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“THE WORST OF ALL BARBARISM”: RACIAL ANXIETY AND THE APPROACH OF SECESSION IN THE PALMETTO STATE

BERNARD E. POWERS JR.*

Who knows but that a Toussaint, a Christophe, a Rigaud, a Clervaux, and a Dessaline [*sic*], may some day appear in the Southern States of this Union? That they are there, no one will doubt. That their souls are thirsting for liberty, all will admit. The spirit that caused the blacks to take up arms, and to shed their blood in the American revolutionary war, is still amongst the slaves of the south; and, if we are not mistaken, the day is not far distant when the revolution of St. Domingo will be reenacted in South Carolina.

—William Wells Brown, *The History of the Haitian Revolution* (1855)

ON APRIL 12, 1861, THE SECESSION CRISIS THAT HAD GRIPPED THE country for months reached its seemingly inexorable conclusion with the firing on Fort Sumter. Although the Confederate government already had been formed, it was those first shots that irrevocably cast South Carolina's immediate course. For some the tocsin of war provided cathartic relief from the anguish of an uncertain future. However, the sacrifices necessary to sustain a war and defend a new nation were yet unknown; the longer view remained obscure. Anticipating hardships to come, some like famed diarist Mary Boykin Chesnut took time for revelry. She described a Charleston dinner party she attended on April 11 as “the merriest, maddest dinner we have had yet. Men were audaciously wise and witty. We had an unspoken foreboding that it was to be our last pleasant meeting.” Later that evening, her anticipation was so great she could hardly sleep. Then, after hearing the sound of artillery in the early morning hours, she reported springing from her bed, “and on my knees prostrate I prayed as I have never prayed before.” Shortly after Fort Sumter fell, plantation mistress Keziah Brevard got the news outside of Columbia, was greatly relieved at the outcome, and thanked God that there had been minimal bloodshed. “Lord t’was hard the citizens of Charleston should be rendered so miserable by that Fort—I am thankful it is no longer there a terror.” While God favored the secessionists according to Brevard, all was not well. “Oh my God,” she exclaimed, “we may still tremble for we have enemies in our midst.”¹ She was referring to the slaves, the increasingly

* Bernard E. Powers Jr. is professor of history and associate chair of the department at the College of Charleston.

¹ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie*, ed. Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avary (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1905), 35; Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, *A Plantation Mistress on the Eve of the Civil War: The Diary of Keziah*

precarious control whites exercised over them during this period, and the uncertain prospects for the future.

Modern scholarship on secession in South Carolina and the events leading to the Civil War has continued to explore the important role played by the institution of slavery.² Slavery in the American South was first and foremost a system of labor coercion. But as a race-based system, its additional function was to control race relations. In considering the secession crisis, we have yet to explore fully the secessionists' drive to maintain white racial hegemony as a powerful force in South Carolina's march to war. In addition to their carefully elaborated notions of states' rights constitutionalism, the secessionists had a worldview that was shaped by their understanding of the racial history of the Western Hemisphere.³ Many of their views on abolitionists and the consequences of emancipation were derived from hemispheric developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The end of slavery in the British Caribbean is important, but no events are as crucial as the French and Haitian Revolutions for appreciating the secessionists' ideas about emancipation. These violent upheavals instilled a deep foreboding of emancipation and a loathing for its advocates. As the intersectional conflict over slavery escalated, the racial anxieties of South Carolina secessionists rose correspondingly. This was at least in part because they interpreted the circumstances looming before them through the experiences of Africans and Europeans in other parts of the Americas, especially in Saint Domingue (later Haiti).

Many whites in antebellum America considered free blacks social misfits and a burden to society. This was especially the case in the antebellum South, where the logic of the proslavery doctrine meant freedom was the worst possible status for African people. John C. Calhoun demonstrated this—to his own satisfaction at least—when his analysis of the 1840 census showed

Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard, 1860–1861, ed. John Hammond Moore (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 114.

² Examples of studies that give slavery and preserving white hegemony important consideration strictly within the American South include: Steven A. Channing, *Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina* (New York: Norton, 1974); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion*, vol. 2, *Secessionists Triumphant, 1854–1861* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); W. Scott Poole, *South Carolina's Civil War: A Narrative History* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2005).

³ See as examples: Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Matthew J. Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture and the American Civil War* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Edward Bartlett Rugemer, *The Problem of Emancipation: The Caribbean Roots of the American Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008).

insanity to be more prevalent among free blacks than slaves. This meant that "the African is incapable of self-care and sinks into lunacy under the burden of freedom." Slavery was abolished in Saint Domingue in the 1790s, and the British followed in stages between 1834 and 1838. South Carolina observers paid close attention to abolition in these international contexts and found evidence to bolster their proslavery arguments. Former slaves were accused of being unreliable laborers who would not work consistently without compulsion and white supervision. *De Bow's Review*, the leading agricultural journal in the South, published an article entitled "Free Negro Rule" about the search for "a moral, happy, and voluntarily industrious community of free negroes." After a wide-ranging survey, the editor concluded, "No such community exists upon the face of the earth." This is why one writer from Barnwell said that "Hayti and St. Domingo are daily announcing verdicts in favor of slavery." Similarly, Louisa McCord of Columbia resolved that "Jamaica is fast treading on the tracks of Hayti." Based on preconceived notions or statistics without consideration of mitigating factors, declining real-estate values, increased costs, and lower productivity all were used to condemn these allegedly failed experiments in freedom. Experiences abroad were directly applied to the South, where according to James Henry Hammond, the prospects for emancipation were even worse. This was because Americans were a restless people, and that penchant for movement doubtless would be communicated to the slave population. Once freed, Hammond claimed, a migratory impulse, combined with a natural lethargy and the absence of natural geographical limits such as existed on Caribbean islands, would produce a vagabond population beyond the control of authority.⁴ Therefore, given white southerners' assumptions about their own society and their perceptions of racial affairs in the larger world around them, emancipation was not only illogical, but indeed inconceivable.

