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THE GREAT POPULATION EXODUS FROM SOUTH CAROLINA 1850-1860

TOMMY W. ROGERS

Americans have traditionally been a people on the move. Few aspects of American history have generated more interest than the westward population movement. Exercise of the freedom to move has played a tremendously important part in the development of the nation's culture, in all its aspects, economic, social, and political.¹

The large volume of out-migration of native born South Carolinians to other states which took place in the decades prior to the Civil War forms an interesting part of this national movement and is an important aspect of the history of the state. Such large-scale redistribution of an area's population usually takes place in response to some real or imagined opportunity for a more satisfactory life elsewhere. Although numerous factors combined and interacted to bring about the large out-migration from South Carolina between 1820 and 1860, a major factor was the extension of cotton culture to the south west with the subsequent decline in the productivity of the soil at home, especially in the Piedmont section of the state.

Although the out-migration of small farmers had begun by 1800, the expansion of the plantation system beyond the coastal plain after that date speeded up the flow of small farmers to new areas outside the state.² The magnitude of this out-migration is illustrated by Alfred

⁰ Dr. Rogers is an assistant professor of sociology at Northwestern Louisiana State College, Natchitoches, La.

¹ William Petersen, *Population*, New York, 1961, p. 156; Ray Allen Billington, *The Westward Movement in the United States*, New York, p. 45; Francis Lieber, *On Civil Liberty and Self-Government*, Philadelphia, 1859, p. 95; A. G. Mejernik, *The Revolt of the South and West*, New York, 1946, p. 69; P. H. Landis and P. K. Hatt, *Population Problems*, New York, 1954, p. 389; Martha Scarlett, "A Psychodynamic Interpretation of Population Movement: A Changing Emphasis Reflected in Travelers Aid Casework," *Social Service Review*, XXXVI (September 1962), 280; Conrad and Irene Taeuber, *The Changing Population of the United States*, New York, 1958, p. 9; William Petersen, *The Politics of Population*, Garden City, 1965, p. 294; Everett S. Lee, "Internal Migration and Population Redistribution in the United States," *Population: The Vital Revolution*, ed. Ronald Freedman, Garden City, 1964, pp. 122-127.

² "South Carolina—Her Agriculture, Etc.," *De Bow's Review*, XIX (November 1855), 530-533; Francis Lieber, *Slavery, Plantations, and the Yeomanry*, New York, 1863, pp. 3-5; Robert E. Riegil, *America Moves West*, New York, 1930, p.

1775, March 1

1. CO 5/380¹⁶: microfilm BMP/D442; SC-Ar MS transcript bound with Council Journal PRO Photostats No. 3
2. SC-Ar MS missing

1775, Aug. 14, Sept. 2, 4, 15¹⁷

1. CO 5/396 [pp. 497 ff.]: microfilm BMP/D458; photostatic copy, SC-Ar Council Journal PRO Photostats No. 3
2. SC-Ar MS missing

¹⁶ Endorsed: "South Carolina. Extracts from Minutes of the Council, relative to Mr. Drayton's suspension from his Seat there. In the Lt. Govrs Letter of the 8th of March 1775." Lt. Gov. William Bull's letter is found in CO 5/380, P 59, the extract in CO 5/380, pp. [278]-293.

¹⁷ Endorsed: "For Letter No. 7/ (No. 3)/Minutes of Council/ In Lord Wm Campbell's/ (No. 7) of 19th Sepr 1775."

