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POSTMASTER HUGER AND THE INCENDIARY PUBLICATIONS

Edited by FRANK OTTO GATELL

University of Maryland

A reader of the Charleston *Southern Patriot* of July 29, 1835, would have learned that the steam packet *Columbia*, Captain Coffee, arrived that morning from the North with New York newspapers. Those hoping for interesting "intelligences" from Europe were disappointed, for the papers were "uncommonly barren of information of any novelty or importance." Some, doubtless, read no further; but those who pushed on saw a brief notice which gave warning of Charleston's greatest agitation since the nullification struggle. "INCENDIARY TRACTS AND PAPERS—", the item began, "the mail brought by the Steam Packet *Columbia* has come not merely laden, but literally overburdened with abolitionist tracts." This was a monstrous abuse of the mailing privilege, warned the *Patriot*, and if the Post Office Department offered no security against this "moral poison," the good citizens of Charleston could not answer for the safety of the mails.¹

The man most concerned with such safety was Alfred Huger,² the Charleston postmaster. Huger, a conscientious office holder who appreciated the import of his oath and responsibilities, was a man cruelly torn by the stresses of the situation in which he found himself. Federal officer and loyal Carolinian, how could he reconcile the statutory responsibilities of the one, with the ingrained beliefs of the other? How could he be a party to the dissemination of literature which struck at the very heart of the Southern way of life—literature upon whose subject there could be no compromise? Such was his dilemma, that he unburdened himself to Samuel L. Gouverneur,³ postmaster at New York, the originating point of the abolitionist pamphlets and papers.

While the details of this affair are well known to students of the slavery controversy,⁴ the correspondence here published is revealing of the personal

¹ *Charleston Southern Patriot*, July 29, 1835.

² Unionist Huger (1788-1872) received his appointment early in 1835. *Official Register of the United States . . . 1835* (Washington, 1836). See also this quarterly, XLIII (1942), 234.

³ Gouverneur (1799-1865) married one of James Madison's daughters, and served as the President's secretary. From 1825 to 1827 he was a member of the New York state assembly. (Information supplied by Mr. Laurence Gouverneur Hoes, Washington, D. C.)

⁴ W. Sherman Savage, *The Controversy over the Distribution of Abolition Literature 1830-1860* (n. p., 1938), 15-26; Clement Eaton, "Censorship of the Southern Mails," *American Historical Review*, XLVII (Jan. 1943), 266-280.

involvements of the participants. They graphically reveal the determination of the Southerner, whatever his partisan alignment, to preserve the essence of his society.

All the letters, save one, are from Huger to Gouverneur. The exception is Gouverneur's letter of August 8, a copy of which is located in the Gouverneur Papers at the Manuscript Room, New York Public Library, as are the Huger originals. Published here with the kind permission of the New York Public Library, Robert W. Hill, Keeper of Manuscripts, they are reproduced in their original form except that the terminal dash has been substituted by the period, "&" spelled out, and the complimentary close compressed into fewer lines.

Charleston. P. O. August 1st 1835

Dear Sir: I take the liberty of trespassing upon you for a few moments that your self and the Citizens of N. Y. may be correctly informed upon a Subject of equal interest to us all; Which has and continues to agitate and disturb the public Mind, threatening additional difficulties, and materially affecting the Safe transmission of the Mail. The Steamer which arrived here on Wednesday, literally filled our office with thousands of Pamphlets and Tracts upon the question on which this community is too Sensitive to admit of any Compromise—the Emancipation of the Southern Slave. Many were addressed to the Clergy and other persons in this place; and being returned at our office after their Nature had been discovered, and proclaimed, the attention of the Whole Town was immediately attracted to the P. O. The most respectable men of all parties gather'd about our doors and windows, and in a little time I was formally summoned to give up the "incendiary publications" which were known to be in my possession, and at the same [time] told with very little ceremony, that they would be taken from me, if I did not—thus standing with those of every condition against me, or rather, against the Contents of my office, I could only resolve that when the mail became the object of attack, I would make it the object of defence; but seeing plainly the excitement and exasperation which were every Moment increasing, I came to the determination to Separate the obnoxious papers, from the rest of the Mail, not doubting that otherwise, the whole might be destroy'd between the Office and the Rail-Road. Endeavouring to appease by every means in my power the disposition to commit violence which was now manifested openly, by those of every grade in Society from the highest to the lowest, I called into consultation the Collector of the Port, the District Attorney of the United States,⁵ and others of the most distinguished Citizens, and but one opinion prevail'd viz that the Mail could not possibly be conveyed thro' the Streets, nor do I believe