Abolitionism in the United States continued apace in the 1840s and expanded in the 1850s. Emboldened by the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, abolitionists were pushed to ever more radical acts of civil disobedience. In 1851 alone, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York experienced dramatic fugitive slave rescue cases. In this atmosphere, it is no wonder that secessionist sentiment ran particularly high in South Carolina. During the

⁴ Quoted in Leslie Howard Owens, *This Species of Property: Slave Life and Culture in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 3; David Dabydeen, John Gilmore, and Cecily Jones, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Black British History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154; *De Bow's Review*, April 1860, 440; *Charleston Daily Courier* (Charleston, S.C.), October 27, 1859; Louisa S. McCord, *Louisa S. McCord: Political and Social Essays*, ed. Richard C. Lounsbury (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 240; J. H. Hammond, *Two Letters on Slavery in the United States: Addressed to Thomas Clarkson, Esq.* (Columbia, S.C.: Allen, McCarter, and Co., 1845), 34.

decade, there were over eighty highly publicized rescue attempts. Abolitionists, both black and white, invaded courtrooms and jails, physically assaulting officers of the law, seizing fugitives, and spiriting them off to some unknown location, usually Canada. Southern slaveholders were even more disconcerted by the unwillingness of local courts, and sometimes even state supreme courts, in the North to uphold the Fugitive Slave Act. The 1854 Jerry Glover fugitive rescue case was especially exasperating since the Wisconsin State Supreme Court declared the law unconstitutional because its provisions denied trial by jury. These and similar cases received widespread coverage, signifying the rising legal and criminal assault on the institution of slavery.⁵

In 1858 New York senator William Seward, one of the North's leading Republicans, unleashed a fusillade attack against slavery in his famous "Irrepressible Conflict" speech. Unlike free labor, which elevated the worker and society, Seward identified slavery with the degradation of all workers and economic backwardness. To white southerners, his most shocking assertion was that the two social and labor systems were on a collision course, and inevitably, the nation would have to become fully one or the other. Given Seward's stature in the party, many southerners considered this speech to be official party doctrine, thus fixing the abolitionist label more firmly on all Republicans. Just days after Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election of 1860, John C. Calhoun's eldest son, Andrew, said that the Republicans were led by an "irrepressible conflict man." Furthermore, he accused the party of standing "ready to plunge the dagger into the heart of those they call fellow-citizens if they do not deliver up their property, as a holocaust to their scheming and unholy ambition."⁶ Some observers understood the Republican ascendancy within the framework of the Western Hemisphere's racial history. In one example from *De Bow's Review*, "Python" contended that the policies of the most radical Republican abolitionists would lead to "the beastly horrors of the French Revolution in St. Domingo."⁷ This reference was quite common in secessionist parlance and is suggestive of the anxiety white Carolinians felt when faced with the prospect of emancipation.

The French Revolution, which began in 1789, had significant implications for slavery in the Americas. In Saint Domingue, it provoked a civil war

⁵ David W. Blight, ed., *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books in association with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, Cincinnati, Ohio), 162–170; Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 344–345; James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 86; John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union: A Biography* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 220.

⁶ McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, 198; *Daily South Carolinian* (Charleston, S.C.), November 14, 1860.

⁷ *De Bow's Review*, March 1860, 248.

and contributed to a major slave insurrection in 1791. At various points in the insurrection, for either ideological or strategic reasons, the French government extended rights to Saint Domingue's black population. In 1792 the French National Convention granted equal political rights to the free blacks. French abolitionists had been actively promoting emancipation through the *Société des Amis des Noirs* since 1788, but with no effect. However, the outbreak of Saint Domingue's slave insurrection changed everything. In 1793 a special commission emancipated the slaves in the northern part of the colony, and in 1794 the French government extended emancipation to all of its colonies.⁸ By then, though, emancipation was too limited a goal for Saint Domingue's slaves. During the next decade, they thwarted invasions by Great Britain and Spain as well as Napoleon's efforts to re-impose white rule and slavery. Toussaint Louverture became the most prominent of Saint Domingue's military leaders, and he and his successors won independence from France, changing the colony's name to Haiti in 1804. Their success gave Haiti the distinction of becoming the first black republic in the world and the only nation born of a successful slave revolt.⁹

The reverberations of the French and Haitian Revolutions were like thunderous waves crashing on the Carolina shore. One Charlestonian recalled that this was a time in the city "when Sansculottes and their principles had great ascendancy . . . when the tri-coloured cockade of France was the great badge of honour and . . . the Marseilloise hymn" was among the most popular songs. Charlestonians also witnessed what he described as "the awful tragedy of St. Domingo . . . which threw upon our shores a crowd of miserable and destitute French[men]." In 1793, during the course of the island slave revolt, Cape Francais—once considered the "Paris of the Antilles"—was burned, substantially increasing the number of refugees that streamed into Charleston and other port cities. The citizens of Charleston initially were unrestrained in their display of humanitarian assistance to these unfortunates; by 1796 approximately six hundred refugees from the French colony resided in the city. Most refugees were white, but they brought slaves with them, and free blacks arrived as well. They all came to South Carolina with stories about their recent experiences in the Caribbean. These were sometimes tales of harrowing escapes from death; others embodied by Africans were of new hope for a heretofore powerless people.

