



MINIÉ BALL GAZETTE

The Official Newsletter of the Lowcountry Civil War Round Table, Inc.

February 20, 2019

Dear LCWRT members,

Our next meeting is on Feb. 27, 2019, at Magnolia Hall. (Please note the change from Pickney Hall last months venue.) A perennial favorite, Jack Davis, will present “Robert Barnwell Rhett, the Man Who Would Be King,” commencing at 6:45 p.m.

A few months ago I mentioned that the LCWRT scholarship to high schools seniors in Beaufort and Jasper counties will be awarded in May for \$1,000. Starting this month, we will have a Scholarship Box available when one comes in, and if you wish to donate money for this endeavor, it would be much appreciated.

In the past on occasion, we had a “50-50 drawing, and it appeared to be acceptable to many. We are starting this and will have such a drawing monthly. You can purchase your ticket(s) as you enter and the winner will be announced just before our speaker presents their presentation. The cost will be \$1 per individual ticket or six for \$5.

After the Battle of Shiloh, the wounds of some of the casualties glowed in the dark! Many wounded lay in the mud for two days and got hypothermic. Their lowered body temperature encouraged the growth of the bioluminescent bacterium *Photobacterium luminescens*. Those with glowing wounds healed faster, as the bacterium inhibited the growth of pathogens in the injuries.

Potpourri: (1) UNC’s outgoing chancellor ordered the removal of the plaque and pedestal of the “Silent Sam” statue — this was a fixture since 11913 even though, for decades, state officials rejected pleas to oust it. Earlier, the chancellor and university trustees had proposed housing it a new, more remote building at the cost of \$5.3 million to build and \$8,000 annually to maintain; (2) the final Confederate flag to fly at the statehouse has been put on display in a museum and (3) in Atlanta Confederate Avenue has been renamed United Avenue.

Thank you for your continued support and enthusiasm.

Your obedient servant,

Michael Sweeney, President

* * *

William C. “Jack” Davis

Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater

William C. “Jack” Davis is a native of Independence, Missouri and has a master’s degree from Sonoma State in Calif. He retired in 2013 as Professor of History and Executive Director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech, and the former longtime editor of *Civil War Times Illustrated*. He will speak on *Robert Barnwell Rhett, the Man Who Would Be King*.

Davis is the author of *Rhett: The Turbulent Life and Times of a Fire-Eater* and the editor of *A Fire-Eater Remembered: The Confederate Memoir of Robert Barnwell Rhett*.

Davis's biography of Robert Barnwell Rhett provides a definitive picture of South Carolina's most prominent secessionist and arguably the best known in the nation during the two decades leading up to the Civil War. Dubbed the Father of Secession, Rhett attached himself to South Carolina statesman John C. Calhoun but grew more zealous than his mentor on the secession issue. Rhett first raised the possibility of secession in 1826, well before Calhoun adopted the notion, and would ever after hold fast to his one great idea. This book illuminates Rhett's role in secession's time and passage. It tells of Rhett's interest in secession doctrine as early as 1828 and his outspoken support of disunion fully a quarter-century before 1861.

“Robert Barnwell Rhett — we all know who he was, even if we just confuse him with Scarlett O’Hara’s love interest (and there is a connection!), but there was more to him than simply being a firebrand of secession. He was born a Smith. His 15 children bore testimony to what they say about bald men. His wives adored him while he all but ignored them (except for the fathering 15 children bit of course). He saw himself as the apostle of local rights and the “father of secession,” yet his own kind largely ignored and even shunned him. A champion of slavery as a positive good for society, he actually retained the loyalty of his own slaves even after the end of the war and emancipation. He preached violence yet shrank from the “code of honor” when it came to himself. The perfect hypocrite, he still inspired affectionate friendship among some of his worst political enemies Oscar Wilde could have had him in mind when he wrote *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as Rhett’s actual physiognomy changed to reflect the growing ugliness inside him. He was a study in contrasts and extremism with virtually no regard for truth. Today he would have been a political radio broadcaster.” - wcd

