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CONTENTS

	PAGE
Articles:	
<i>"The Fall of Charleston,"</i> compiled by Viola Caston Floyd	1
<i>An Eye Witness Account of the Occupation of Mt. Pleasant</i>	8
<i>Letters from John Lewis Gervais to Henry Laurens, 1777-1778,</i> edited by Raymond Starr	15
<i>The Movement to Reopen the African Slave Trade in South Carolina,</i> by Ronald Takaki	38
<i>Records and Notes of the Scott Family of St. Helena Island,</i> com- piled by David McCord Wright	55
 Reviews:	
Waring, <i>A History of Medicine in South Carolina, 1670-1825,</i> by Chapman J. Milling	60
Peckham, <i>The Colonial Wars 1689-1762,</i> by Charles L. Anger . .	61
<i>Guide to Genealogical Records in the National Archives,</i> by Mrs. Ben C. Hough	62
Harwell, <i>Confederate Imprints in the University of Georgia Li- braries,</i> by Clara Mae Jacobs	62
Ervin and Rudisill, <i>The Darlingtoniana: A History of People, Places and Events in Darlington County, South Carolina,</i> by Mary B. Prior	63
Griffith, <i>Virginia House of Burgesses, 1750-1774,</i> by Thad W. Tate	64
Holland, <i>Pierce M. B. Young: the Warwick of the South and Mont- gomery, Johnny Cobb: Confederate Aristocrat,</i> by Ernest M. Lander, Jr.	65
Notes	68
Archives News	72

THE MOVEMENT TO REOPEN THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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One of the most significant developments of the 1850's was the movement to reopen the African slave trade. It represented without doubt the most radical line of Southern thought. And yet it is surprising and unfortunate that little is actually known about the movement itself—its advocates and its Southern opponents, the motives, viewpoints, and strategies of both sides. Certainly one excellent way to advance understanding of this activity is to study the movement in South Carolina, the storm-center for the revival of the trade.

In South Carolina, the first serious proposal to reopen the African slave trade was advanced in August 1853 by Leonidas W. Spratt, editor of the *Charleston Standard*. A year later, the *Charleston Mercury*, a newspaper closely connected to Robert Barnwell Rhett, joined Spratt's crusade. The grand juries of Richland and Williamsburg districts also issued presentments that year in favor of the renewal of the African slave trade. In 1856 Governor James H. Adams advocated it in his message to the legislature, and Edward B. Bryan, chairman of the committee which considered the governor's proposal, presented a favorable majority report in 1857. The advocates then tried again and again to pass in the legislature resolutions on the African slave trade. Meanwhile Spratt and African slave-trade advocates from the other Southern states—leaders like James D. B. De Bow of Louisiana, William L. Yancey of Alabama, and William B. Goulden of Georgia—introduced the subject into the Southern commercial conventions, where it became the central topic of heated debates in 1858 and 1859.

The most active and articulate advocates of the African slave trade in South Carolina included James H. Adams, Edward B. Bryan, Robert Barnwell Rhett, Maxcy Gregg, Alexander Mazyck, John Middleton, and Leonidas W. Spratt. Within this group there were large slaveholders like Bryan, Middleton, and Rhett. The most consistent and fanatic advocate, however, was Spratt, a nonslaveowner.

All of them were fire-eaters. Rhett and Adams had been nullifiers during the 1830's, and many like Rhett, Middleton, Mazyck, and Gregg were avowed secessionists. They opposed any attempts by the South

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loss of time would be attended with Success be least expensive in the End—& keep the Choctaws, Chickesaws & Cherokees in Respect. Delay I am afraid will bring them all again upon our backs next spring—it is idle to expect to be at peace with one part of the nation & at war with the rest. I prefer a war with the whole nation, otherwise we shall have all the disadvantages of War & they all the advantages of Peace.

If congress could be prevailed on to countenance & give assistance in a well concerted plan against [torn] & West Florida—it would be the surest way to secure the Indians in our Interest—the house have recommended to the president to apply or rather to urge[?] the subject to Congress.

The Boat came to night from Mepkin with a load of Ruff Rice, and I am in hopes it will sell at 20/ pr. Bushel.

Mr. Zahn expects to make a good Crop at Santee Mr. Baillee & Springs give also good hopes. I hope this years crop will help to bear your great Expences. . . .⁸¹

⁸¹ At the end of the letter the names of the members of the committee on the proclamation had been listed as follows: Edward Rutledge, Alex Moultrie, General Moultrie, Col. [Owen] Roberts, Doctor Ramsay, town members unanimous in the majority; Charles C. Pinckney, Col. [James] Mayson, and Mr. [Aaron] Loocock, country members unanimous in the minority.

Carolina National Democrats to involve the state in the National Democratic party. Generally they came from the lowcountry parishes, and both the *Charleston Mercury* and the *Charleston Standard*, propaganda engines for the African slave trade, were against increasing representation for the upcountry and giving the people the power to elect the governor and presidential electors. Furthermore the speeches of these men and their writings constituted an important as well as an extreme part of the pro-slavery argument.