⁸ Robert Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt of 1793," in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David P. Geggus (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 95; Daniel P. Resnick, "The *Société des Amis des Noirs* and the Abolition of Slavery," *French Historical Studies* 7 (Autumn 1972): 559.

⁹ Philippe Girard, *Haiti: The Tumultuous History—from Pearl of the Caribbean to Broken Nation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 42–61.

Over time white Charlestonians developed reservations about the new immigrants from Saint Domingue, fearing what their presence might mean for South Carolina's future. Bowing to public pressure, in October 1793 Governor William Moultrie issued a proclamation ordering all foreign free blacks resident in the state for less than one year to leave.¹⁰ One year later, under the nom de plume "Rusticus," Alexander Garden confided his concerns to officials. "It has been affirmed that their [*sic*] actually consists within our City a Society corresponding with that which the French term Les Amis des Noirs," he wrote. Those who were familiar with the Haitian cause were being urged to demand their rights based upon the French government's decree of emancipation. Most shockingly, "Rusticus" continued, "in some instances these deluded people have declared in the hearing [of their] superiors, that if they continued to serve it was from pure good will, for the right of freedom was theirs." This would instill a sense of injustice among Carolina slaves and "produce a flame that can only be extinguished in blood." Garden's recommendation was to expel the French Africans and for the community to guard against the publication and distribution of incendiary literature to prevent further damage.¹¹ In the mid 1790s, U.S. senator Ralph Izard expressed concerns about the effects of French emancipation when arguing against joint military operations with France (in keeping with treaty obligations of the United States). He claimed that military cooperation would lead to Frenchmen of lower ranks entering the country "who would fraternize with our Democratical Clubs, & introduce the same horrid tragedies among our negroes, which have been so fatally exhibited in the French islands." South Carolinians should readily see that, and if not, he wondered whether it was God's will that "the Proprietors of negroes should themselves be the instruments of destroying that species of property?"¹²

In the latter half of 1793, Charleston witnessed an upsurge in arson fires and slave runaways, contributing to rampant rumors of rebellion and insurrectionary plots. In August, Virginia officials notified their South Carolina counterparts of a slave conspiracy to promote rebellion in both states in mid October. French blacks from Saint Domingue were said to be its ring leaders, and the French consul also was accused of aiding and abetting the conspirators. When a French vessel with Republican soldiers and refugees, including

¹⁰ Charles Fraser, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston, S.C.: John Russell, 1854), 35, 44; Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 1–4; Hunt, *Haiti's Influence*, 42, 107–108; Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt," 98–99.

¹¹ Rusticus to Gentlemen, August 7, 1794, Letters of Rusticus, South Carolina Historical Society, Charleston (hereafter cited as SCHS). Emphasis in original.

¹² Ralph Izard to Mathias Hutchinson, November 20, 1794, Ralph Izard Family Papers, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia (hereafter cited as SCL).

free blacks, aboard attempted to land in Charleston in early October, they were refused entry. The widespread suspicion was that dangerous revolutionaries intent on aiding the plot were among the ship's passengers. Charleston authorities likewise used the occasion to strengthen ordinances governing slaves and free blacks. In the final analysis, this scare seems to have had little foundation, but it illustrates the tensions that were palpable in Charleston at the time.¹³ An apparently more substantial plot emerged in 1797. Charleston's mayor reported "a conspiracy of Several French Negroes to fire the city, and act there as they had formerly done at St. Domingo." Between ten and fifteen people were implicated in the plans to blow up the powder magazines on a Sunday, execute citizens as they exited their churches, and set multiple fires around the city. At least two "French negroes" were executed, and two more were sentenced to transportation out of state at the time of the report. Others waited in jail expecting adjudication by late December.¹⁴

The most significant insurrectionary scare in Charleston's history occurred a quarter-century later in 1822, and a Caribbean connection was central to its organization. Denmark Vesey, a free black residing in Charleston, was convicted of fomenting slaves from the city and its environs to seize weapons from the local arsenal and set fires around town, creating enough chaos to afford a mass maritime escape. Although some parts of the plan were vague, Haiti was featured prominently. Before coming to Charleston after the American Revolution, Vesey briefly had been enslaved on the island and thus had personal contacts and retained memories of the place. With so many refugees from Saint Domingue in Charleston, Vesey easily came into contact with them and befriended two of the slaves. During his planning, Vesey supposedly made efforts to communicate with potential allies in Haiti, and the final stage of the plan was for as many rebels as possible to escape there.¹⁵ This conspiracy never matured into a rebellion because informants alerted authorities. Trials followed and thirty-five of those convicted were hung, including Vesey, with thirty-seven others exiled to Spanish Cuba. In an effort to give authorities greater control over the city's black population, new legislation such as the Negro Seaman Acts was passed.¹⁶

¹³ Alderson, "Charleston's Rumored Slave Revolt," 93–96, 102, 104.

¹⁴ "Conspiracy of Several French Negroes to Fire the City and to Act There as They Had Formerly Done at St. Domingue," *Massachusetts Spy; or, the Worcester Gazette* (Worcester, Mass.), December 20, 1797.