The Picture of Dorian Gray is an 1891 philosophical novel by Irish writer and playwright Oscar Wilde. First published as a serial story in the July 1890 issue of *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, the editors feared the story was offensive, and without Wilde's knowledge, deleted 500 words before publication. Despite that censorship, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* offended the moral sensibilities of British book reviewers, some of whom said that Oscar Wilde merited prosecution for violating the laws guarding the public morality. In response, Wilde aggressively defended his novel and art in correspondence with the British press. Wilde revised and expanded the magazine edition of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) for publication as a novel; the book edition (1891) featured an aphoristic preface — an apologia about the art of the story and the reader. The content, style, and presentation of the introduction made it famous in its own literary right, as social and cultural criticism.

Davis served as the principal historical and as the on-camera consultant for the 52 episodes of the *Arts & Entertainment Network/History Channel* series *Civil War Journal*.

He is author and editor of more than 50 books and numerous documentary screenplays in the fields of Civil War and Southern history, including *'A Government of Our Own': The Making of the Confederacy*; *An Honorable Defeat: The Last Days of the Confederate Government* and *Look Away!: A History of the Confederate States of America*.

Davis has twice been nominated for a Pulitzer Prize (for *Breckinridge: Statesman, Soldier, Symbol and Battle at Bull Run*). He is the only three-time winner of the Jefferson Davis Prize for Confederate history and was awarded the Jules F. Landry Award for Southern history. -cwk

* * *

The Fire-Eaters

Fire-eaters were radical southern secessionists who had long been committed to the dissolution of the

United States.

When Jefferson Davis, president-elect of the Confederacy arrived in Montgomery, Ala. on Feb. 16, 1861, he was greeted by a huge throng at the Exchange Hotel. At Davis's side was William Lowndes Yancey. "*The man and the hour have met,*" Yancey announced. "*Prosperity, honor, and victory await his administration.*"

There was one man in the crowd that night who despised Jefferson Davis. Robert Barnwell Rhett felt he had a right to leadership of the South. Yet no one but a handful of best friends could conceive of Rhett in the position. Davis's was selected for his measured thought and calm deliberation that made him the logical choice for the Confederacy's first president. Robert Barnwell Rhett was anything but reassuring because it was considered a fire-eater. Every Southern state had its own radicals, homegrown or transplanted. Rhett and Yancey illustrated the rivalry of radical efforts. The South Carolinian Rhett was a Southern localist, while the Yankee transplant Yancey first rose to prominence in South Carolina and Georgia as a Unionist. After he settled in Alabama, abolitionism's growing influence in the North was said to have transformed him into a fire-eater. (He also was disgusted over his abolitionist stepfather's cruelty.)

In the early 1850s, northerners and southerners alike used the term fire-eater to describe anyone whose views were apparently outside the political mainstream. Eventually, though, the word came to be most closely identified with those southerners who were staunch and unyielding advocates of secession committed to the dissolution of the United States. They wanted to protect slavery and seized upon the idea of separating from the Union before anyone else considered it possible. Rather than framing their cause in the shadow of slavery, they voiced their complaints around states' rights. Their goal was to protect slavery as an institution, and states' rights became a means to that end.

Local control of affairs had fueled disgruntled colonists to resort to independence when they could not curb remote authority by other means. Splintering Protestant denominations in New England had tried during the American Revolution to formalize secession as a deliberate political process. Americans had made revolution a legitimate form of political expression. Localisms had all but prevented the beginning of an American union, especially after victory over Britain removed the need for joint action against an existential threat.

After the Constitution was ratified and the Federal government became a formal concern, local distrust transformed into sectional jealousies. Areas in the early years, felt isolated from or neglected by the rest of the country and considered separation. Westerners flirted with Spain until the U.S. stopped unfriendly Indians and secured navigation of the Mississippi River. The Louisiana Purchase made New Englanders anxious over the loss of their political influence.