⁵ James R. Pringle and Robert B. Gilchrist.

there is any tribunal in the State that could have commanded obedience for the moment. The Whole Civil authority were in favour of arresting the Mail, and no power could have protected it, but a military force greater than the Undivided population of Charleston. Nullifiers and Union men, Jackson men and Clay men, Van Buren Men and White⁶ men who differ on all other points agree on this.⁷ I had hoped that when I assumed the responsibility of Separating these productions from the rest of the Mail, (for the Security of the Mail), and expressed my intention of keeping them until instructions could be Sent me from Washington that everything would have remained quiet and tranquil. I regret to say that in this expectation I was disappointed, and during the Night of Wednesday the P. O. was broken open and the bag containing the Tracts carried off—as I have already said, they were Separate from other papers and therefore easily detected—no other injury was done the office. I can only say that I will assuredly perform what my duty to the Government, to Your community, to this Community, and to myself require at my hands: if the Mail by the next Boat reaches the P. O. I *must* and *will* defend it untill I am overpower'd; how long one Man can Sustain himself in this position, you can easily determine. I greatly lament these occurrences, and what, on my part, can be done, shall be done to prevent future Excesses, but it is impossible to restrain the universal indignation that pervades all Classes, and I think it incumbent upon me to apprise you, and thro' you, our Northern friends, of what is our real Situation. I beg leave to Suggest to you that the Bag containing letters should be labelled "Nothing but Letters"—and that the Bag containing these Tracts, (which I hope will be Separate) should be labelled "Suspicious," for your guidance and for the Safety of the Mail. I know not how far this will be in keeping with the regular course, but our Case here, is one so Novel and in its Nature so delicate, as to justify, if not make necessary some departure from the Ordinary Mode. The Boat is in the act of leaving the Wharf and leaves me time to assure You of the great respect With which I remain

Your Obt St

Alfred Huger

⁶ Hugh Lawson White of Tennessee, a presidential hopeful.

⁷ The press questioned only the timing of the seizure, reflecting that the citizens might have shown more restraint until the decision from Washington arrived. *Charleston Southern Patriot*, July 30, 1835; *Charleston Courier*, July 31, 1835. The Catholic bishop of Charleston rushed to join the unanimous chorus: "Nor do I know a single Roman Catholic, clerical or lay, . . . who is not fully determined to use his best efforts to prevent the mischief of . . . [this] interference." John England to Editor of *Courier*, July 30, 1835, *Charleston Courier*, July 31, 1835.

P. O. Charleston. August 6th 1835.

Dear Sir: The Ship *Salinda* will Sail this eve[nin]g with a fair wind and may probably arrive in anticipation of the Steamer of Saturday next. It gives me great pleasure to inform you that the Mail by the Gibbons came safely to the P. O.—it was brought thro' the Streets by a committee of the most respectable and distinguished citizens;⁸ delivered to my Hands and distributed as usual. The "Emancipator," "Human Rights"⁹ and other such papers did not come by the Boat—had they come, I should have stop'd them in the office untill I receive instructions from the Department. If I am directed to forward them they will unquestionably be arrested in the Streets by the Civil authority of the state and destroyed—this is inevitable—nor do I believe that any military force not strong enough to subdue South Carolina, can prevent it. I do not believe that greater indignation could be felt, if the Mail were used to Convey the most deadly pestilence among us—and it is my solemn and sincere opinion that if it continues, the commercial intercourse between the two Cities, so far as the P. O. is concerned, must cease.¹⁰ It may be imagined that my local feelings influence me on this occasion, and to a Certain Extent they do: I am neither "more nor less than Man," and if I could with indifference, see a torch put to my own House, or my family subjected to brutality and butchery, I should not believe myself better qualified to serve the Government. A Single movement at this moment, and hundreds of Negroes, perhaps perfectly innocent would surely perish. Our friends at the North will I trust appreciate these painful and embarrassing considerations; the fate of the Slave cannot be mitigated by these means—on the contrary the Cord which binds the

⁸ On August 3, an "ample representation of the property, respectability and intelligence" of Charleston met at the city hall to hear speeches of Charles J. Colcock, Henry A. DeSaussure, and Robert Y. Hayne, and appointed a committee of twenty-one citizens to handle the crisis with Huger. The public prints extolled the responsible and prudent conduct of the gathering.