¹⁵ Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1999), 16, 45, 135–136. For a historiographical counterpoint on the essence of the Vesey conspiracy, see Michael P. Johnson, "Denmark Vesey and His Co-Conspirators" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 58 (October 2001): 915–976.

¹⁶ Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free*, 217.

The original date that the Vesey conspirators chose to launch their bid for freedom was July 14. This date coincided with Bastille Day, when the Francophone world commemorated an important episode of the French Revolution.¹⁷ The connection was not lost on those who also understood the linkage between the planned rebellion in South Carolina and the political violence of the Haitian Revolution. The words of Edward Holland are highly suggestive. In the wake of the Vesey episode, he admonished Charlestonians to institute legislative protections for securing their futures. In doing so, he said, "Let it never be forgotten" that "our NEGROES are truly the *Jacobins* of the country . . . and the barbarians who would, IF THEY COULD, become the DESTROYERS of our race."¹⁸ Insulating the bondsmen from corrupting influences meant survival for the master class.

Though apprehensions faded with time, neither the memories nor the lore of the Haitian Revolution were forgotten by mid century; they remained an important part of Charleston's collective memory. When Daniel Payne, an antebellum free black Charlestonian, published his autobiography in 1888, he recalled hearing about the Haitians as a youth. He associated them with martial traditions and "desired to become a soldier and go to Hayti." James D. B. De Bow, the editor of *De Bow's Review*, grew up in Charleston prior to the Civil War and heard stories as well. "The horrors of the island became a narrative which frightened our childhood," he recalled, and many years later "still curdles the blood to read." Discussing benevolent slaveholders in the Camden area, Mary Boykin Chesnut described her mother-in-law as the slaves' "good angel," who "is and has always been afraid of Negroes." This was because "in her youth, the San Domingo stories were indelibly printed on her mind. She shows her dread now by treating every one as if they were a black Prince Albert or Queen Victoria."¹⁹

At the end of the antebellum era, there were still some refugees from Saint Domingue or their close relatives present in South Carolina. For example, Charleston resident Antoine Barbot's father-in-law was a refugee, as was Jean Pierre Esnard. In 1827 Esnard was the only surviving member of his immedi-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, xix.

¹⁸ [Edwin C. Holland], *A Refutation of the Calumnies Circulated against the Southern and Western States, Respecting the Institution and Existence of Slavery among Them* (Charleston, S.C.: A. E. Miller, 1822), 86; William H. Pease and Jane H. Pease, *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1848* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 223; George M. Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 53.

¹⁹ Clavin, *Toussaint Louverture*, 18, 29; Daniel A. Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1888), 15-16; Eric H. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 198-199; *De Bow's Review*, January 1854, 35; Mary Boykin Chesnut, *Mary Boykin Chesnut's Civil War*, ed. C. Vann Woodward (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), 211 .

ate family. According to a legal document among his family papers, this was "by means of the death of my brother Lecombe Esnard assassinated by his own servant at the time of the Revolution in St. Domingo." Evidence suggests that his other relatives may have been murdered in the same fashion. Jean Pierre's wife, Euphrosine, who was born in Saint Domingue, died in Chester in 1863.²⁰ In another fascinating case, Norice Wilkinson, who fought for Toussaint Louverture, was found living on Hilton Head Island in 1864. He had been enslaved in South Carolina for decades by then, but still spoke Spanish and French. He remembered battles and leaders from the Haitian Revolution as well as personal information about Louverture. He sometimes even sang Toussaint's favorite song, "Le Marsellaise," but he did so cautiously because, we are told, "he knew too well, how much the Southern [whites] hated its spirit of Freedom."²¹ As the foregoing examples aptly illustrate, neither the horrors of war nor the exhilaration of liberty were feelings easily forgotten even many decades later. What was known about them informed South Carolina discussions regarding emancipation and secession as the state approached the precipice of disunion and war.

White Carolinians simply could not conceive of emancipation because most thought of the slaves as a virtual horde of savages, poised to overtake the ramparts of civilization if unrestrained. Recoiling from the prospect, Keziah Brevard exclaimed, "Free such a multitude of half barbarians in our midst—no—no—no we must sooner give up our lives than submit to such degradation [*sic*]." Secessionist William Drayton also thought emancipation to be a ridiculous goal. Without self-discipline, the former slave would fall prey to endless vices, and "he must sink to the lowest wretchedness." As the final word on the subject, Drayton quoted an unnamed "authority" who postulated, "You may manumit a slave . . . but you cannot make him a white man. He still remains a negro or mulatto."²²

Slaveholders convinced themselves that under normal circumstances, bondsmen were content and loyal, but at the same time, they knew that outside influences could upset the stasis of master-slave relations. The greatest source of corruption was the ongoing abolitionist attacks. In these diatribes, masters believed that fanatical antislavery critics were not only planting the seeds of dissatisfaction, but also counseling the slaves to commit acts of violence. After denouncing the abolitionists and blaming them for the barbaric and "miserable triumph of St. Domingo," jurist and proslavery writer William Harper

²⁰ Power of attorney from Mr. Esnard to Antoine Barbot, April 30, 1827, Barbot Family Genealogy, Barbot Family Papers, SCHS.

²¹ Irving H. Bartlett, *Wendell and Ann Phillips: The Community of Reform, 1840–1880* (New York: Norton, 1979), 131–134.