On June 18, 1812, American president James Madison declared war on Britain. Simultaneously, as the war was waging overseas, American officials were expanding their territories by tricking Native Americans into signing treaties that handed away millions of acres of land to the United States. This act would lead to the cooperation of both Britain and Spain with the American Indians as a united force in stopping the United States expansion. The War of 1812 worsened the region's dislike. The end of the War of 1812 coincided with a feeling of nationalism that all but blotted out routine sectional hostilities over slavery and commerce. The "Era of Good Feelings," was to last only a few years before the same old troubles reappeared.

In four years slavery began eroding nationalism. Slavery was blamed as a southern institution, making the crisis of admitting Missouri to the Union especially tricky because the great compromise postponed rather than resolve the core disagreement — slavery. Slavery was like a bad penny. It kept turning up disguised as something else — the tariff in South Carolina or expansionism in Texas — always disruptive, and increasingly unmanageable.

The Southern secessionists had complained for four decades! Their serious arguments never

weakened but instead lead to the Civil War. Slave-owners were ready for a convulsive response to Abraham Lincoln's election, the ultimate calamity as seen by Southerners. With a well-known opponent of slavery president, they ceased to deride the fire-eaters as wild alarmists. Fire-eaters trumpeted, anti federalist warnings and the seeds of tyranny sprouted from the central authority. They could portray themselves as successors to the Founders by comparing their spirit of resistance to the Spirit of 1776! Northerners dismissed the comparison as preposterous.

(The importation of African slaves was prohibited in the United States beginning in 1808; however, Charleston, S.C. was the primary slave auction market in the US for intrastate sales until the end of the Civil War. South Carolina had about 75,000 slaves in 1770 and more than 100,000 slaves in 1790. Charleston County in 1790 had three times the number of slaves compared to the white population of 12,000. By 1860, some 400,000 slaves lived in South Carolina, about 10% of the total slave population in the USA.)

The men called fire-eaters achieved their brief popularity by events rather than their ideas. Their refusal to compromise on nearly everything alienated potential allies and put off those inclined to agree with their complaints. They found the day-to-day work necessary to form coalitions difficult in turbulent times and nearly impossible in calm ones. Fire-eaters resembled a group advancing a movement, while in reality, they were individuals in broad agreement about the need for a separate South. The problem was they differed on how to achieve it that they were not people working together to advance their common interests.

After 1846 the enemies of slavery would mount an attack on the institution. The goal was the elimination of slavery where it existed. Armed with what seemed proof of Northern intentions, the fire-eater's political shortcomings became less visible. In 1848 the innovation to accomplish moderation was the promotion of Popular Sovereignty as a way to avoid disruptive differences between the Northern and Southern wings of the Democratic Party. Popular Sovereignty was a reaction to problems caused by the Mexican Cession because slavery was not within congressional interest. It was thought that people in the territories should decide their domestic arrangements. Popular Sovereignty was portrayed as the reasonable center between the extremes of wanting to restrict slavery and those wishing to expand it. Slavery threatened Democratic Party unity. The Northern wing of the Democratic Party wanted to suit antislavery constituencies.

Disbelieving citizens said that Popular Sovereignty could not possibly work if slavery began in a territory in the first place. Lincoln concluded this as Popular Sovereignty's most implausible feature in the wake of the 1857 Supreme Court decision in *Scott vs. Sandford*. Southerners thought the ruling put slavery at risk and saw such stances as a species of betrayal.

The election of 1848 was a troubling portent of things to come. Slavery brought forth violent emotions. The fire-eaters at Baltimore deliberately made discord, but most were shoved aside, with the floor vote attracting only 15 percent of the delegation of Alabama.

A perfect storm of sectional discord created what presidential candidate Henry Clay called "Five Bleeding Wounds." He said there were multiple points of controversy that had the potential to destroy the union in 1850. (1. The admission of California. 2.) The organization of the territories of Utah and New Mexico. 3.) The Texas boundary. 4.) Slavery in the District of Columbus. 5.) An effective fugitive slave law.)