Next day the committee conferred with Huger and came away with assurances that the abolitionist pamphlets would not be circulated. In their report to the general meeting, committee members praised the postmaster for the "important communications made to them, and for the pledge of co-operation." There was never any doubt about Huger's course; wrote the *Patriot*: "That gentleman is no stranger to us. Born among us, having a deep stake in common with us, he is in heart and principle a Carolinian." *Charleston Southern Patriot*, August 4, 1835; *Charleston Courier*, Aug. 4-6, 1835.

⁹ The *Emancipator* and *Human Rights*, abolitionist papers published in New York.

¹⁰ Charleston storekeepers met on August 3 to propose a boycott of those northern merchants who aided the abolitionists in any way. *Charleston Courier*, Aug. 4, 1835.

Servant to his Master must be, and will be, drawn Closer and Closer by this cruel and fatal interference—Cruel, as it disturbs the repose of a whole country, and fatal, as it crushes the disposition which every where exists, to lessen the labour and augment the comforts of the African. I ought not trespass upon you and these reflections which are not in the way of our business—but I desire to keep you correctly informed of what transpires so far as the transmission of the Mail is concerned. If the Abolitionists must send their papers among us, the Mail, I hope will not be the means of conveying them. I say this not as a Slaveholder, but as a Post-Master. What can you or I do against the whole Civil and Military power of S. Carolina? It would be just as easy for you to persuade the People of N. Y to shut up the Hudson River, as for me to convince those among whom I live, of the propriety or justice of leaving their fate, and the fate of their children, in the hands of the abolitionists. The breaking open of the Post-Office is almost universally disapproved; but only so, because the community think it wrong to do *clandestinely*, what they have a Right to do *openly*—that Right, I am satisfied they will exercise whether it be legal, or illegal. If the attack upon the office is repeated, which I do not apprehend, I shall apply for a Room in one of the Forts in the Harbour, that the large sums of Money frequently in our hands may be safe while we have it—but after all, the mail must take its chance on the High-Way. I pray you, seriously to consider this matter and to give me the benefit of your own suggestions. You may rely upon the triumph of good order and Law, untill I am ordered to forward those Tracts—and *then* you may rely upon the Mail being Stop'd by the authority of the State—there are no politics in this affair. Men who hate each other will cooperate now—the most Ultra Nullifier and the most confirmed Unionist, will go together Shoulder to Shoulder—and for once the Nation will see the Extraordinary Spectacle of a whole State; unanimous. We hope that the good sense which distinguishes your City will shew itself now; that the true philanthropy which belongs to you will stretch forth its mighty hand and that the Enterprizing Spirit of that community which has pushed an unrivall'd commerce into Every quarter of the Globe, will not quietly look on these efforts to Establish Anarchy and Misrule among us. I confidently calculate that New York will take this matter up—that the Slave and the Owner will be left where the Constitution of the U. S. placed them and all will be well; but if the South is driven to protect itself, we shall do it to a Man. I shall write you by the Steamer on Saturday and the mean time I beg you to be assured of the Great Respect with which I remain

Yours

Alfred Huger

Charleston P. O. August 8th 1835—

Dear Sir—I wrote you, fully, upon the Subject of our local difficulties, by the *Salinda*, hoping that her passage would be short, and her arrival in anticipation of the Steamer. The wind is now at East and you will not receive my letter by her as early as I expected. Things continue to be perfectly tranquil, our business going on as usual without disturbance or interruption, tho' the incendiary publications continue to reach this office. As soon as the mail is open'd, they are separated from all other papers and carefully put away, but I can neither issue them here, nor distribute them untill I hear Specially from the Department. The Civil authorities of the State and City have the matter in hand, and the very moment the Mail leaves the P. O. unless accompanied with my assurance that these pamphlets are *not* in it, it (the Mail itself) will assuredly be taken possession of by the police and subjected to *their* examination. It is easy to perceive the unhappy consequences of such measures so far as our Commercial Intercourse Extends for when the Mail is once opened illegally it is out of my power to determine how long the Wardens with the Intendant at their head would be able to protect it against the fury of the People. This view of the case will be entitled to some consideration and *that* will be enhanced when we reflect upon this Serious and indeed awful State of things, as the result of an Unnecessary and Unprovoked interference by a portion of one community with the Rights of another. I trust and hope that we shall get relief from the P. M. General,¹¹ but if the case is not in his opinion within his jurisdiction, our situation will [prove] extremely embarrassing. I shall think it *then* incumbent upon me to say that remittance of any money or the representative of money ought not to be sent by mail from N. Y. to Charleston, untill you are advised by me of the position in which the affair may be placed by the Committee, or the Council, or the people, as the case may be. If you can by means of your own influence, or by any other proper means prevent the transmission of these fire brands among us, for God's sake do so; and let the question of slavery be decided elsewhere than in the P. O. where the Post-Master himself is a Slave holder, and cannot believe it sinful without convicting his own Soul and his own Ancestors for five Generations. The Citizens will meet again on Monday, and by Monday