²² Moore, *Plantation Mistress*, 38–39; William Drayton, *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists* (Philadelphia: H. Manly, 1836), 249.

predicted they would never win in the South. Nonetheless, their efforts would do "the greatest injury . . . to [the slave's] character, as well as to their happiness." South Carolinians knew the writings of proslavery ideologue Thomas R. Dew of Virginia, who argued that "schemes of emancipation" were "admirably calculated to excite plots, murders, and insurrections." From Beaufort in 1859, "Vigilance" complained that the slaves, who were naturally gullible, were being tampered with by abolitionists. With their encouragement, he warned, "Our negroes [*sic*] are constantly tempted to cut our throats or pink us with SHARPS, or rather BEECHER'S rifles."²³ On the eve of the Civil War, South Carolina slaveholders felt besieged. Whether by clandestine personal contacts or through literature smuggled into the state, they realized that their bondsmen were being influenced by the abolitionists—and with dire consequences. No doubt capturing the spirit of the times, one observer noted that he still had no distrust of his slaves "if left to themselves."²⁴ Dramatic events soon showed that such was not to be the case.

On October 16, 1859, radical antislavery crusader John Brown led a cadre of black and white men against the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia. Brown and his forces held the outpost briefly, but the ill-conceived assault was quashed with the arrival of Robert E. Lee and the U.S. Marines one day later. Although a failure, the boldness of the act, along with the adulation expressed for Brown in northern quarters and the words he conveyed publicly before execution consigned him to martyrdom, sent new shock waves through the South. Brown wanted to free as many people immediately as possible, while triggering insurrections in other rugged and isolated locations that might continue as protracted guerrilla wars. South Carolinians must have felt especially vulnerable because the trial produced some of Brown's maps, which labeled specific points of weakness or locations to be attacked inside of the state. In addition, one of Brown's co-conspirators identified a swath of counties with heavy black populations, from the low country extending westward to Mississippi, that might have been incorporated into their plans.²⁵ Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis and other Democrats immediately suspected Republican collaboration with Brown. Davis characterized the attack as "the violent offspring of Republican dogma—of the party's 'irrepressible conflict' and 'house divided' doctrines." He also placed Harper's Ferry in the

²³ *The Proslavery Argument as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott and Grambo, 1853), 94, 97; Drayton, *South Vindicated*, 245; *Charleston Mercury* (Charleston, S.C.), November 11, 1859.

²⁴ A South Carolinian [William Gilmore Simms], "Miss Martineau on Slavery," *Southern Literary Messenger* 3 (November 1837): 643; John Townsend, *The Doom of Slavery in the Union: Its Safety out of It* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell, 1860), 24–25.

²⁵ Freehling, *Road to Disunion*, 2: 211–212, 215–217; James Redpath, *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown* (Boston: Thayer and Eldridge, 1860), 203–205.

international context, believing it had connections extending across the Atlantic Ocean to unidentified British abolitionist sources. The incident powerfully demonstrated to Davis that "the South was a lonely slaveholding outpost, surrounded by abolitionist enemies and sitting atop a powder keg."²⁶

John Brown's raid was singular in its effect on the South, yet other abolitionist forays into the region kept the atmosphere unsettled. While in the employ of Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune*, journalist James Redpath travelled the South in 1854 investigating slavery. He visited South Carolina twice and in 1859 published his observations in a book entitled *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States*.²⁷ In addition to being an abolitionist, Redpath classified himself as a "reparationist." He believed that the slaves were not only entitled to their liberty, but also to compensation for their unpaid labor. Redpath challenged the masters' contention that the slaves were docile and content. When visiting Charleston, he found bondsmen "morose and savagely brooding over their wrongs." Only the slaveholders' raw power kept them in check. But Redpath warned that "if the roar of hostile cannon was to be heard by the slaves, or a hostile fleet was seen sailing up the bay . . . as surely as God lives, would the sewers of the city be instantly filled with the blood of the slave masters." The journalist made a special plea to Charleston women that they promote emancipation and thus avoid becoming "widowed ladies, whose husbands shall have been justly massacred" by rampaging blacks.²⁸

Between 1855 and 1858, Redpath lived in Kansas, where he met John Brown. The two shared similar ideas, and Redpath developed great respect for Brown, to whom he dedicated *The Roving Editor*. In 1860 Redpath became Brown's first biographer when he published *The Public Life of Capt. John Brown*. In the mid 1850s, Bleeding Kansas had become such a central theater in the struggle over slavery that Redpath left the South, thinking that the Civil War would break out in the Midwest. Even though that failed to happen, Redpath still considered the violent political confrontations in Kansas to have been the start of "the second American Revolution." He said that "Kansas was its Lexington; Texas will be its Bunker Hill, and South Carolina its Yorktown."²⁹

²⁶ Stephen B. Oates, *The Approaching Fury: Voices of the Storm, 1820–1861* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 293–294. By this time in the Western Hemisphere, aside from the United States, slavery could only be found in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Brazil. David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 270; *Charleston Mercury*, November 22, 1859.

²⁷ James Repath, *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* by James Redpath, ed. John R. McKivigan (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), xiv.

²⁸ James Redpath, *The Roving Editor; or, Talks with Slaves in the Southern States* (New York: A. B. Burdick, 1859), vi, 50–52.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, 300–301. Emphasis in original.