The American System became the chief plank in the platform of Clay's Whig party, which was formed in opposition to the Democratic party of Andrew Jackson, creating 'the second party system.' Whigs were found all over the country, but especially among the wealthy classes, in areas wanting government economic aid, and among Protestant religious bodies that wanted a stable government that would further their agenda of moral reform. Clay never became president, with his Whig party disappearing shortly after his death. Its successor, the Republican party, put many features of the American System into operation. In the long run, Clay's economic and political vision of America was largely fulfilled.

Compromise proposals in 1850 with statesmen like Henry Clay, and Daniel Webster made the Nashville Convention largely irrelevant by June of 1860. The Democrats appeared incompetent and reckless. Embarrassed they registered its disapproval through meetings across Tennessee advocating for the compromise. Every state but two had shown reluctance to send delegates and confirmed, Unionists filled most of the delegations. Yancey boycotted the meeting in protest of the state's instructions to avoid extreme measures.

South Carolina and Georgia were exceptions to the rule of restraint, they irritated and exasperated the members of the convention. Rhett could bridle himself for only so long in the delicate situation. His address gave a tone that was unpopular from the start. His lecture to Southerners about their complacency and to the Northerners for their march against slavery had been going on for nearly two decades.

A second convention was planned for the fall in Nashville. The city's inhospitable manner reflected the changed situation in the country. Opening on Nov. 11, 1850, the gathering was smaller and more radical — more embarrassing and divisive. Langdon Cheves from South Carolina declared that southern secession was "*the only remedy for aggravated wrongs,*" committed by Northerners. He thundered about the Constitution, "It stinks in our nostrils."

The Compromise of 1850 helped steady the furor, but the arrangement left intact the impression among Southern Unionists as well as radicals that secession was a logical political recourse to unbearable transgressions by a conscientious majority. This was the nub of the Georgia Platform, which passed at the end of 1850 and became the guide of Southern Unionists for a future example. It meant that if sectional troubles began again, Unionists would be lacking in power and differ with secessionists exclusively about when and for what argument secession should be placed into action.

Secession had come to be identified with the Southern Democratic Party but remained agreeable only in theory. To apply the theory in practice, caused the majority of Southerners to pause and ultimately renounce it. Wavering irritated the fire-eaters. For Rhett it would be the breaking point. That fall the South Carolina legislature with a radical cadre formed an uneasy arrangement between cooperationists and separate state actionists to come to terms with moderates. The liberal majority elected Robert Barnwell Rhett to replace Robert Barnwell in the U.S. Senate. Many thought it was not a cause for rejoicing.

Rhett hid his temper and spoke in pleasant terms, but treason was so thick on him that Clay bluntly directed attention to it. He did not endure himself to fellow Southerners who thought that at any moment he would tread heavily on the Compromise. Anxious to shield the Fugitive Slave Law they were right in understanding that Rhett was not friendly to all parts of the Compromise, which he confidently objected to just like a Northerner.

Rhett did not think Northern localities would enforce the law, and when petitions began appearing in Congress imploring small and then strong alternations in it, Rhett denounced them as preludes to a move for its repeal. He reminded his fellow Senators from the South of the action against the slave trade in the District of Columbia: first attacked by petitions, then criticized by resolutions, and finally eliminated in their Compromise of 1850.

Rhett did not last long in the Senate when it appeared that moderation was on the rise again at home in South Carolina. "*All good men,*" said the *Charleston Mercury*, "*can find something useful to do at home.*" When Rhett resigned, he was not useful at home but kept quiet because he had no choice. His unpopularity, for eight years, drove him away from the public stage and left him with only an occasional essay in lowly publications. He bore up under the exile fairly well, sustained by religious faith, and a sense that he had done what was right.

Jefferson Davis broke the news in 1851 that he would answer in "*monosyllables*" to any man who said he was a disunionist, causing John A. Quitman to say, "*I carry my State-Rights views to the citadel, but you stop at the outworks.*" True as that may have been, the truth was not comforting for discredited fire-eaters who could only offer raw commentary about less scrupulous Southerners that

sold themselves at the federal trough.