During the early fifties, these leaders became increasingly and fearfully aware of three threats to the institution of slavery in the South: the external threat of the federal government, the internal threat of the Southern nonslaveowners, and the moral threat of the sentiment of the nineteenth-century western world. Consequently they proposed the African slave trade as the defense of slavery.

After the admission of California into the Union as a free state, these South Carolina extremists who shortly became slave-trade advocates were profoundly apprehensive about the diminished Southern power in the federal government. They observed that the North now had a majority in both houses of Congress and could control the fortunes of the South.

They came to believe that the cause of the decline of Southern power in the federal government was the federal prohibition of the African slave trade in 1808. As a result of this prohibition, Southern population did not increase as rapidly as Northern population, boosted by the flow of immigrants from Europe. While Northern representation in Congress steadily increased, Southern representation lagged. While the North expanded into the territories, the South lacked the human resources for slavery expansion. In August 1859 Spratt had only to point to the Kansas disappointment to demonstrate this fact. "Ten thousand masters have failed to take Kansas," he declared, "but so would not have failed ten thousand slaves. Ten thousand of the rudest Africans . . . would have swept the free soil party from the land."¹

Spratt and other South Carolina extremists perceived that "the great want of the South is of population. This is necessary to political power. . . ."² They argued that the reopening of the African slave trade would provide the necessary population for the South to expand into the territories and to increase her federal representation. Thus, by means of the African slave trade, the advocates asserted, it would be possible to

¹ L. W. Spratt, speech reprinted in the *Boston Liberator*, August 12, 1859.

² Spratt, "Report on the Slave Trade Made to the Southern Convention at Montgomery, Alabama," *De Bow's Review*, XXIV (June 1858), 481.

restore Southern power and to protect and preserve Southern rights within the Union.

Of course this policy would work only if the North accepted the proposal to renew the African slave trade. But even if the North rejected the proposal, the advocates saw that the issue could still be used to protect Southern rights, for it would bring about secession. This either-or strategy was set forth clearly by Spratt. "If permitted," he argued, "it will lead the South to power and fortune within this Union; if not permitted, but yet approved of Southern sentiment, it will lead the South to independence out of it. This, therefore, is the only, the real and efficient measure."³

The slave-trade advocates were probably well aware that the first program—Northern acceptance of the African slave trade and the protection of slavery within the Union—was not possible and that their real goal was secession. Advocates like Rhett and Spratt were clearly convinced that the South could never remain in the Union and at the same time preserve its institution of slavery. The *Charleston Mercury* announced on June 19, 1856: "We have an abiding conviction that it is impossible for the Union to last. As soon as the element of slavery entered into the politics of the Union, its doom was sealed. The South has the simple alternative of separating herself from the Union or being destroyed by it."⁴

The advocates acknowledged openly that their proposal would deepen sectional antagonism and hasten the conflict. Spratt boldly challenged: "Is it that it would precipitate an issue? That is to be wished for. The contest is inevitable. The power is with the North and the purpose of aggression is declared."⁵

In addition they knew that the African slave trade could split the National Democracy along sectional lines and thereby clear the path to secession. The slave-trade advocates did not openly confess that their purpose was to disrupt the party, yet they did freely express their distrust toward that party. Rhett, for example, in his speech in the Senate on February 24, 1851, saw no hope for cooperation with the Northern Democrats: ". . . at the last session of Congress they surrendered to their enemies; they went over in the free States to the consolidationists, in

³ Spratt, from *De Bow's Review*, XXVII (June 1859), 209.

⁴ Quoted in Harold S. Schultz, *Nationalism and Sectionalism in South Carolina, 1852-1860*, Durham, 1950, p. 125.

⁵ Spratt, speech at Jackson, Mississippi, on May 16, 1859, reprinted in the *Jackson Mississippian*, May 20, 1859.

order that together they might spoil the South.”⁶ And in the mid-fifties, the advocates opposed the efforts of James L. Orr to represent South Carolina in the National Democratic convention. The connection between pro-slave-trade and anti-Democrat sentiments may be seen in a letter signed “H” in the *Edgefield Advertiser* of September 15, 1858. While urging the renewal of the trade, this writer assailed the national party.

The advocates must have seen that the African slave-trade issue did divide the National Democratic party on one occasion in December 1856. At the time, Etheridge Emerson, a Whig from Tennessee, introduced into the House of Representatives a resolution which declared the proposal to revive the African slave trade “shocking to the moral sentiment of the enlightened portion of mankind.”⁷ Every Southern Democrat who voted on the resolution voted against it, while almost every Northern Democrat who voted on the resolution voted for it (18 for, 3 against).⁸

Probably not as apparent as the external threat of the federal government, but nonetheless a menace which the slave-trade advocates viewed with fear and trembling, was the internal threat from the nonslaveholders of the South.

