vigilants,” celebrating fire-fighting, fellow feeling and decades of tradition. 10 They sang and drank and cheered, rhyming off their heroic members’ names, never mentioning their ruin, or the war that caused it, or their own disastrous choices that did so much to light the fuse. That sort of history delights some still.

Other scholars have asked who built the Seven Gates, thinking the question quite clever. A better and tougher question is who tore them down, and how, and why. In Charleston in 1860, by their hopes and fears and cunning and foolishness, it was the Vigilant Rifles and their mates. That was their special destiny, though they did not understand it in the least.

So many particulars.

So many questions. 11

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9 Charleston Mercury, December 17, 1861.

10 Song of the “Vigilants,” Dedicated to them by their President, Charleston, June 2, 1868, Vigilant Fire Engine Company Papers, SCL.

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    Lalla Pelot Papers
    William Gilmore Simms Papers

R. W. Woodruff Library for Advanced Studies, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia
    Robert Newman Gourdin Papers

Hargrett Manuscript Library, University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia
    Gazaway Bugg Lamar Papers
    Pioneer Hook and Ladder Company Minutes
    Keith Morton Read Collection
    Theatrical Photographs Collection

Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia
    Gourdin-Young Papers

Baker Library, Graduate School of Business Administration, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
    R. G. Dun and Company Collection

Pusey Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts
    Harvard Theatre Collection
        Bowery Theatre, New York, Playbills
        Frank Chanfrau Papers
        Charleston, South Carolina, Theatre Playbills
        Chatham Theatre, New York, Playbills
        Olympic Theatre, New York, Playbills
Library of Congress, Washington, D. C.
  Charleston Port Society for Promoting the Gospel Among Seamen Records
  George S. Cook Papers
  Franklin Harper Elmore Papers
  Henry Gourdin Papers
  James Henry Hammond Papers
  Abraham Lincoln Papers
  McCarter Journal
  Whitemarsh Benjamin Seabrook Papers

Museum of the Confederacy, Richmond, Virginia
  Roll of Honor

National Archives, Washington, D. C.
  Record Group 29: Records of the Bureau of the Census
    Seventh (1850) Census of the United States
      Schedule I (Free Inhabitants), Charleston District, South Carolina
    Eighth (1860) Census of the United States
      Schedule I (Free Inhabitants), Charleston District, South Carolina
  Record Group 58: Records of the Internal Revenue Service
    Series 5.40: Records of Internal Revenue Collection Districts
      (South Carolina), Assessment Lists, District 2, Monthly and Special Lists,
      August 1865-December 1866
  Record Group 109: War Department Collection of Confederate Records
    Series 18: Muster and Pay Rolls, 1861-65, Records Relating to Military
      Personnel, Records of the Adjutant and Inspector General’s Department
      General’s Office Relating to the Military and Naval Service of Confederates,
      Records of the United States War Department Relating to Confederates
    Series 195: General Index, “Carded” Records Showing Military Service, Records
      of the Adjutant General’s Office Relating to the Military and Naval Service of
      Confederates, Records of the United States War Department Relating to
      Confederates
  Record Group 217: Records of the US General Accounting Office
    Records of the Commissioners of Claims (Southern Claims Commission)
    Miscellaneous Letters Received, March 10 1871-December 30 1872
  Record Group 365: Records of the Department of the Treasury
    Series 7.2: Records of the Office of the Collector of Customs, Charleston, South
      Carolina

North Carolina Department of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina
  James Johnston Pettigrew Papers
South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, South Carolina

Anderson County
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
  Abstracts of Judgments

Charleston County
  Miscellaneous Records
  Records of the Clerk of Court Other than Court or Mesne Conveyance Records
    Register of Limited Partnerships
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
    Petitions and Schedules of Insolvent Debtors
    Pleadings and Judgments
    Suggestions for Prohibition
  Records of the Court of General Sessions
    Criminal Journals

Edgefield County
  Miscellaneous Records
    Confessions of Indebtedness

Greenville County
  Records of the Sheriff
    Sale Book

Horry County
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
    Abstracts of Judgments