Several years went by after the destruction of the Whig Party caused by the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The members favored the fortunes of national Democrats, but the untethered Southern Whigs could not bring themselves to join the Native American party — colloquially, the Know-Nothings. Confused by the decline of the Know-Nothings, Southern Whigs gravitated toward the Democratic Party, making the South a singularly uniform section just as the Republicans developed into a party exclusive to the North. Northern Democrats found themselves increasingly in untenable positions as they had to cope with Republicans in local elections and found their Southern wing's agenda taxing.

The Know-Nothings damaged the political process by boosting the prosperity of fire-eaters in places where the Democratic Party was vulnerable to elaborate scheming, which was the case in Texas where Sam Houston's dalliance with the Native American Party proved beneficial for Wigfall.

Wigfall, from South Carolina, settled in the Up Country district of Edgefield, read the law, and developed a courtroom presence that made him a local hot-headed star. After he fought several duels with the Brooks clan and endured severe wounds, he required a lengthy recuperation that ruined his law practice and prompted him to move to Texas in 1846.

His fighting instinct made him a force in the state Democratic Party. A friend said, "*He likes to be where he can be as rude as he pleases.*" Many thought Wigfall was unhinged. Edmund Ruffin thought him odd in his "extravagance" of expression. Wigfall was extravagant enough to attack Sam Houston then the "Hero of San Jacinto" was seemingly at the height of his popularity. Wigfall saw that Houston had seriously misjudged the strength of the Know-Nothings in Texas when he openly disgraced Democrats over their stand on Nebraska. Wigfall persuaded the Texas legislature to criticize Houston's every move.

Disillusioned by Southern Democrats, Houston leaned to the Know-Nothings, and though he never officially joined them, he might as well have for the damage it inflicted to his standing in Texas. Wigfall benefitted from the breach and enabling him to win the election to the Senate in the critical year of 1859. It was a shocking achievement for an outright impulsive secessionist. Houston rehabilitated his political fortunes that year to reclaim the governorship, but his fling with the Know-Nothings had impaired his influence to promote Unionism when it most mattered.

Yancey, Wigfall, and Ruffin endorsed reopening the African slave trade in 1853. By the close of 1854, they had convinced the North that the Southern talk of state's rights was merely a cover for preserving slavery. Southern legislatures routinely tabled calls for reopening the trade, but fire-eaters refused to abandon the contrivance. They promoted the idea at the annual conventions beginning in Savannah (1856), continuing in Knoxville (1857), and finally pushing so hard at Montgomery in 1858 that other Southerners finally pushed back.

Because neither the commercial conventions nor the slave trade proved of any use both were abandoned. Throughout this entire fiasco, Rhett was known for avoiding the controversial subject because he saw it as only annoying Northerners and alienating Southerners. He never tied secession to the slave trade. He was also similarly wary of another plan that appeared after the Montgomery Commercial Convention of 1858.

Chronic turmoil over Kansas seemed to present the best opportunity to stoke Southern concerns, and Yancey aimed to do that with something he styled the "League of United Southerners." Its charter described its purpose as opposing any more compromises that undermined Southern rights, whether they were the product of a Democrat platform or political initiatives in state legislatures. The league did not plan to nominate candidates, instead it was to be careful about organizing an organized challenge to the Democratic Party. It meant to pressure Democrats into choosing only the right sort of candidates.

Actually, the league's public posture was carefully formed to conceal its real function, which was to form a network that could "*at the proper moment, by one organized, concerted action . . . precipitate the cotton States into a revolution.*" Yancey let on as much in a letter that explained "*no national party*

can save us” and “*no sectional party can ever do it either.*” This letter did not surface until 1860 when other events clouded the injury its seemingly conspiratorial tone might have otherwise caused. But in reality, the league’s prospects were always slim from the time Yancey conceived of it shortly after the Montgomery Convention. Edmund Ruffin was enlisted to found chapters in Virginia, and he reentered the sectional fray after having left it for several years to advance his first love of agricultural reform.