Glaze Smith's estimate that nearly half of all white persons born in South Carolina after 1800 left the state.³ One indication of the migratory tendency of South Carolinians is revealed by the fact that by 1854 of the twelve graduates of the South Carolina College who had become governors, five were governors of other states, while of the twenty-one graduates who had become judges, ten were judges in states other than South Carolina.⁴

A. G. Sumner, writing in *De Bow's Review* in 1855, blamed the poor and unfertile South Carolina soil as the cause of the exodus. The people by their "careless system of indifference" had done nothing to improve the soil and carried on "with no foresight for their future." He compared the South Carolina lands with the "glorious west, with soil as deep as its extent of acres was broad," land which "stretched out, in valley and prairie, many thousand hands, to bid" newcomers "welcome." "As long as our people consider that other sections of the country possess greater natural advantages than they do," Sumner observed, "they will continue restless and dissatisfied." Sumner argued that the creation of a state agricultural society would give a boost to the spirit of improvement necessary to prevent the "departure of the flower of our land" and "make the sons of South Carolina proud to linger and to labor upon their native soil." Sumner maintained that the feeling of dissatisfaction which resulted in out-migration was not compatible with a spirit of development since "men will not bestow time and labor upon the preservation of land which they expect to abandon."⁵

Census data, giving the name of the state in which each person was born, were first gathered in the enumeration of 1850. Therefore, a study of this sort cannot be made for any period prior to 1850. Even these statistics do not indicate the total number of persons who had moved from the state in which they were born. Some of those who had moved had died, and others had returned to their native state before the census

198; Robert R. Russel, *Economic Aspects of Southern Sectionalism*, New York, 1960, pp. 33-64; Anthony M. Tang, *Economic Development in the Southern Piedmont*, Chapel Hill, 1958, pp. 22-27; John G. Van Deusen, *Economic Basis of Disunion in South Carolina*, New York, 1928, pp. 28-64; Rupert B. Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, Chapel Hill, 1935, pp. 40-58.

³ Alfred Glaze Smith, *Economic Readjustment of an Old Cotton State, South Carolina, 1820-1860*, Columbia, 1958, pp. 25-26.

⁴ *Camden Journal*, October 31, 1854, quoted in Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁵ A. G. Sumner, "State Agricultural Societies," *De Bow's Review*, XIX (August 1855), 223.

was taken. These statistics are of value mainly for the information they provide on the movement of the native population within the United States.⁶

Data collected on the nativity of the free population of the United States in 1850 revealed that no less than 4,112,433 of the 17,736,792 native free inhabitants of the country were living in states other than the one in which they were born. Thus approximately 23 percent of all free persons born in the United States who were living in the United States in 1850 had migrated from their state of birth.⁷

The proportion of out-migrants from South Carolina was considerably greater than for the nation as a whole. Of the 448,639 free persons living in the United States in 1850 who were born in South Carolina, 186,479 were living in other states.⁸ This large number of out-migrants, which accounted for fully 41 percent of all persons living in the United States who had been born in South Carolina was, as expressed by Superintendent of the Census Joseph C. G. Kennedy, "a very remarkable proportion."⁹ The number of out-migrants was equal to two-thirds of all free persons living in the state.

The primary destination for these out-migrants from South Carolina were three states: Georgia's population in 1850 contained 52,154 native South Carolinians, Alabama 48,663 and Mississippi 27,908.¹⁰ Natives of South Carolina accounted for 45 percent of all in-migrants to Georgia, while South Carolina's contribution to the Alabama population was exceeded only by these who had come from Georgia. Out-migrants from North and South Carolina combined accounted for more than three-fourths of all Georgia in-migrants, and natives of Georgia and South Carolina combined accounted for over two-thirds of the total in-migrants to Alabama, South Carolina alone contributing 30 percent of this amount. South Carolina and Alabama combined contributed 40 percent of all free persons born outside of Mississippi who were living in that state in 1850; nearly 20 percent of these persons were natives of South Carolina.

⁶ *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Washington, 1947, p. 18; Everett S. Lee, "Internal Migration Statistics for the United States," *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, LV (December 1960), 664-697.

⁷ *Report of the Superintendent of the Census for December 1, 1852*, Washington, 1853, p. 15.

⁸ See Table I.