Redpath did not tour the South as a mere observer. He boldly confessed, "My object was to aid the slaves." For too long, the struggle had been based in the North, but now, it was time to "carry the war into the South." This meant using emissaries to identify antislavery whites in the region, especially non-slaveholders; establish more Underground Railroad stations; enlist the aid of southern free blacks; and "disseminate discontent among the slaves themselves." These "Apostles of Freedom," as he called the spies, could enable thousands to escape every year. Ultimately, Redpath did "not hesitate to urge the friends of the slave to incite insurrections."³⁰

In 1859, in his final initiatives before the Civil War, Redpath began to work with President Fabre Geffrard of Haiti to promote African American emigration to the island. The following year, he established the Haitian Emigration Bureau in Boston and recruited agents including John Brown Jr. In March 1861, Redpath was in Haiti, and an article reprinted in the *Liberator* indicated that the real purpose of his visit was to raise an army of black men to attack the South and complete John Brown Sr.'s original plan.³¹ No such army ever materialized, but the connections could not have been comforting in South Carolina. Redpath had visited the state and created clandestine contacts with slaves, he knew and admired John Brown, and he worked with the son on a project that some contended involved plans to foment an insurrection that would settle the unfinished business of the father.

As storm clouds continued gathering on the political horizon, southern secessionist leaders were forced to confront threats from an unlikely source: other southern whites with different class values. In one extreme example, under the influence of abolitionist literature, South Carolina planter William Brisbane emancipated his slaves, converted to the antislavery cause, and relocated to the North. From there in 1849, he further alarmed large numbers of South Carolinians by publishing and mailing a series of abolitionist pamphlets that targeted the group he believed was most sympathetic to ending slavery—the up-country yeomanry. While Brisbane was denounced and threatened in South Carolina, his efforts were acknowledged and praised by abolitionist Frederick Douglass.³² The most shocking class-based attack on the South occurred in 1857 when North Carolinian Hinton Rowan Helper published his bombshell abolitionist critique entitled *The Impending Crisis of the South*. His thesis was essentially that slavery hurt the economic prospects

³⁰ *Ibid.*, iv, 130–132.

³¹ Willis D. Boyd, "James Redpath and American Negro Colonization in Haiti, 1860–1862," *Americas* 12 (October 1955): 171–172, 175; *Liberator* (Boston), March 15, 1861.

³² J. Brent Morris, " 'We Are Verily Guilty concerning Our Brother': The Abolitionist Transformation of Planter William Henry Brisbane," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 111 (July–October 2010): 128–130, 138; *North Star* (Rochester, N.Y.), October 12, 1849.

for the non-slaveholder and led to southern economic underdevelopment. The book was resoundingly condemned in the South (the *Charleston Mercury* called it "infamous") with political leaders charging both that it counseled slave violence and that its provenance could be directly linked to Sewardism and John Brown.³³ Horace Greeley, the abolitionist publisher of the *New York Tribune*, provoked further hostility when he led a fundraising effort, joined by many Republican congressmen, to create an abridged version of the text for wider distribution.³⁴

The potential liability posed by the yeomanry and other working-class whites was a routine subject of lament among slaveholders. In the mid 1850s, a South Carolina newspaper characterized many laboring men as lacking talent and "perfect drones in society, continually carping about slave competition and their inability to acquire respectable positions." These were "dangerous among the slave population and ever ready to form combinations against the interest of the slaveholder." That the working class could pose crucial difficulties for the most radical secessionists was shown in 1851, when a convention was held to decide if South Carolina should secede alone. In the middle and up country particularly, many believed that seceding without the rest of the South would provoke a costly war, the chief burden of which would be borne by the yeomen. In elections for delegates, the radicals were rebuked statewide and overwhelmingly in all of the white-majority districts.³⁵ Secession had been delayed.

To address the problem of class division in a society where racial hierarchy was central, the master class resorted to race-based appeals and scare tactics. In a lengthy defense of slavery delivered to Edisto Island planters, John Townsend urged his listeners to remember the consequences of emancipation on the non-slaveholders. After outlining a series of privileges that all southern whites shared, he explained the social and psychological value of whiteness in a racially ordered slave society. "The color of the white man is now, in the South, a title of nobility in his relations as to the negro; and although Cuffy or Sambo be immensely his superior in wealth . . . yet the poorest non-slaveholder, being a white man, is his superior in the eye of the law." Early in 1861, *De Bow's Review* published an article on the non-slaveholders of the South that echoed Townsend's view on the psychological and social benefits of whiteness, but in a direct challenge to Helper, it also showed how those

³³ George M. Frederickson, *The Arrogance of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1988), 28–32; Townsend, *Doom of Slavery*, 8; *Charleston Mercury*, December 6, 13, 1859.

³⁴ *Charleston Mercury*, December 6, 1859.

³⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853–1854* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 2: 149–150; Edgar, *South Carolina*, 345–346.

without slaves benefitted by the slave economy.³⁶ Sometimes these appeals drew upon the racial history of the Western Hemisphere. In 1851 the *Darlington Flag* denied that secession was class based and tried to galvanize yeomen by proclaiming “the poor man has as much at stake [in slavery] as he who is possessed of hundreds of negroes.” For good measure, the paper referenced Saint Domingue to remind its readers of their possible future. As additional evidence of what was at stake, *De Bow's Review* contrasted thriving, slaveholding Cuba with the moribund British West Indies. Most frighteningly, the *Review* and the *Charleston Mercury* both used the Haitian Revolution to show that there could be no speculation about the fate of whites in post-emancipation societies. The words of fire-eater Robert Barnwell Rhett were at once poignant and chilling when he asked and answered the question: “Where are the white non-slaveholders of Hayti? Slaughtered or driven out of that grand paradise of Abolitionism.”³⁷ The lesson was that in a slaveholding society where whites were the minority, disunity could bring disaster.