The political pursuit became healing for Ruffin, in fact, as he fought depression, insomnia, and failing memory. Yet the league never caught on in Virginia, and Ruffin finally declared it stillborn. The six chapters that were set up were all in Alabama and had less to do with Yancey’s exertions than those of William Samford, an intellectual who taught English literature and wrote protests of such persuasive power as to gain him the sobriquet “Penman of Secession.” Samford was supremely principled — he condemned Kansas’s proslavery Lecompton Constitution as an abomination born of a rigged election — but such consistency made him popular even among those who did not always understand him. He avoided politics as the sordid art of office-seeking, but by the late 1850s, he was disgusted with the “partyism” of bores who placed their interests ahead of the South’s.

Samford was a persistent cooperationist. His wariness about leaving the Union persisted until Lincoln’s election persuaded him there was no other choice. He would support secession if it were undertaken in concert with other states. And he was never one to mislead. While helping to found chapters of the League of United Southerners, he conceded it was the foundation for a political party to supplant the Democrats in the South. The act killed the league and hurt Yancey’s standing. Yancey objected, but nobody believed him, and he was defeated when he challenged Benjamin Fitzpatrick for Alabama’s U.S. Senate seat despite enjoying the brief support of the *Montgomery Advertiser*. The setback made what happened in 1860 all the more remarkable.

Commercial innovation and industrial expansion failed to gain a foothold in the South which pointed to a cultural source that offered the fire-eaters an unexpected bounty. Modernism did not appeal to Southerners. Planter and merchant were traditionalists first and businessmen second, and their lack of ability to compete with the North did not make them include secession to escape debts to Northern creditors. The South stayed stubbornly agricultural because it wanted to, and it wanted to because it felt it had to.

Protecting slavery had almost everything to do with that, but it also came from Southern anxiety over what was happening in the North and the world. The fire-eaters found in that disorder the most significant possibility for reviving their expiring ways. They thought in all sincerity that the Southern way of life was superior to the North’s with its decadence and impairment of virtue. When they disdained Northern politicians as serving the volatile interest of urban hordes, fire-eaters found veins of discontent that had fueled American colonial protests against the British system of patronage and influence, which everyone knew were euphemisms for graft and moral integrity. The North as much as the South had at one time rejected that way of doing political business, but something had happened to change all that. As early as Alexander Hamilton’s economic system that many Southerners believed was created to encourage speculation and a public debt forever. Ruffin spoke in that vein of patriotism when he declared, “*This alone would be sufficient reason for separation of the Northern and Southern states.*”

The fire-eater’s eagerness for secession placed the most remote streams of the political current of thought, but their embrace of social, economic, and intellectual orthodoxy planted them in the middle of the prevailing mood of the South. It was from that vantage point that they could revive their flagging political fortunes among people weary of sectional strife and tired of constant agitation. As late as 1860 and less than three months after John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry, Alexander Stephens was surprised that “*there is really not the least excitement in the public mind upon public affairs.*” It was a testament to how upheaval can lose its power to fear, and fire-eaters trafficked rather heavily in changes of the dramatic sort — real or imagined. Most Southerners did not believe in radical policies, it was their philosophical conservatism and their reaction when beliefs integral to their way of life were in danger

that nudged them to the fire-eater way of thinking. They were people wary of change, so even the steady center of the majority simmered when Northerners demanded it of them.

By standing fast in an increasingly nihilistic world, the South and its institutions were to safeguard the stability and civilization, and that attitude infused proslavery Southerners with a missionary eagerness. Planters were joined by yeomen and artisans by the shopkeepers to shield slavery as part of a supposedly constant system beginning in the agricultural society. When the 1850s began to reveal its disturbing sequence of sectional difficulties, the unity of white Southerners became even more critical and thus even more obligatory. Hinton Helper's *Impending Crisis* proved with hard data instead of anecdotes that slavery was a wasteful type of labor, and that brought near 100 percent denunciation from Southerner's intent on killing the messenger. But it was Helper's potential to undermine the system with facts that posed the greatest danger.