¹¹ Relief was on the way. Amos Kendall, a Kentuckian by adoption and newly installed as Postmaster General, supported Huger in a widely publicized letter. "By no act, or direction of mine, official or private, could I be induced to aid, knowingly, in giving circulation to papers of this description. . . . We owe an obligation to the laws, but a higher one to the communities in which we live, and if the former be perverted to destroy the latter, it is patriotism to disregard them. Entertaining these views, I cannot sanction, and will not condemn the step you have taken." Kendall to Huger, Aug. 4, 1835; *Charleston Courier*, Aug. 14, 1835.

it is likely that instructions for my guidance may come from Washington. The Contents of my letters I take it for granted you will make public but I do not desire that my correspondence should appear (entire) in print unless in your belief the necessity or propriety of the Emergency should require it.

It will give me pleasure to hear from you, as it does to assure you that I am with much respect

Your obt St

Alfred Huger

[*Gouverneur to Huger*]

Private

Dear Sir

I have received Your favor of the 1st. Inst.—I have waited until the closing of the Mail to write to You a few lines in reply. I cannot say more at this time, than advise You of the fact that I transmitted a Copy of Your letter immediately on its receipt to the Post Master General.¹² Until his instructions are received, I shall not forward by Mail, any of the papers referred to. I wish to apprise You simply of this fact in the present state of the matter, and do not wish You to Communicate to the public any thing in relation to it, until You hear from me again. I presume in case of a recurrence of difficulty, on the arrival of the Mail, it will be sufficient to assure the public that it contains none of the offensive papers.

With great respect

Your Obt Servt

New York 8 Augt. 1835

signed S. L. Gouverneur

Charleston. August 15th 1835.

Dear Sir: Your letter reached me on Thursday and in Compliance with your request I have said nothing on the subject to which it refers, merely Stating to the Intendant of the City,¹³ who attended the Mail from the Wharf to the P. O. that the "Boat had brought us no pamphlet of an incendiary Character." Everything is again quiet and tranquil, and the breaking open of the office, I believe, is universally regretted. I look back to the Scenes we have passed thro', and more so, to those we were fast approaching, with greater than ordinary sensibility. Before the Committee of 21 was nominated, it seemed to me than an *open* assault upon the Mail after it was received upon us, was our destiny: what would

¹² Gouverneur to Kendall, Aug. 7, 1835; copy in Gouverneur Papers. Kendall's reply omitted the "higher law" doctrine which had been severely criticised in the North. Kendall to Gouverneur, Aug. 22, 1835, Gouverneur Papers. See also Savage, *Controversy over . . . Abolition Literature*, pp. 20-22.

¹³ Intendant Edward W. North.

certainly [have] been the unhappy result, I need not advert to—but if the Abolitionists are bent upon deeds of Quixotic benevolence, and if the Nation mean that they shall persist in their madness, both will one day learn that the history of their triumph or their defeat, will be written with the blood of the “best and the bravest” that this country can produce. Among the deplorable consequences of this unholy Crusade, one which is well fitted to make any Man shudder, who has the Heart or Mind either of a Christian, or Philanthropist, will surely accrue—the poor Negroe who is contented if left alone, will share largely and cruelly, with his Master in the suffering of a conflict in which he stands no Earthly chance of Success. And where Fanaticism (mis-called Humanity) shall once cause the Sword to be drawn against our own Property, the War will be *one*, not of defence or assault, but of utter desolation and annihilation. And Southern as I am (thank God) and Slave holder as I found myself at my birth, I never can contemplate without horror, the possibility of sooner or later embruing my hands in the blood of those who never injured me, but on the contrary have faithfully served me! That the efforts of your Enthusiasts are leading on to this dismal termination, is as true as your Hudson to its bed, or your Mountains to their base. And when *we* shall perhaps become the authors of Injustice, by mingling the Innocent with the Guilty; and they (our deluded Slaves) shall be the victims of an infuriated Wrath that no human Law can restrain; then may we both turn to our worst Enemies, Enemies of the White Man, but still greater Enemies of the Black Man and pointing to hundreds and hundreds of Slaughter’d Africans, and to the destroyed dwellings of their rightful owners, we may say to the Emancipator and Abolitionist “these are thy trophies”. You perceive My Dr Sir, that I have put your patience in [*torn*] requisition, but you will I trust pardon the trespasses I have committed upon your time. The extraordinary responsibility which I have assumed, has been called for by difficulties by which I have been surrounded—and whatever are now the Consequences of my departing from the regular Course where my duty to the United States and my duty to South Carolina required both it,—those consequences will come, and find me in the enjoyment of that complacency which belongs to one who *knows* that he is *Right*. Doubtless, the Enemies of our local Institutions will differ with me on this point, but I shall submit cheerfully to their denunciations, if I am thought worthy of receiving them.