⁹ *Report of the Superintendent of the Census for December 1, 1852*, Washington, 1853, p. 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Either Georgia, Alabama, or Mississippi, was the destination for 70 percent of all free persons living in the United States in 1850 who had been born in South Carolina and had moved to another state. Nearly 30 percent of all living persons of South Carolina nativity were residing in one of these three states.

From four to five thousand natives of South Carolina were found within each of the states of Arkansas, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, North Carolina, and Texas, while Kentucky and Missouri contained 3,164 and 2,919 respectively. Lesser numbers were found in every state and territory in the union, ranging from four in the Minnesota territory to 1,468 in Ohio. Of these states, only New York, which was the residence of 935 natives of South Carolina, approached the figure for Ohio.¹¹

Superintendent of the Census Kennedy, commenting on the internal migration of the nation's population as reflected in the census of 1850, expressed the opinion that this incessant moving would soon slow down. "The roving tendency of our people is incident to the peculiar condition of their country, and each succeeding Census will prove that it is diminishing. When the fertile plains of the West shall have been filled up, and men of scanty means cannot by a mere change of location acquire a homestead, the inhabitants of each State will become comparatively stationary, and our countrymen will exhibit that attachment to the homes of their childhood, the want of which is sometimes cited as an unfavorable trait in our national character."¹²

However, the enumeration of 1860 again revealed that approximately one-fourth of the free population had moved from their state of birth. These facts persuaded Kennedy to modify his earlier view. "The opinion was some years since expressed, that, by an agricultural law, emigration would be arrested on the frontier confines of the Mississippi Valley, the fertile lands being all occupied, and the mountainous region beyond remaining an uninhabited desert. But the continued discoveries of rich mineral resources further west, have opened new and stronger attractions."¹³

South Carolinians continued to respond during the 1850's to this westward tug. Of the 470,257 persons living in the United States in 1860 who were born in South Carolina, 193,389 had since moved to another state.¹⁴ Although the absolute number of out-migrants from

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹³ *Population of the United States in 1860*, Washington, 1864, p. xxxiv.

¹⁴ See Table I.

South Carolina to other states increased by nearly 7,000 during the fifties, the percentage of out-migrants relative to non-migrants remained almost stable at 41 percent. Thus the rate of out-migration of South Carolina natives continued to be considerably higher than the migration rate of the nation as a whole.

A look at the areas of residence of the South Carolina out-migrants in 1860 gives evidence of the increased attraction of areas further west. The number of South Carolinians living in Georgia decreased to 50,112 in 1860, the number in Alabama decreased to 45,185, and the number in Mississippi decreased to 26,577. Nevertheless, these three states still accounted for nearly 122,000 or 63 percent of all out-migrants. Undoubtedly, this reduction in the number of native South Carolinians living in these three states was a reflection of the successive movement of persons further and further west as well as of deaths of South Carolina born residents of these states between 1850 and 1860. The largest decrease was in Tennessee, which held only 11,423 free persons of South Carolina nativity in 1860 compared with 15,197 in 1850. Illinois and Indiana divided a loss of more than 2,000, while the number in Kentucky decreased by nearly 700 to 2,478.¹⁵

The pull of areas further west is reflected in the fact that the biggest gain in the number of South Carolina natives living in another state was found in Texas. Here the number of free persons of South Carolina nativity increased from 4,482 to 10,876 between 1850 and 1860. The second largest increase, from 4,587 to 10,704, was in Arkansas, while the number of South Carolina born free persons living in Florida increased by nearly 4,000 persons to a total of 8,284. The number in Missouri increased by over 1,500 to a total of nearly 4,000. Louisiana, which contained 4,583 free persons of South Carolina birth in 1850, held only the slightly larger number of 5,011 in 1860. The increase of South Carolina born persons in California, from 519 to 782, was also a slight one. Other states reflecting an increase were New York, which held 1,139 free persons of South Carolina nativity in 1860 compared with 935 in 1850, and North Carolina, which increased from 4,420 to 6,670.¹⁶

South Carolina's exchange of population was not all in one direction, although there were far fewer in-migrants from other states to South Carolina than there were out-migrants from South Carolina to other states. There were only 12,653 in-migrants from other states living in South Carolina in 1850. Almost half of these were from North Carolina.