This is what ultimately made political moderation first suspect and then detested in the South. The inability or worse, the unwillingness to protect and preserve the system made moderates seem feckless, while political radicalism was the only practical way to save Southern culture. As the national government came under the influence of slavery's enemies and men hostile to the Southern way of life, a Southern confederation held out the promise of cultural security and economic stability. When Southerners became fearful enough of the potential for losing their influence in the national government, they would be more agreeable to creating one of their own. That too had the effect of making the fire-eater seem a prophet.

For a time nothing the fire-eaters did in the practical arena of politics seemed to work, but events beyond their control were turning affairs in their favor. A breach opened between Stephen A. Douglas and President James Buchanan over the Lecompton Constitution for Kansas. The quarrel forced Douglas to campaign against Abraham Lincoln to keep his Senate seat in 1858. The debates that resulted in Douglas's misstep at Freeport, Ill., when he answered Lincoln's question about how Popular Sovereignty could work in light of the recent Dred Scott decision. How could slavery be excluded from a territory where it already existed and could not be barred because of the Supreme Court decision? Douglas retorted that slavery could not live where the local law did not support it. It was not the first time he had said it. The so-called Freeport Doctrine became a remarkable weapon for fire-eaters who treated it as a new and more persuasive reason to keep Douglas from receiving the Democratic nomination in 1860. Again as in 1848, the real intent was to damage the Democratic Party completely.

Douglas began fighting with Mississippi fire-eater Albert Gallatin Brown who used Douglas to undermine Jefferson Davis for control of the Mississippi Democratic Party. The moves were encouraged by Mississippi's growing alarm over ascendant Republicans in the North, and when radicals won Mississippi elections in 1859. Their success helped fire-eaters in the South, especially Rhett in South Carolina. That summer he made his first public appearance in eight years to deliver a speech that by his old standards of unbending support to separate state action was given in restraint. Rather than disdaining cooperation, Rhett advocated it. Would anyone believe he was sincere?

The question became less relevant because more than at any other time, the radicals had all but a written assurance of success at the Democratic Convention in Charleston. To add to Douglas's remarks, John Brown's raid at Harpers Ferry stunned Southern Unionists and raised the fire-eaters. The long years of fire-eaters being jeered at for warning about non-existent threats were coming to a close. By the end of the 1850s, Southerners looking at the Republican success in the North, the unsteadiness of Democratic golden boy Stephen A. Douglas, and the Harpers Ferry raid applauded by Northerners caused even the most confident moderate to pause.

Alabama's Democrat Convention essentially reprised the hymns of 1848 to shove aside Douglas friends and instruct its delegation to Charleston to secure the Alabama Platform or leave the convention. Douglas's operatives in Charleston planned to force radicals out of the meeting to clear his path toward the nomination. The extremists in Charleston wanted to be ousted, and that led to a strange series of separate collaborations that brought about the unexpected consequences. Buchanan

administration operatives still angry about Douglas's beliefs on the Lecompton Constitution were as determined to stop him as were the radicals. An alliance between these distinct groups resulted. Douglas did not realize how his tactics would cause a general Southern withdrawal that made his nomination in Charleston unachievable, the one he received in Baltimore worthless, and Lincoln's election virtually sure.

The radicals were more organized than ever during the initial secession crisis after Lincoln's election. They were persistent spurs to action wherever they appeared, but they also fully aware that the appearance of impetuous reaction could easily summon the forces of moderation, or as they would have put it, the old habits of hesitation. And in reality, even in this great significant time their moment was brief and their efforts fleeting. Northerners noted "*their anxiety to accomplish their object without delay and their reliance on popular ignorance as to the true position of affairs.*"

South Carolina left the Union first, but the Rhett helped bring about that result by not pushing for it too aggressively. Alabama seceded despite Yancey rather than because of him, as was the case in most states where fire-eaters were most persuasive when they did not participate in debates. Florida's David Yulee, Mississippi's Albert Gallatin Brown, Texas's Wigfall, Georgia's Benning and Colquitt did not exert the level of power to shape policy that traditional politicians did.