By the middle of 1860, even the fiction of unity had disappeared from the Democratic Party, and in the electoral contest, it became apparent that Abraham Lincoln and the Republicans would be the winners. South Carolina political leaders contemplated what minority status would mean under such a government. Multiple scenarios were discussed, but in this unprecedented political environment, secession appeared more likely than ever, and its advocates felt new urgency. Andrew Calhoun raised the issue of whether South Carolina should secede immediately or cooperate with other states, knowing that “the inauguration of an Abolitionist, on the fourth of March next will damage the cause of the South irretrievably.” Southern Democrats feared two possibilities once Lincoln assumed office. One was that Republican-controlled patronage could be used against the South. The other was that it might be possible to build support for the Republicans in the South, thus transforming the conflict over slavery from a sectional to a national struggle.³⁸ Once Republicans were in power, secessionists predicted that the federal framework so vital to slavery would be dismantled. Hence, the three-fifths clause of the Constitution would be eliminated, and additional slave states could not be admitted to the Union. The Fugitive Slave Act would no longer be enforced as well, and federal forts, manned by abolitionists, would be used to protect escaped slaves.³⁹

³⁶ Townsend, *Doom of Slavery*, 22; *De Bow's Review*, January 1861, 67–77.

³⁷ Quoted in Stephanie McCurry, *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 284–285; *De Bow's Review*, January 1861, 75; *Charleston Mercury*, November 1, 1860.

³⁸ Townsend, *Doom of Slavery*, 7; *Daily South Carolinian*, November 14, 1860; Frederickson, *Arrogance of Race*, 32.

³⁹ Townsend, *Doom of Slavery*, 16; *De Bow's Review*, September 1857, 228.

Andrew Calhoun charged the foregoing actions and others would be the products of what he termed a "consolidated Government" that threatened its citizens' rights. Secessionist leaders saw ample evidence to support their argument in the Caribbean. James De Bow contended that Republican control of the federal government would victimize the planters the same way France and Britain abused their slaveholding citizens. He wondered, "What feeble barrier can be interposed to the proclamation from the National Capital like that which was made from the French Assembly, or the British Parliament, of universal and unconditional emancipation?" In a speech given before Congress during the crisis over Fort Sumter, Jefferson Davis referred to the federal government as a "military despotism" and denied its right to forcibly retain the fort. Going further he directed his audience to remember French policy in Saint Domingue. "The French Government, trampling upon the rights and safety of a distant and feeble colony by sending troops among them, brought on a revolution, first of the mulattoes, and afterwards of the blacks." Furthermore, the "planters [were] arrested for treason—just such charges as are made to-day against southern men."⁴⁰ In 1860 near Rockville, John Townsend likewise referred to Saint Domingue in order to show the dangers of a fanatical government imposing "crude experiments" on slavery at the expense of its citizens. "Unhappy St. Domingo!" he cried. "She had not *her destinies in her own keeping*; she was governed by a nation which knew not her condition," and when "Liberte, Equalite, Fraternite" were improperly applied to her, "scenes of untold misery followed . . . and there she stands—a Degraded Thing—a monument of 'warning' to all people, *to take their government into their own hands, and not to permit themselves to be governed by another and a hostile people!*" No more powerful argument for secession had ever been made.⁴¹

For white South Carolinians, it was axiomatic that a powerful federal government, headed by a Republican president and influenced by Les Amis des Noir-type organizations, spelled imminent disaster. With emancipation a virtual certainty, they contemplated troubling futures. Nothing in their direct experience prepared them for what might come, but William Drayton believed enough was known "to give the mad scheme of emancipation an aspect of unequalled horror." Without white oversight, the freedmen would slip into barbarism. According to William Harper, this would be "the worst of all barbarism—barbarism corrupted and depraved by intercourse with civilization." Next, the heretofore harmonious master-slave relations would

⁴⁰ *Daily South Carolinian*, November 14, 1860; *De Bow's Review*, September 1857, 228; Jefferson Davis, *Speech of the Hon. Jefferson Davis of Mississippi . . . upon the Message of the President of the United States on the Condition of Things in South Carolina* (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1861), 15.

⁴¹ John Townsend, *The South Alone Should Govern the South and African Slavery Should Be Controlled by Those Only Who Are Friendly to It* (Charleston, S.C.: Evans and Cogswell, 1860), 10. Emphasis in original.

be replaced with a new hostility, estrangement, and eventual slave insurrection on the lines of Saint Domingue.⁴² Drayton found that all historical slave insurrections shared the same horrible characteristics: "the madness which a sudden freedom from restraint begets—the overpowering burst of long-buried passion—the wild frenzy of revenge, and the savage lust for blood." Once unleashed, "it sweeps the old and young, innocent and guilty, the hoary sire and the blooming maid, in one undistinguished mass before it." However, the specter of a southern race war would be far worse than what transpired in Saint Domingue. "History has no page which can afford a picture so fearful, so revolting, so full of dread," Drayton asserted.⁴³ Secessionists also insisted that either to establish their manhood or exact vengeance, the freedmen would sexually assault white women. Townsend charged that this was among the latest Republican tools of devastation and demoralization. Another writer predicted that during the race war, fathers' lives would be spared "to witness the violation of the daughter or the wife." Then, other "helpless females would be spared to glut the savage and brutal passions of their demoniac captors." Just after John Brown's raid, and with the fear of a Republican president as the backdrop, a correspondent to the *Mercury* urged white men to "teach our daughters how to defend themselves against . . . threats of negro rape." They should be prepared to skillfully shoot long guns as well as revolvers and "be cool and silent in time of danger." Finally, white South Carolinians' fear of amalgamation was reinforced by others with similar concerns. In the 1860 presidential campaign in New York, a Constitutional Union Party supporter observed that in America after emancipation, the Negro would remain. "What will you do with these people?" he asked rhetorically. "Will you allow them to sit at your own table, marry your daughters, govern your States, sit in your halls of Congress and perhaps be President of the United States?" With all of the foregoing at stake, South Carolina political leadership acted decisively. On December 20, 1860, its secession convention voted to leave the Union and start a new chapter in the state's history.⁴⁴