Kershaw County
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
    Abstracts of Pleadings and Judgments

Laurens County
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
    Abstracts of Judgments

Lexington County
  Records of the Court of Common Pleas
    Abstracts of Judgments
  Records of the Sheriff
    Sale Book

Marion County
  Records of Uncertain Provenance
    Attorney’s Commonplace Book (Robert B. Boyleston Notebook)

Marlboro County
  Records of the Sheriff
    Sale Book
Records of the Confederate Historian
Minutes of the Orangeburg Minute Men
Records of the General Assembly
Grand Jury Presentments
Petitions
Reports
Records of the Governor
William Henry Gist Papers
Spartanburg County
Records of the Court of Common Pleas
Abstracts of Judgments
Williamsburg County
Records of the Court of Common Pleas
Abstracts of Judgments
Records of the Sheriff
Sale Book

South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston, South Carolina
Charles Pons Aimar Papers
George W. Alexander Reminiscences
Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers
Bacot-Huger Collection
Baker Family Papers
Barbot Family Papers
George W. Black Papers
John P. Cantwell Papers
Charleston Light Dragoons Records
James Chesnut Letters
Chesnut-Miller-Manning Papers
Langdon Cheves Papers
Conner Family Papers
Thomas John Cumming Collection
Macbeth Family Papers
John L. Manning Papers
Miscellaneous Papers
Neufville Family Papers
Peter Cordes Porcher Papers
Thomas Peyre Porcher Journal
Thomas Porcher Ravenel Papers
Robert Barnwell Rhett, Sr., Papers
Scotch Guard Records
James McBride Shackelford Papers
Walter Steele Papers
John Henry Steinmeyer Papers
Townsend Family Papers
South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina

James Hopkins Adams Papers
David Wyatt Aiken Papers
Robert Francis Withers Allston Papers
Robert Anderson Papers
W. P. Andrews Papers
Anonymous Papers
Association of Claremont Election District for the Defense of Southern Rights Papers
Lewis Malone Ayer Papers
Ada Bacot Diary
Peter S. Bacot Papers
Robert Woodward Barnwell Papers
John Perkins Barratt Papers
Charles Barron Papers
Beech Island Farmers’ Club Records
Bissell Family Papers
William Blanding Papers
Milledge Luke Bonham Papers
Benjamin Booth Papers
Branchville Vigilant Association Book
Bratton Family Papers
Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard Diary
Preston Smith Brooks Papers
P. O. Bryan Papers
James Ervin Byrd Notebook and Scrapbook
James Edward Calhoun Papers
Charles William Capers Papers
James Carr Journal
James Ronald Chalmers Papers
Charleston Papers
Charleston Light Dragoon Records
Charleston Typographical Union No. 43 Records
Committee of Safety and Correspondence of Richland District Papers
Henry Calvin Conner Papers
John Hamilton Cornish Papers
Crawford Family Papers
Arthur G. Cudworth Papers
Ann Pamela Cunningham Papers
Peter Della Torre Papers
William Ford DeSauussure Papers
William King Easley Papers
Ellison Family Papers
Grace Brown Elmore Reminiscences
John Christopher Faber Papers
First Baptist Church, Charleston, Charleston County, Minutes and Register
Charles Fraser Papers
Thomas Boone Fraser Papers
Glass Family Papers
Maxcy Gregg Journal
Henry Pinckney Hammett Papers
James Henry Hammond Papers
Heyward Family Album
J. Ward Hopkins Scrapbook
Cleland Kinloch Huger Papers
Samuel Cram Jackson Diary
Timothy W. Johnson Papers
Mitchell King Papers
Aaron Knight Diary
Long Cane Minute Men Constitution and By-Laws
Thomas Pinckney Lowndes Reminiscences
McCants Family Papers
McCready Family Papers
Samuel McGowan Papers
Catherine L. McLaurin Diary
James Stringfellow McLure Papers
Mechanicsville Baptist Church, Darlington County, Minutes
W. H. Mears Papers
Louisa Minot Papers
Minute Men Papers
Percy Nagel Papers
William Ogilvy Papers
Hattie Amelia Palmer Poetry Collection
Giles J. Patterson Book
Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Jr. Papers
William Mazyck Porcher Papers
Lemuel Reid Diary
William Moultrie Reid Papers
Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers
Richland Southern Rights Association Papers
Rutledge Family Papers
St. John's Berkeley Papers
Saluda Minute Men Association Minutes
George Herbert Sass Papers
Screven, Edwards, Clarkson, and Heriot Families Papers
Seibels Family Papers
Louis Sherfesee Papers
James Foster Sloan Diaries
Elihu Penquite Smith Papers
John Henry Steinmeyer Diary
William Stokes Papers
Stroman Family Papers
John Eldred Swearingen Papers
Augustin L. Taveau Papers
Edward Smith Tennant I Papers
James Henley Thornwell Papers
Francis Torres Papers
Tournaments Book
John W. L. Tylee Papers
Tylee and Willis Families Papers
Vigilant Fire Engine Company, Charleston, Constitution
Daniel Wallace Papers
Thomas J. Warren Papers
Waties-Parker Family Papers
Beaufort Taylor Watts Papers
William Whaley Papers
Whetstone Family Papers
Benjamin F. Whitner Papers
Whitner Family Papers
William May Wightman Papers
Zalmon Wildman Papers
David Rogerson Williams Papers
John Lide Wilson Papers
Simon Peter Wingard Papers
Winyah Fire Engine Company, Georgetown, South Carolina, Minute Book
Witherspoon Family Papers

Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, North Carolina
John Durant Ashmore Farm Journals
Charleston Board of Fire Masters Record Book
William Ferguson Colcock Autobiography
John Hamilton Cornish Papers
Edgefield District Militia Record
David Gavin Diary
David Golightly Harris Farm Journals
Meta Morris Grimball Journal
Samuel Cram Jackson Diary
William Porcher Miles Papers
Pettigrew Family Papers
Robert Barnwell Rhett Papers
Archibald Rutledge Papers
Benjamin Cudworth Yancey Papers

State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin
William Henry Brisbane Papers
Chesnut Family Papers

Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, Louisiana
Colcock Family Papers

University of South Carolina Archives, Columbia, South Carolina
William R. Taber student file

Valentine Richmond History Center, Richmond, Virginia
George S. Cook Collection

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Abbeville Independent Press
Abbeville Medium
Albion
All The Year Round
American
American Chess Magazine
American Farmer
American Magazine of Wonders and Marvellous Chronicle
(Anderson, S. C.) Anderson Gazette
Anderson Intelligencer
Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter
Anti-Slavery Reporter
Atlantic Monthly
Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion
Baltimore American
Baltimore Sun
(Bangor, Me.) Bangor Daily Whig and Courier
Blackwood's Magazine
Boston Courier
(Boston, Mass.) Daily Advertiser
Boston Daily Atlas
(Boston, Mass.) Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle
Boston Investigator
(Boston, Mass.) The Liberator
(Camden, S. C.) Camden Journal
Carolina Journal of Medicine, Science, and Agriculture
Century Magazine
(Charleston, S. C.) City Gazette
Charleston Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society
Charleston Courier
Charleston Evening News
Charleston Mercury
(Charleston, S. C.) Saturday Bulletin
Charleston Times
Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier
Charleston Tri-Weekly News
(Charleston, S. C.) Virginia Free Press
(Cheraw, S. C.) Cheraw Gazette
Chess Player’s Chronicle
Chess Monthly
(Chillicothe, O.) Scioto Gazette
(Cleveland, O.) Daily Cleveland Herald
(Cleveland, O.) Daily Herald and Gazette
(Columbia, S. C.) Columbia Banner
(Columbia, S. C.) Daily South Carolinian
Columbia Telescope
(Columbus, O.) Daily Ohio Statesman
Continental Monthly
Daguerrean Journal
(Darlington, S. C.) Darlington Flag
De Bow’s Review
(Dover, N. H.) Dover Gazette and Strafford Advertiser
Dwight’s American Magazine, and Family Newspaper
(Edgefield, S. C.) Edgefield Advertiser
Edinburgh Review
(Fayetteville, N. C.) Fayetteville Observer
Fraser’s Magazine
Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper
Gentleman’s Magazine
(Georgetown, S. C.) Winyaw Intelligencer
Graham’s Magazine
Great Republic Monthly
(Greenville, S. C.) Patriot and Mountaineer