Economic competition between white laborers and slaves had existed in South Carolina for a long time. Even as early as 1720, slave labor drove out white artisans from the colony, and in 1742 a grand jury declared: “We present as a grievance the want of a law to prevent the hiring out of negro tradesmen, to the great discouragement of the white workmen coming into this province.”⁹

A century later the competition between the two groups increased. During the early 1840’s American cotton production exceeded the demand for cotton, and the price of cotton in 1845 dropped to a low of 5½ cents per pound. Consequently, in the South, there was a surplus of slave labor which planters began to divert into the mechanic trades and thus intensified the competition. The white laborers protested. In 1845 Georgia passed an act that prohibited the hiring of slaves and free colored men as mechanics and provided that violators be fined. Sir Charles Lyell, who was visiting Georgia at the time, observed: “. . . they [white mechanics] are using in Georgia the power given to them by an exclusive

⁶ Robert Barnwell Rhett, speech in the Senate, reprinted in the *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 13, 1851.

⁷ Etheridge Emerson, in John F. H. Claiborne, *Life and Correspondence of John A. Quitman*, New York, 1860, II, 336.

⁸ A table of the votes may be found in Michael W. Cluskey, *The Political Text-book*, Philadelphia, 1860, p. 589.

⁹ Quoted in U. B. Phillips, “The Slave Labor Problem in the Charleston District,” *Political Science Quarterly*, XXII (September 1907), 423.

franchise, to pass disabling statutes against the blacks. . . . Such combinations will . . . forward the substitution of white for negro labor, and may hasten the era of general emancipation."¹⁰ South Carolina had a somewhat similar act against Negro competition, but grand jury presentments between 1849 and 1851 complained that the law was not enforced.

The rise in cotton prices which began in the late forties did not alleviate the conflict between white and slave labor, but it did forecast the rise of white labor in the South. And it was this forecast that struck fear in the minds of the slave-trade advocates.

They saw that with the increase in cotton prices and with the consequent rise in demand for labor the South would have to find some way to meet this new demand. They also perceived that, since the African slave trade was closed, the flow of labor would probably have to come from Europe. Thus the ranks of free labor in the South would be augmented and slavery threatened. "If we cannot supply the demand for slave labor," Governor Adams warned in his message of 1856, "then we must expect to be supplied with a species of labor we do not want, and which is, from the very nature of things antagonistic to our institutions."¹¹

The advocates were indeed greatly disturbed by this antagonism. Spratt observed that many whites had emigrated to the South since the prohibition of the African slave trade and that they struggled for subsistence in competition with the slave. They are, he believed, "distinctly conscious that there is a difference between 'labor' and 'slave labor.'"¹² Already they had begun to exclude the slave from the trades, public works, and employments in the city of Charleston. And when more free laborers came South, Spratt argued:

they will question the right of masters to employ their slaves in any works that they may wish for; they will invoke the aid of legislation; they may acquire the power to determine municipal elections; they will inexorably use it; and thus this town of Charleston, at the very heart of slavery, may become a fortress of democratic power against it.¹³

To prevent the immigration of foreigners into the South, to check the increase of free laborers within the South, and to meet at the same time

¹⁰ Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States*, New York, 1849, pp. 82-83.

¹¹ James H. Adams, "Message to the Legislature, 1856," reprinted in the appendix of Edward B. Bryan, *Report of the Special Committee of the House of Representatives of South Carolina, on so much of the Message of His Excellency Gov. Jas. H. Adams, As relates to Slavery and the Slave Trade*, Columbia, 1857, p. 48.

¹² Spratt, "Report, Montgomery," *De Bow's Review*, XXIV (June 1858), 487.

¹³ Spratt to John Perkins, reprinted in J. E. Cairnes, *The Slave Power*, London, 1863, pp. 399-400.

the demand for labor, the African slave-trade advocates demanded the reopening of the trade. "We want," Spratt said, "only that kind of population which will extend and secure our peculiar institutions, and there is no source but Africa."¹⁴ Indeed, to the advocates, any source of white labor would only strengthen the enemy within.

The slave-trade advocates argued that the newly imported Africans would go to the field while the civilized slaves would serve in the household or be employed in the mechanic arts. Such a development would discourage foreign white immigration into the South and diminish the threat of white laborers. The pitting of white labor versus slave labor, Spratt assured his listeners at the Montgomery Southern Commercial Convention in 1858, "painful, if it be not perilous, would be alleviated by the foreign slave trade."¹⁵

The actual danger from Southern white laborers was probably not very real. Perhaps the white laborers in the border states constituted a significant force, but in South Carolina this was doubtful. The foreign population in South Carolina was small, constituting only about three per cent of the state's total white population in 1860.¹⁶ As for white laborers in South Carolina, it is true that they did exert increasing pressure against slave competition during the 1850's. Organizations like the Charleston Mechanic Society and the South Carolina Mechanics Association of Charleston sent petitions and memorials to the legislature demanding the removal of Negro competition. Between 1854 and 1859 the legislature received no less than ten such appeals. But the mechanics' efforts were futile, for the legislators merely directed these notices into committees and they were seen no more.