¹⁵ *Population of the United States in 1860*, Washington, 1864, pp. 618-619.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

The net exchange with other states left South Carolina with a deficit of 173,826 free persons in 1850 and 179,023 in 1860. Approximately 14 free persons who were born in South Carolina were living in other states at both time periods for every one free person born in another state living in South Carolina. The number of in-migrants increased by less than 2,000 persons between 1850 and 1860 compared with an increase of nearly 7,000 out-migrants.¹⁷

Further perspective on South Carolina as a receiving state is reflected in the fact that more than 90 percent of the free persons born in the United States living in South Carolina in 1850 were natives of the state.¹⁸ This picture had not changed by 1860.

This aspect of South Carolina's population history was not without consequence for the social and political development of the state. During the colonial period South Carolina had experienced a heavy in-migration from the northern colonies.¹⁹ David Duncan Wallace has suggested that an indication of the loss to South Carolina through the cessation of this in-migration may be gained from a consideration of the contributions of earlier newcomers such as Ramsay, Cooper, Bachman, Maxcy, Jasper Adams, President Wilson's parents, Howe of the Episcopal church, and Howe of the Presbyterian church, and a host of other intellectual and spiritual leaders.²⁰

That small yeoman farmers left the state in droves during the latter part of the ante-bellum era was recognized by contemporary observers as well as historians of later days. This exodus took place simultaneously with the progressive extension of the plantation system over the state.²¹ Although it would be a mistake to generalize that the population South

¹⁷ See Table I.

¹⁸ The percentages of the native born free population residing at home for other states were: Georgia, 75%; Alabama, 55%; Mississippi, 45%; Florida, 40%; Arkansas, 38%; Texas, 28%; California, 8%. J. B. D. De Bow, *Compendium of the Seventh Census, Washington, 1854*, p. 61.

¹⁹ William O. Lynch, "The Westward Flow of Southern Colonists Before 1861," *Journal of Southern History*, IX (August 1943), 310.

²⁰ David Duncan Wallace, *South Carolina: A Short History*, Chapel Hill, 1951, p. 386.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of this aspect of South Carolina's socio-economic development by a contemporary observer, see *De Bow's Review*, XIX, (November 1855), 523-535. An extensive discussion of this process is given by U. B. Phillips in the following articles: "The Economics of the Plantation," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, II (July 1903), 231-236; "The Plantation as a Civilizing Factor," *Sewanee Review*, XII (July 1904), 257-267; "The Origin and Growth of the Southern Black Belts," *American Historical Review*, XI (July 1906), 798-816.

Carolina lost through this great exodus were of the unenterprising sort who had been driven out by competition, there was a steady tendency for small farmers to sell at good prices to planters who were extending their operations and to seek homesteads in the frontier states.²²

By 1850 South Carolina had attained the largest average farm size in the nation. The average farm size of 541 acres in South Carolina was considerably more than the average size in the second and third ranking states of Georgia and Virginia at 447 and 340 acres respectively and was over four times greater than the 114 acre average for the United States as a whole.²³

The changed conditions were not without political ramifications. The transformation of many counties into communities with larger than average land holdings, more slaves, and fewer free persons, has been judged to be a factor instrumental in the shifting of the views of the people and their leaders on economic and political questions. According to Fredrick Jackson Turner, the influence of economic change transformed South Carolinians from warm supporters of a liberal national policy into a set of state sovereignty advocates intent upon raising barriers against the flood of nationalism that threatened to overwhelm the South. The South Carolina legislature, still nationalistic in 1820, protested the tariff because it would foster a spirit of sectionalism. By the middle twenties, however, the decline of slave-supported prosperity was stimulating anger and resentment. Turner, in explaining Calhoun's change from an avowedly nationalistic orientation to a spirited crusader in defense of the sovereignty of the states, put his finger on South Carolina's change from an essentially western state to a slave holding region as "the clue to his career."²⁴