In deciding for secession, South Carolina's leaders launched a "counter-revolution of slavery," but it was not the product of mere theoretical conflicts or clashing abstract principles. As Steven Channing argues, "the fear-of-insurrection-abolition syndrome was the *core* of the secession persuasion." Travelling the country in the early 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that in the North, slavery had been a matter of "commerce and manufacture . . . [but]

⁴² *Proslavery Argument*, 89, 91, 97; Drayton, *South Vindicated*, 240, 244.

⁴³ Drayton, *South Vindicated*, 246–248.

⁴⁴ Townsend, *Doom of Slavery*, 6–7; Drayton, *South Vindicated*, 247–248; *Charleston Mercury*, November 11, 1859; *New York Herald*, October 5, 1860; Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 284.

for those of the South, it is a question of life and death.”⁴⁵ With each new occurrence in the ongoing and nationally corrosive debate over slavery, the future of that system appeared more and more precarious in the Union. In South Carolina, a state with a black majority, threats to slavery ultimately threatened white lives. Of this Carolinians were certain, not only because of where they lived but also based on their perception of slaveholding societies in the Western Hemisphere, particularly Saint Domingue. The rise of the Republican Party and the militant abolitionists threatened to bring about emancipation and all of the worst fears South Carolina slaveholders could conceive. Secessionists frequently referred to Haiti as the embodiment of these fears, and often, the reference required no explanation since its meaning and implications were both well known.⁴⁶

Secessionists argued that the only way to protect slavery with certainty was to take it beyond the Union. This step was designed to avert a catastrophe by effectively insulating the slaves from dangerous ideas, thus ensuring their subordination.⁴⁷ Protecting slavery preserved white livelihoods as well as white lives. But was it already too late? In the months preceding and immediately following South Carolina’s secession, signs appeared of slave unrest and resistance including unprecedented reports of impudence, arson, and even murder. Just before the Secession Convention assembled, Keziah Brevard hoped that the newly independent South Carolina would soon repatriate the slaves to Africa to make the state safer. “I can’t see how we are ever to be safe with them in our midst . . . as long as they are here and number so many more than the whites,” she lamented. In frustration and fear, she noted that despite her efforts to show her slaves good will, she periodically confronted the stark

⁴⁵ Channing, *Crisis of Fear*, 265, 291; Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1966) 1: 372. Manisha Singha posits that South Carolina’s counterrevolution of slavery uniquely questioned the democratic legacy of the American Revolution. See Singha, *The Counter-revolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 5.

⁴⁶ In December 1860, while discussing South Carolina’s political situation and fears of insurrection, Charles Venable of South Carolina College said that the state seceded because “she was to be St. Domingo’s d.” Quoted in Clement Eaton, *A History of the Southern Confederacy* (1954; repr., New York: Free Press, 1965), 14. After the Pearl incident, in which District of Columbia abolitionists assisted a major slave escape attempt, Congress debated a response. Senator John C. Calhoun warned that abolitionists had to be discouraged, otherwise “we shall have St. Domingo over again. Yes, and worse than that.” Josephine F. Pacheco, *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2005), 180–181; “Remarks on the Disturbances in the District of Columbia,” April 20, 1848, in *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, vol. 25, 1847–1848, ed. Clyde N. Wilson and Shirley Bright Cook (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 346–347.

⁴⁷ *Daily South Carolinian*, November 14, 1860.

reality that they hated her deeply. Her only explanation was because "I am *white & own slaves*." On another occasion, after being discomfited by news of slave unrest, she confessed her vulnerability to her diary: "We know not what moment we may be hacked to death in the most cruel manner by our slaves." In September 1861, Mary Boykin Chesnut was horrified to find out that her own recently deceased cousin had not passed away peacefully, but was "murdered by her own people. Her negroes." Such events caused South Carolina masters and mistresses to reflect upon similar events from the past. Could Saint Domingue have been far from Chesnut's mind? Probably not. Only three months earlier, she had read a biography of Faustin Soulouque, the recently deposed emperor of Haiti. She wrote, this subject "has a wonderful interest just now. Slavery has to go, of course—and joy go with it. These Yankees may kill us and lay waste the land for a while, but conquer us? Never!"⁴⁸ Although her specific meaning is not absolutely clear, Chesnut's words confirm that Haiti continued as an important touchstone for understanding how South Carolinians thought about the state's past and now perilous future possibilities.

⁴⁸ Ada Bacot, *A Confederate Nurse: The Diary of Ada Bacot*, ed. Jean V. Berlin (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 27; Moore, *Plantation Mistress*, 58, 86–87, 110; Woodward, *Chestnut's Civil War*, 198; Girard, *Haiti*, 72–76.