The African slave-trade advocates' fear of Southern white laborers was based more on a future than a present reality. They were afraid of a future influx of foreigners and a future real internal threat of white laborers. And, it seemed to the advocates, the closed African slave trade, the Southern demand for labor, and the high wages in the South made the possibility of such trends great.

The rise in cotton prices brought also a second problem to the advocates. It increased the Southern demand for labor, and consequently the price of slaves (field hands) nearly doubled between 1851 and 1856 and continued to rise until by 1860 it ranged from \$1,200 to \$1,800. To the advocates, this development was especially disturbing. It meant that fewer whites would be able to enter the slaveowning ranks. It also

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

¹⁵ Spratt, "Report, Montgomery," *De Bow's Review*, XXIV (June 1858), 487.

¹⁶ U. S. Bureau of the Census, *8th Census, 1860, Washington, 1864*, pp. 452-453.

meant that the emigration of South Carolina slaves to the southwest where the slave prices were extremely high would continue and increase, and that more whites in South Carolina would enter the nonslaveowning group.

The advocates were aware that the nonslaveowners in the South were not economically committed to the institution of slavery and that they had failed to support secession during the excitement of 1851. In the South Carolina election of delegates to a Southern congress, the upcountry, low slave-population counties and Charleston city voted overwhelmingly against secession. Secessionists were able to win only in the high slave-population parishes of the lowcountry. One slaveholder in a letter to the *Southern Reveille* in September 1853 wrote:

In the excited political discussions of 1851, a general apprehension was felt that the permanency of this property was threatened. The absence of a more general diffusion of this interest was a serious cause of apprehension to the more reflecting: and it is believed that, had all been slaveholders, in the State where slavery is tolerated, a large majority would have been opposed to submission to the Compromise measures.¹⁷

In 1851 unionist opponents of secession made appeals to the non-slaveholders of South Carolina. One unionist pamphleteer, under the pen name of "Brutus," charged that the secessionists were agitators who wanted to preserve planter rule in the state. He urged the 200,000 disfranchised white citizens of South Carolina to appoint delegates to a state constitutional convention rather than to a secession convention. "Let that state convention," he continued, "draft a new constitution for the state, in which the interests of the free laborer shall be provided for and an equality of representation established."¹⁸ And if the legislature rejected the measure, "Brutus" urged the people to "appeal to the federal Congress to secure to the people a truly republican form of state government."¹⁹

It is no wonder that the *Charleston Mercury* in 1854 feared that with the new rise in slave prices non-slaveholders would never be able to purchase slaves, that they would have little interest in defending slavery, and that "the idea and spirit of that infamous pamphlet 'Brutus'" would spread. "But," continued the *Mercury*, "increase the supply of labor, and thus cheapen the cost of slaves and the South will escape this *internal*

¹⁷ Reprinted in the *Boston Liberator*, September 16, 1853.

¹⁸ "Brutus," from Chauncey S. Boucher, "Sectionalism, Representation, and the Electoral Question in Ante-Bellum South Carolina," *Washington University Studies*, IV, Part II (October 1916), 40-41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

peril. The number of slave-owners would multiply, the direct interest in its preservation would be more universally diffused, and that great necessity of the South—union in defense of slavery, more readily accomplished.”²⁰

Perhaps more distressing to the slave-trade advocates than the external threat of the federal government or the internal threat of the nonslaveholders was the moral threat—the western world’s moral condemnation of slavery.

Southern leaders like Rhett, Spratt, Bryan, and Adams were only too well aware of the fact that the sentiment of the nineteenth-century western world was arrayed against the institution of slavery. By 1808 both the United States and England had prohibited the African slave trade, and in 1833 England had abolished slavery. The law which deeply disturbed these Southern leaders was the 1820 federal act that declared the African slave trade piracy.

The slave-trade advocates themselves could not avoid making juxtapositions and moral equations. Adams logically reasoned that “if the trade be piracy, the slave must be plunder.”²¹ Rhett told the British consul at Charleston that “to prohibit the Slave trade was, virtually, to admit that the Institution of Slavery was an evil and a wrong. . . .”²² C. A. L. Lamar, who was actually engaged in the illegal importation of Africans, wrote to his father: “Did not the negroes all come originally from the Coast of Africa? What is the difference between going to Africa and Virginia for negroes?”²³ Spratt realized that “we cannot hug our institutions to our hearts, and yet concur with the General Government in declaring the act, by which it has been brought about, as piracy.”²⁴

The advocates believed that the contest was one of ideas—between the idea of the North and the western world that slavery was morally wrong and the idea of the South that slavery was morally right. The war then, they argued, must be waged on the battlefield of principles. But they noticed that Southerners felt hesitant to defend on moral grounds their institution of slavery. “There was,” Spratt observed, “the feeling that, in some sense, they [slaves] were plunder, which it was

²⁰ Quoted in *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 16, 1854. Italics added.