(Greenville, S. C.) Southern Patriot
(Greenville, S. C.) Southern Enterprise
Harper’s Monthly Magazine
Humphrey’s Journal
Hunt's Merchants Magazine
Illustrated London News
(Indianapolis, Ind.) Indiana Journal
(Jackson, Miss.) Daily Mississippian
(Jackson, Miss.) Semi-Weekly Mississippian
(Jackson, Miss.) Weekly Mississippian
(Jonesborough, Tenn.) Jonesborough Whig
(Lancaster, S. C.) Lancaster Ledger
(Laurensville, S. C.) Laurensville Herald
Littell's Living Age
(Little Rock, Ark.) Arkansas State Gazette
(Macon, Ga.) Macon Telegraph
Magnolia
(Manning, S. C.) Clarendon Banner
(Milwaukee, Wisc.) Milwaukee Daily Sentinel
(Montpelier, Vt.) Vermont Watchman and State Journal
Museum of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art
(Natchez, Miss.) Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette
New Orleans Delta
New Orleans Picayune
(New York, N. Y.) Freeman's Journal
New York Herald
(New York, N. Y.) Morning Herald
(New York, N. Y.) Weekly Herald
New York Spectator
(New York, N. Y.) Spirit of the Times
New York Times
New York Tribune
Niles' Weekly Register
(Omaha, Neb.) Daily Omaha Nebraskan
(Ottawa, Ill.) Ottawa Free Trader
(Pensacola, Fla.) Pensacola Gazette
(Philadelphia, Pa.) Mechanics' Free Press
(Philadelphia, Pa.) North American and United States Gazette
(Philadelphia, Pa.) Pennsylvania Inquirer and National Gazette
Philidorian
Photographic Art Journal
(Providence, R. I.) Providence Patriot
Punch, or the London Charivari
Putnam's Magazine
Quarterly Review
(Raleigh, N. C.) Daily Register
(Raleigh, N. C.) Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register
(Raleigh, N. C.) Weekly Raleigh Register
(Richmond, Va.) Richmond Daily Whig
(Ripley, O.) Ripley Bee
Russell’s Magazine
(Salt Lake City, Ut.) Deseret News
(Savannah, Ga.) Daily Morning News
South Carolina Agriculturist
South Carolina State Gazette and Commercial Advertiser
South-Carolina Temperance Advocate
Southern Agriculturist
Southern Bivouac
Southern Cabinet
Southern Light
Southern Literary Journal and Monthly Magazine
Southern Literary Messenger
Southern Quarterly Review
Southern Presbyterian Review
Southern Rose-Bud
(Spartanburg, S. C.) Carolina Spartan
(Tallahassee, Fla.) Tallahassee Floridian
United States Literary Gazette
(Wakarusa, Kans.) Kansas Herald of Freedom
(Warren, O.) Western Reserve Chronicle
(Washington, D. C.) Daily National Intelligencer
(Washington, D. C.) Washington Sentinel
(Yorkville, S. C.) Yorkville Compiler

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Clark v. Mikel (1852), 5 Richardson, 247.
Clarke ads. State (1822), 2 McCord, 47.
Cross v. Gabeau (1829), 1 Bailey, 211.
Macon v. Cook (1820), 2 Nott and McCord, 379.
State v. Bates (1833), 1 Hill, 48.
State v. Collector of Fines (1826), 4 McCord, 30.
State v. Grimke (1836), 3 Hill, 17.
State v. Hunt (1834), 2 Hill, 1.
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