

CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Slowing Down Secession: Louisianans Feared Commercial Consequences

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Feature Essay

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Jewett, Leah Wood *CIVIL WAR TREASURES: Slowing Down Secession: Louisianans Feared Commercial Consequences.*

Slowing Down Secession Louisianans feared commercial consequences

In the late 1850s, with the exception of a few outspoken politicians, Louisianans were by and large Unionists, keenly aware of their economic dependence on the North. On the eve of secession in Louisiana, many citizens felt that a final compromise with the North was possible, and that division would surely bring war and ruin and therefore should be avoided. That is, however, until the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency on November 6, 1860.

Submission to the "Black Republicans" was not an option. Though citizens were now unified in the cause to separate from the Union, they did not all agree on when and how to accomplish this. Some hoped for one last compromise, proposing amendments to the Constitution that favored the slave-holding South. Others sought to reorganize the Union to exclude New England, which was perceived as the root of anti-slavery sentiment against the South. Fire-eaters called for immediate, unconditional secession, accepting war as a consequence. Those who favored permanent separation argued whether the southern states should act in solidarity or unify only after each state seceded on its own. Even men who agreed that secession was the only answer hoped to delay the inevitable blow to southern commerce.

Prodded politically, newly elected Louisiana governor Thomas Overton Moore called a session of the legislature on December 10, 1860. During that session, legislators approved the calling of a convention to vote on secession. On January 7, 1861, delegates were elected to the convention.

Several collections within the LSU Libraries Special Collections furnish letters and diary entries from individuals who pondered the possibility and consequences of secession.

Alonzo Snyder Papers, Mss. 655

LLMVC

Snyder was a cotton planter, judge and Louisiana senator. He was elected as a delegate to the Louisiana secession convention in 1861.

Natchez , December 16, 1860

Judge A. Snyder

Dear Sir,

I understand the citizens of our parish are to meet at St. Joseph at Thursday 20th instant for the purpose of selecting candidates for the convention. My object in writing you this is to say you must be a candidate- you must go to the convention. All that is required is your own consent. You will be elected if you are a candidate.

I do not know your particular views in regard to the objects of the convention, but I know you so well I rely safely on any cause you might urge upon the convention. We can differ but little throughout the South- I look upon the Union as gone beyond hope and that disunion is inevitable. We can only differ in regard to point of time to decide. The commercial interests of New Orleans are too important to take hasty steps without due reflection... Louisiana should not be too precipitous. She can get in readiness to join others at the last hour but hold on so long as advisable.

My own prayers are that this great and serious matter may end in a Reunion with the... states and indeed all except the New England states. I [see] no compromise with them although... I would be willing to try them again. The South in future will always be ready to secede. I am only afraid they will be too ready. You must go to the convention. I go up tonight to the lake and will be in St. Joseph on Thursday if possible. I am...

Respectfully yours,

Haller Nutt1

Alonzo Snyder Papers, Mss. 655

LLMVC

Vicksburg, December 23, 1860

Dear Judge,

... As to the tide of politics, I know not what to say. I am afraid the country is ruined and Claiborne nominated for the convention. It is supposed that Mississippi on yesterday went by 25,000 for immediate secession. I am beginning to believe this "Cooperation Party" a sham and that our only salvation is in separate state action and then cooperation.

M.C. Lamar of this state has originated a plan for the reconstruction of the Union excluding the New England states. It has been submitted to a caucus of Southern senators and is reported to be the only one that seems to meet the emergencies of our situation. Its adoption however is very doubtful as it proposes an amendment to the constitution making all territories south of a certain line permanently slave and modification of the fugitive slave law. But judge excuse me that I have just reflected that you get a newspaper occasionally...

My love to your family. Let me hear from you soon,

T. Wilbur Compton

Edward J. Gay Family Papers, Mss. 1295

LLMVC

Gay was a successful and influential sugar planter in Iberville Parish. Both letters from the Edward J. Gay Papers illustrate the early effects that secession had on business.

St. Louis, January 17, 1861

Dear Brother

We are still deprived of your favors and attribute their non-arrival to the irregularities of the mail. Business continues very quiet, little or nothing doing and shipments of good as they generally arrived are brot [sic] to store...

Trade generally is reduced to small operations and that of a very limited character. Our legislature has not agreed upon the time nor conditions upon which the proposed convention shall be held and if the measure passes it will doubtless be coupled with the restrictions that the proceedings shall be submitted afterwards to the people for their approval. Virginia will doubtless have great influence on the position which this state will ultimately take. The border states will probably act in concert ...

Most affectionately yours

William T. Gay

In this letter, Gay refers to a land dispute he has with a Mr. Downes.

L. Janin, Esq.

Plaquemine, January 17, 1861

Dear Sir

...These times which hurry events along with such rapidity and which are to me so incomprehensible have quite stupefied me.

We made a strong effort in our parish to elect safe conservative men who would restrain hasty action in the Convention as far as possible, and who would nurture every possible hope to preserve the Union, but we failed by small majorities.

If it were not for secession my own opinion is that my chance would be improved by a change in the administration. There is no question in my mind, but that my case was delayed and objected to through the influence of Mr. Slidell² to aid that partyback[ed] scoundrel Downes who was enabled to place himself temporarily in a conspicuous position by getting into the [...] Convention.

With secession , which I suppose is hurrying on inevitably, the condition of the U. S. will not be changed in their legal rights until La. is acknowledged as independent, and purchases any remaining rights of the U. S. ...

Very Truly Yours,

Edward J. Gay

James O. Fuqua Papers, Mss. 893, 438

LLMVC

Fuqua was a slaveholder in East Baton Rouge Parish. He was elected as a delegate to the state secession convention, and later served as captain of the 16th Louisiana Infantry regiment.

Baton Rouge, January 24, 1861

My Dear Wife

The convention completed its organization today. The ordinance for Secession will come up tomorrow, and will certainly pass on Saturday on the same day. I have no doubt the convention will adjourn to New Orleans. I will endeavor to come home before going to the city...

Kiss the dear children for me. Love to Ma, and all at home. I am tired already, and would gladly go home.

Affectionately,

J. O. F.

Delegates passed the ordinance of secession on January 26, 1861. The deed was done. Soon enough, the political musings and secessionist rhetoric found in letters, diaries, and newspapers of the time gave way to reports of war, suffering and bloodshed.

Image:

Harper's Weekly, September 11, 1860 p. 560 1-Haller Nutt, was a sugar and cotton planter who owned several plantations in Louisiana and Mississippi.

2-U.S. Senator John Slidell

Suggested reading:

Caskey, Willie Malvin. *Secession and Restoration of Louisiana*. Baton Rouge:, LSU Press, 1938.

Roland, Charles P. "Louisiana and Secession." *Louisiana History, The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* Vol. 19, No. 4 (Autumn, 1978), pp. 389-399.