²¹ Adams, “Message, 1856,” in the appendix of Bryan, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

²² “Dispatch from the British Consul at Charleston to Lord John Russell, 1860,” *The American Historical Review*, XVIII (July 1913), 786.

²³ “A Slave-Trader’s Letter-Book,” *The North American Review*, CXLII (November 1886), 449-450.

²⁴ *Charleston Standard*, reprinted in the *Boston Liberator*, December 12, 1856.

enough to get out of the way with.”²⁵ The advocates pointed out that Southern moral meekness was unwise, and that the South must launch its own crusade, advance its own principles, and challenge the moral sentiment of the western world. To accomplish this, the advocates asserted, the South “must give to it [slavery] the moral strength of an aggressive attitude—a position in which there could be no admission of a wrong—no implication of a sense of shame in its condition.”²⁶ Thus they proposed to plant “our standard right in the very faces of our adversaries”²⁷ and to declare with defiance the renewal of the African slave trade as the leading principle of Southern policy.

For the African slave-trade advocates, then, their proposal was designed to serve more than political or economic needs. It had a moral purpose. “I regard,” wrote Spratt, “the slave trade as the test of its [slavery’s] integrity. If that be right, then slavery is right, but not without. . . .”²⁸

Even critical Northerners recognized the moral purpose of the slave-trade advocates. Frederick Law Olmsted, commenting on the South Carolina proposal to reopen the trade, asked “why, except for the sake of consistency, or for the purpose of bullying the moral sense of the rest of mankind, South Carolina should propose to re-establish the African slave-trade. . . .”²⁹ William Lloyd Garrison observed: “. . . attempts are now being made to change the views of the Christian world, in regard to slavery; to make it respected.”³⁰

The moral purpose of the proposal to reopen the African slave trade attracted some Southern leaders who were opposed to the trade on grounds of policy. For these leaders, to repeal the prohibitive laws and to reopen the trade were two different questions. The first was moral and the second economic, and thus it was possible to favor the first and oppose the second. William P. Miles, representative from South Carolina, argued on the floor of Congress in 1859: “I, sir, am not prepared to advocate the reopening of the slave trade, but I am prepared to advocate with all my mind and strength, the sweeping away from our statute-book, of laws which stamp the people of my section as pirates, and put a stigma upon their institutions.”³¹

²⁵ New York *Weekly Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1856.

²⁶ Spratt, from *De Bow's Review*, XXVII (June 1859), 208.

²⁷ New York *Weekly Tribune*, Nov. 8, 1856.

²⁸ Spratt to John Perkins, Cairnes, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

²⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States In the Years 1853-1854 With Remarks on Their Economy*, New York, 1904, II, 118.

³⁰ Boston *Liberator*, June 25, 1858.

³¹ *Congressional Globe*, 35th Congress, 2nd session, p. 619.

In South Carolina opposition to the movement to reopen the trade was articulate and vigorous. One of the earliest denunciations of the proposal was issued by Benjamin F. Perry in October 1854. Two years later, in the House of Representatives, James L. Orr offered a resolution against attempts to repeal the federal prohibition. In the South Carolina House of Representatives, J. J. Pettigrew, in his minority report on the governor's proposal, ably countered the arguments advanced by Adams. South Carolinians like James Farrow opposed the efforts of Spratt at the Southern commercial conventions. And James Hammond, senator from South Carolina, assailed Spratt's position in his Barnwell speech in 1858.

The opposition to the trade also included John D. Ashmore, Richard Yeadon, and James Chesnut. Among the opponents there were both large and small slaveholders. Hammond, for example, owned more than three hundred slaves, while Perry owned twelve or thirteen slaves. Most of the opponents received their support from the upcountry districts and Charleston city, areas with low slave population. Many were remnants of the old Whig party. Some like Pettigrew, Perry, and Yeadon had been union men in 1832. Perry was well known for his staunch unionism in 1851. Hammond, on the other hand, had been a nullifier in the 1830's. Furthermore the opposition group included leaders who sought the removal of property qualification for membership in the legislature, the reapportionment of the legislature to give the upcountry truer representation, and popular elections for governor and presidential electors. They also supported white labor and encouraged foreign immigration.

Generally the opponents of the trade were either members of or sympathized with the National Democratic faction in South Carolina. Orr was the leader of the movement to send South Carolina delegates to the National Democratic convention at Cincinnati in 1856, and many of this group like Farrow and Pettigrew had attended the convention. Orr probably expressed the attitude of the National Democrats of South Carolina when he said: "It [the National Democracy] is the only exponent of the principles you have cherished for many long years, and is the only party willing and able to maintain your rights in the Union."²²

Finally, while the slave-trade advocates viewed the North as a serious threat to slavery, the opponents had a different concept of the North. Orr and Farrow assured South Carolinians that even in the North people were hostile towards abolitionists and that Northern Democrats could be trusted. Even in 1860, before the election of Lincoln, Perry and Chesnut urged the people of South Carolina that Lincoln's election should not be regarded as a cause for secession.