I beg you again to accept my apologies for the trouble I have given you and My assurance of Great Respect With which I remain

Your Obt St.

Alfred Huger

Charleston Aug 22d 1835

Dear Sir: It gives me great pleasure to acknowledge the receipt of yours of the last Steamer. Nothing can be more Satisfactory than the Correspondence between the Abolitionists and yourself:¹⁴ the Community of Charleston are sensibly affected by the course you have taken, and for myself personally, I cannot too warmly speak of our Sympathy and Kindness. Mr. King of the "American."¹⁵ accuses me of making a "Compromise with the Citizens and—," when in fact it was for two or three days doubtful, how long I would escape the fury of the people, because, I refused to compromise with them! throughout the whole affair, I have occupied but one position, and *that*, I took without consulting a Single Individual. Very early in this business, I saw plainly that the Mail could not pass thro' the Streets with those pamphlets contained in it: I *therefore*, to *save the Mail* took them out and told the Citizens I had done so. This did not satisfy the Lynch Men, who wished to have access to the office. I prepared myself to receive them, when the *Committee* of 21 was nominated: by *their* interference, bloodshed was prevented. Even to them, to the Intendent and Wardens, I refused absolutely, the slightest communication with my office. Where then has been the Compromise? I have made none, and should think myself dishonoured if I had.¹⁶

I am Dr Sir—with great Respect

Yours

Alfred Huger

Although there was no change in the statutes regulating the delivery of mail, including that sent by abolitionists, the *de facto* censorship instituted by Huger and Gouverneur received the tacit approval of the Jackson administration. The Charleston affair, and several other similar cases in southern states in 1835, established the pattern whereby the South protected itself from the incendiary publications of northern abolitionism.

¹⁴ Gouverneur's correspondence with the American Anti-Slavery Society, Gouverneur Papers. The exchanges with abolitionists Arthur Tappan and Elizur Wright appeared in many newspapers, including the *Charleston Courier*, Aug. 21, 1835.

¹⁵ Charles King was editor of the New York *American* from 1823 to 1845. He was later president of Columbia University in New York. Frederic Hudson, *Journalism in the United States From 1690 to 1872* (New York, 1873), 312.

¹⁶ "Wherever . . . the Post Master here could follow the law, having in view the safety of the mail, he did so. Does this look like compromise?" *Charleston Southern Patriot*, Aug. 21, 1835.

WEDDING MENU, 1856

Found in an old scrapbook, the following menu was copied by Mary Pressley Smith of Louisville, Kentucky, and presented to the Society.

The reception was given by Mr. and Mrs. I. Jenkins Mikell in honor of a young bridal couple—the Rev. Lucius Cuthbert and Susan Margaret Mikell—and their twenty-four attendants. The bride was the daughter of I. Jenkins Mikell and his second wife, Amarinthia Jenkins Townsend.

Bridal Cake

Groom's Cake

Bridal Palace

Pyramids of Oranges Christalisee

Pyramids of Almonds Christalisee

Tout au Fruit

Harlequin

Bisquit Glasee

Russian Charlotte

Italian Cream

Wine Jelly

Maraschino Jelly

Orange Jelly with Oranges

Spanish Maringo

Blanc Mangee

Spanish Kisses

Strawberry Ice Cream

Orange Sherbert

Fancy Cake

French Wafers

French Bonbon

French Dragee au Liquer

Boned Turkey with truffles

Pheasant

Woodcock

Capon

Grouse

Canvas Back Duck

Currant Jelly

Wild Turkey

Venison

Oysters Stewed

Oyster Patte

Chicken Salad a la Mayonnaise

Gelatini de d'Inde

Pattie de Fois Gras

Prepared by

W. Hammond, successor to A. J. Rutjes

Charleston, November 19, 1856