Not the least of South Carolina's influence on Southern history was exerted through her exportation of population. Wallace has observed that many of these persons "like Dr. J. Marion Sims, Dr. Lawrence Smith, Dr. Gildersleeve, Yancey, Longstreet, were the most precious drops of her lifeblood."²⁵ The widespread sowing down of the South from the Savannah to the Rio Grande with South Carolinians in the forty or fifty years before the Civil War played a significant part in spreading South Carolina's political principles and ideals throughout the South.

²² Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 386; Lynch, *op. cit.*, p. 327.

²³ Anonymous, "Population, Capital, and Production," *De Bow's Review*, XIX (August 1855), 135.

²⁴ Frederick Jackson Turner, *Rise of the New West*, New York, 1906, p. 183.

²⁵ Wallace, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

TABLE I

INTERSTATE MIGRATION OF THE NATIVE BORN FREE POPULATION
OF SOUTH CAROLINA, 1850-1860

	<i>Total in U. S. Born in S. C.</i>	<i>Remaining in S. C.</i>	<i>Out- Migrants to Other States</i>	<i>In- Migrants from Other States</i>	<i>Net Exchange</i>
1850	448,639	262,160	186,479	12,653	-173,826
1860	470,257	276,868	193,389	14,366	-179,023

Sources: *Report of the Superintendent of the Census for December 1, 1852*, Washington, 1853, pp. 16-17; J. B. D. De Bow, *Compendium of the Seventh Census*, Washington, 1854, pp. 116-117; *Population of the United States in 1860*, Washington, 1864, pp. xxxiii, 616-619.

THREE LETTERS OF WILLIAM HENRY TRESBOT
TO HOWELL COBB, 1861

EDITED BY M. FOSTER FARLEY *

With an introduction by George C. Rogers, Jr.

There are many South Carolinians who deserve a full-length study, and none more than William Henry Trescot (1822-1898). Trescot was one of those aristocratic South Carolinians whose plantations afforded him leisure for scholarship, travel, and service to his country. His marriage to Eliza Natalie Cuthbert brought him lands on Barnwell Island, making his economic position more secure. Brief sketches in the *Dictionary of American Biography* by Francis Butler Simkins and in the *American Historical Review* by Gaillard Hunt¹ give the facts of his life, but the interesting roles that he played both on the eve of the Civil War and just after the war have never been fully analyzed.

His two-year service as secretary to the London legation, 1852-1854, and his writings on diplomatic history earned for him a place in the government of President James Buchanan as assistant secretary of state. He was appointed in June 1860. After the war his talents were once again used by the government of the United States when he was dispatched on missions to China, Chile, and Mexico. His numerous publications and diplomatic experiences would provide the nucleus for a study. But more important for the history of the South and of the nation were his roles as agent of the state in Washington during the winter crisis of 1860-1861 and again as agent for the South Carolina planters who in the immediate post-war period were petitioning President Andrew Johnson for the return of their lands. It is as a moderate Southerner who had an entree in the governments of both Buchanan and Johnson that he should be studied.

Trescot wrote two narratives of his involvement in the crisis of 1860-1861. The first was written in February 1861 but was not published until 1908, when it was contributed to the *American Historical Review* by Gaillard Hunt.² The second narrative was written by Trescot in 1871. This narrative was sent to Samuel Wylie Crawford who printed it as part of

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¹ "Narrative and Letter of William Henry Trescot, concerning the Negotiations between South Carolina and President Buchanan in December, 1860," contributed by Gaillard Hunt, *The American Historical Review*, XIII (April 1908), 528-556.

² *Ibid.*