²² James L. Orr, speech at Craytonville, quoted in *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 20, 1858.

In view of these characteristics of the opponents it is not difficult to understand the reasons for their opposition to the movement to reopen the African slave trade. In the first place, though both the African slave-trade advocates and opponents believed in slavery, the opponents thought that slavery could best be preserved through the policy of unionism. To William Gilmore Simms, Hammond wrote: "My idea is, as it has long been, to continue to do what we have so long done, rule the Union in the Union."³³ Should the time come when that policy endangered their institution, these leaders would not have hesitated to break the Union. In a private letter to Perry, Hammond wrote: ". . . I do not doubt, that if ever the time arrives that you think the South & Southern institutions—(i. e. slavery), are endangered by Northern & anti-slavery aggression, *actually & practically*, you will show yourself a thorough Southern man 'born to the manor.'"³⁴

To the African slave-trade opponents, that time had not yet arrived. Consequently they resisted the movement to reopen the African slave trade, for they believed that the agitators for the trade were disunionists. They saw that such a proposal would stir up the abolitionists to launch fiercer attacks against slavery, that it would alienate Northern Democrats from the Southern Democratic wing, and that such a disruption of the Democratic party would signify the end of the Union as well as of Southern rights and slavery itself.

The African slave-trade opponents found the advocates' distribution argument fallacious. Both Perry and Pettigrew levelled cogent criticisms against it. They agreed with the advocates that a new supply of Africans would lower the prices of slaves. But they argued that it would also cheapen the value of labor and thus render it impossible for the poor white laborers whose source of wealth was their labor to accumulate enough capital to purchase slaves.

A deeper fear was expressed in a letter from a poor white man reprinted in the *Edgefield Advertiser* on February 2, 1859.³⁵ His fear was not that the African slave trade would cheapen labor but that the newly imported Africans would replace his labor. "My opposition to it [the African slave trade]," he wrote, "springs from interest. . . . If we are to have negro labor in abundance, where will my support come

³³ Elizabeth Merritt, *James Henry Hammond, 1807-1864*, Baltimore, 1923, p. 130.

³⁴ Lillian A. Kibler, *Benjamin F. Perry: South Carolina Unionist*, Durham, 1946, p. 288.

³⁵ The author of this letter is unknown. The writer, who called himself "poor, very poor," was aware of one dangerous consequence of the African slave trade to the white laborers.

from? . . . If my labor is to be supplanted by that of negroes, how can I live?"⁸⁶

As for the emigration of South Carolina slaves to the southwest, Pettigrew pointed out that this emigration was mainly from the up-country, that the chief reason for it was soil exhaustion, and that a new supply of Africans would not solve the problem. Pettigrew's argument was probably valid. Lewis C. Gray in his classic study of agriculture in the South confirms the condition of soil exhaustion in upper South Carolina. Furthermore a comparison of the 1840 and 1850 census reports reveals a tremendous loss of slaves in the upcountry, while the low-country slave population remained stable or even increased. Greenville and Spartanburg lost over sixty-two per cent of their slave population, while Beaufort lost only ten per cent, and Colleton increased its slaves by twenty-four per cent.⁸⁷

Both the African slave-trade advocates and opponents were active defenders of slavery. But while the advocates chose to defend slavery by forcing the slave trade upon the world, the opponents preferred to preserve it by demonstrating to the world the perfect society of the South. Perry, for example, observed in 1854: "At present we have in South Carolina two hundred and fifty thousand civilized and peaceable slaves, happy and contented in their slavery. . . ." ⁸⁸ And Pettigrew noted the "pleasant intercourse between master and slave."⁸⁹ The opponents argued that to reopen the African slave trade would be to invite everyone to view their ideal society in association with the odious traffic.

Unlike the advocates of the trade, the opponents drew a clear distinction between domestic slavery and the foreign slave trade. Pettigrew attacked Adams' syllogism of the slave trade as piracy and the slave as plunder. He argued that "it is not worth while to stick in the bark of this objection, and show that piracy and plunder are not necessarily correlative terms."⁴⁰ The distinction between slavery and the African slave trade was well expressed in two resolutions adopted by a meeting at Rocky Creek Baptist Church of South Carolina in January 1859.

⁸⁶ Edgefield *Advertiser*, February 2, 1859.

⁸⁷ U. S. Bureau of the Census, *6th Census, 1840*, Washington, 1841, p. 46, and *7th Census, 1850*, Washington, 1853, pp. 338-339. Greenville's slave population dropped from 17,839 to 6,691; Spartanburg's from 23,669 to 8,039; Beaufort's from 35,794 to 32,279; and Colleton's increased from 25,548 to 31,771.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Greenville *Southern Patriot*, October 12, 1854.

⁸⁹ J. J. Pettigrew, "Protest against a Renewal of the Slave-Trade," *De Bow's Review*, XXV (August, September 1858), p. 293.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

Resolved, That we do not oppose the existence of Slavery as we have it among us, but are willing to defend it with all the means that God has given us.

Resolved, That to bring untrained Negroes from Africa, and land them upon any portion of the soil of South Carolina, for the purpose of making slaves of them, meets our unqualified disapprobation, and we will oppose it with all the legal means within our power.⁴¹

On the above resolutions, William Lloyd Garrison caustically commented: "Whoever can reconcile the logic and morality of these resolutions will be competent to reconcile any absurdities and contradictions, however monstrous."⁴² Such a statement, ironically, could have easily been made by Spratt.

Not all opponents of the African slave trade were moderates or unionists. A few South Carolina extremists either opposed or did not favor the African slave trade for practical reasons. This group included John Cunningham, Lawrence Keitt, W. W. Boyce, and Robert Barnwell Rhett. Although earlier in this paper Rhett appeared as a slave trade advocate, he seems to have shifted into this second position by 1857. While these leaders desired secession as intensely as the African slave-trade advocates, they believed that secession required a united South and saw that the slave-trade question was dividing the South. Boyce, for example, wrote that he opposed the proposal because "it will prove a fire-brand to distract and divide our people, and divert us from the greater and more important issue' of safety and independence."⁴³ These extremists' fear of the proposal as a divisive issue may be seen by tracing the positions of the *Charleston Mercury* on the African slave trade. In 1854 the *Mercury* enthusiastically raised Spratt's banner.⁴⁴ But in April 1857 it discouraged its readers from hoping for reopening the African slave trade and suggested instead the importation of coolies.⁴⁵ And in June the *Mercury* argued that the South could not be united on this question and that further discussion would be unwise.⁴⁶

The contest between the African slave-trade advocates and opponents was fought in the legislature of South Carolina. The question of the trade came up in the legislature several times from 1856 to 1859.

⁴¹ Reprinted in the *Boston Liberator*, January 28, 1859.

⁴² Quoted in the *Boston Liberator*, January 28, 1859.

⁴³ A letter of W. W. Boyce reprinted in the *Boston Liberator*, July 8, 1859.

⁴⁴ *Charleston Mercury*, in the *Edgefield Advertiser*, November 16, 1854.

⁴⁵ *Charleston Mercury*, in the *Boston Liberator*, April 17, 1857.

⁴⁶ Laura A. White, *Robert Barnwell Rhett: Father of Secession*, New York, 1931, p. 141.

An analysis of the support for it and opposition to it will throw further light on the question.

In 1860 South Carolina had thirty districts. They may be divided into three groups of ten according to the proportion of the slave population to the total population.⁴⁷ Group I includes the ten districts with the highest proportion of slaves to population. Group III includes the ten districts with the lowest proportion of slaves to population. Group II includes the ten districts between groups I and III. Using these three groups, the votes in the Senate and House on four motions concerning the African slave trade can be analyzed.

In 1857 the Senate voted on a motion to postpone indefinitely the report and resolutions on the African slave trade. The Senate a year later voted on a motion to table a resolution which declared unconstitutional the federal law making the foreign slave trade the equivalent of piracy. Also that year the House voted on a motion to postpone indefinitely Spratt's resolutions on the trade. In 1859 the Senate voted on a motion to table reports and all other matter connected with the subject of the slave trade. The following table shows the proportion of votes for and against tabling or postponing to the total cast by senators or representatives from the districts comprised in each group.⁴⁸

	Group I		Group II		Group III	
	For	Against	For	Against	For	Against
1857	45%	55%	62½%	37½%	100%	
1858	48%	52%	57%	43%	78%	22%
1858	44%	56%	66%	34%	65%	35%
1859	61%	39%	75%	25%	91%	9%

The high slave-population group was divided on the question. Nevertheless, of the three groups, group I gave the African slave trade the highest percentage of support. The middle slave-population group tended to be against the trade. The low slave-population group was overwhelmingly and consistently against it. Finally the evidence seems to indicate that the African slave trade received support from planters, though not all planters, and that it did not attract nonslaveholders, though it was a project avowedly for the benefit of that group.

In January 1859 *De Bow's Review*, an active engine of African slave-trade propaganda, observed that "certainly no cause has ever grown with greater rapidity than that of the advocates of the slave trade."⁴⁹ It seems,

⁴⁷ Schultz, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ The percentages are from *ibid.*, pp. 143, 161, 163, and 184.

⁴⁹ *De Bow's Review*, XXVI (January 1859), 51.

however, that such an observation was never true for South Carolina. Even when the subject was first advanced in 1853, Spratt noticed that he was "*the single advocate*"⁵⁰ and that "the Southern journals were generally silent, and all those which spoke, except *The Charleston Mercury* and *The Richmond Examiner*, deprecated its temerity."⁵¹ And six years later, just two months after De Bow's statement on the rise of the African slave-trade movement, Hammond announced his belief that nine-tenths of the Southern people opposed the reopening of the slave trade.⁵²

One could dismiss both DeBow and Hammond as biased observers, the former for and the latter against the trade. Yet in South Carolina it seems that Hammond's estimate is more accurate than De Bow's. Although Spratt did not remain alone, he attracted few other leaders in South Carolina. William Gilmore Simms, in a letter to Hammond in August 1858 wrote: "They [the advocates] are noisy in proportion to their smallness of number."⁵³ Indeed, most South Carolina leaders did not favor the proposal. The unionists like Perry saw that it would divide the Union, the extremists like Rhett saw that it would divide the South, and the moderates like Hammond saw that it would do both.

The advocates could not gain a majority in the legislature to support their measures or candidates. The opponents successfully tabled slave-trade resolutions, and in 1858 James Chesnut, an opponent of the slave trade, defeated the slave-trade candidate Adams in the senatorial election. After Chesnut's victory, the *Charleston News* commented: "The purport of this Senatorial election cannot be mistaken. . . . It absolutely condemned the agitation of the slave-trade question."⁵⁴ Furthermore the South Carolina press generally opposed the *Charleston Standard's* proposal. The *Charleston Evening News*, the *Charleston Courier*, the *Columbia South Carolinian*, and a number of upcountry papers like the *Edgefield Advertiser* and the *Greenville Southern Patriot* denounced the African slave trade. Even strong Southern rights papers like the *Charleston Mercury*, though at first attracted, eventually turned away from Spratt's position.

If the South Carolina advocates were dismayed by the unpopularity of their cause at home, they were appalled by the actions of the delegates

⁵⁰ Spratt to John Perkins, in Cairnes, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

⁵¹ *Charleston Standard*, in the *New York Weekly Tribune*, September 8, 1856.

⁵² James Hammond, in the *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 2, 1859.

⁵³ *The Letters of William Gilmore Simms*, eds. Mary C. Simms Oliphant, Alfred Taylor Odell, and T. C. Duncan Eaves, Columbia, 1955, IV, 92.

⁵⁴ *Charleston News*, reprinted in the *Washington National Intelligencer*, December 9, 1858.

to the Montgomery convention. In the Confederate Constitution, written in February 1861, the delegates prohibited by organic law the African slave trade.

The chief reasons behind this action may be found by an examination of the Alabama secession convention. In January 1861 this convention adopted a resolution that declared the people of Alabama opposed to the trade on "grounds of public policy" and that instructed its delegates to the Montgomery convention to insist on the enactment of a prohibition of the traffic.⁵⁵ The Alabama leaders, aware that the border states had not yet acted, saw that they "should offer inducements to the slave States, which have not yet seceded, to do so."⁵⁶ Furthermore they realized that as a newly-formed nation it would be foolish "to bid defiance to the whole civilized world."⁵⁷

The South Carolina slave-trade advocates reacted furiously against the Confederate prohibition. They introduced in the state secession convention resolutions to amend the Confederate Constitution, and the Charleston *Mercury*, which had earlier modified its position on the issue, now denounced the new prohibition.

It is indeed fitting that Spratt, whom Horace Greeley dubbed "the philosopher of the new African slave trade,"⁵⁸ was the author of the most cogent and clearest protest against the Confederate law. In a remarkable letter to John Perkins of Louisiana, he expressed profoundly and painfully the Southern dilemma. "The real contest," he observed, "is between the two forms of society which have become established, the one at the North, and the other at the South."⁵⁹ In the North, there were hireling labor and democracy. In the South, there were slavery and aristocracy. Both forms of society were thus antithetical to each other, and "the natural expansion of the one must become the encroachment on the other. . . ."⁶⁰ But rather than advance, Southern society had been threatened by enemies without and within the South.

Spratt then posed the impending question: will slavery "be established as a normal institution of society, and stand the sole exclusive social system of the South?"⁶¹ Slavery, he believed, would stand. But he

⁵⁵ William R. Smith, *History and Debates of the Convention of Alabama, 1861*, Montgomery, 1861, pp. 264-265.

⁵⁶ William Yancey, in *ibid.*, p. 251.

⁵⁷ William R. Smith, in *ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁸ New York *Tribune*, in the Boston *Liberator*, August 19, 1859.

⁵⁹ Spratt to John Perkins, in Cairnes, *op. cit.*, p. 393.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

argued that the Confederate prohibition of the African slave trade would not contribute to its preservation. Without this trade, the South would continue to have nonslaveowners, who “constitute not a part of slave society, but a democratic society.”⁶² And indeed, he warned, “having achieved one revolution to escape democracy at the North, it [the South] must still achieve another to escape it at the South.”⁶³ Moreover, the Confederate prohibition represented a moral defeat, for it declared that the African slave trade and thus slavery were wrong in principle. At the end of the letter, Spratt called for another revolution. “It *may be painful*, but we must make it.”⁶⁴

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 398.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 409.