For at the beginning and in the end, radical secessionists were dreamers. Their reasoning about the Border States showed this. Confidence that Kentucky and Missouri would rush to join the Confederacy were wrong. Arkansas calmed down after its first alarm over Lincoln's election. North Carolina's legislature even resolved that federal coercion was an appropriate response to secession. The second wave of secession changed minds in some of these states to take them out the Union in the wake of Fort Sumter, but never enough in the key western ones.

So it was that 50 years of unsettling chastisement from the North lay the groundwork for the convulsions of 1860-61, as the agonized explanations of secession conventions trying to justify their work proved. Fire-eaters claimed that secession was the implementation of a legitimate act by sovereign entities, and to be sure secessionists in 1860-61 who steered their respective state conventions were lawyers instead of planters. The visible results seemed to stem from long-standing schemes made suddenly famous as well as plausible by the calamities Southerners saw as inevitable consequences of the 1860 election. But actually the events stretched back to the Wilmont Proviso, and for some as far back as the Missouri Compromise and Nullification. They had accumulated in weight to create a desire for action. Radicals had sustained their warnings through the years with consistency if not tact until the day when events rendered them seemed prophetic.

Fire-eaters did not shape these events let alone precipitate them. They did not have a part in keeping Wilmont's Proviso at bay, the regular political force did. They tried to use the crisis of 1850 for their own purpose but compromise in Congress claimed the controversy and made fire-eaters look foolish into the bargain. Traditional politicians brokered the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Roger Taney's position in Scott vs Sanford came from the pen of a Jacksonian Democrat, not a proslavery zealot. Douglas and the Buchanan administration had plenty to do with the destruction of the Democratic Party in Charleston in April 1860. Traditional and calm voices served a quiet warning about Republican ascendancy, and the fact of that ascendancy in 1860 forced action because of those warnings. It was at this period that fire-eaters popped into the picture with a plan while the Southern majority stumbled with uncertainty — events outpaced rational thought.

Tempting as it may be to see a conspiracy guided by fire-eaters in the Gulf States that brought on the Secession winter of 1860, it flies in the face of the events that followed. The careers of the two iconic fire-eaters after secession showed the same flaws that thwarted them before it. Rhett was a member of the South Carolina delegation to the Provisional Congress in Montgomery. In early 1861, he served only as the chairman of three committees with little influence. As the chairman of the committee that presented Jefferson Davis to the Provisional Congress, he was reduced to ceremonial duties while others staffed the government. Rhett soon became Davis's most hateful detractor. After the

inauguration, Rhett began excoriating him as “*egotistical*” and “*arrogant*,” a man most noted for “*terrible incompetency and perversity*.” These criticisms remained constant in their intensity throughout the war always personal in nature.

Davis did invite Yancey to join the cabinet, but Yancey refused. Instead, Davis sent him abroad on the Confederacy’s first diplomatic mission. Did the choice, indicate how little forethought marked the new president’s conception of foreign affairs or suggested that taking Yancey off the stage as the Confederacy performed its opening act was the best course. Davis was a reluctant secessionist, and his vice president Alexander Stephens was a spiritless one. The Confederate cabinet represented varying men of moderate Southern opinion so thoroughly that only one radical — Alabama’s Leroy Pope Walker — joined it and soon proved so unqualified as head of the War Department that he left quickly. It was a metaphor for the secessionist movement and the men who always tried to advance it for the first half of the nineteenth century. Success when it came taxed them beyond their competence, and they quickly lost influence.

The Fire-Eaters made a significant contribution to our understanding of the secession movement and the circumstances in which it evolved and grew. Secessionism was not a monolithic ideology but rather a movement that emerged from many sources, spoke in many voices, and responded to some regional problems, needs, and aspirations.

Sources: *The Fire-Eaters* by Davis S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, *A Sacred Circle: The Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South* by Drew G. Faust, *The Road to Disunion* by William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion, Secession Movement in South Carolina* by Philip M. Hamer

* * *

The Stately Secession Oak in Bluffton — "The Bluffton Movement"

"The South must be free, or the South must perish."— Robert Barnwell Rhett

By Caroline Wallace Kennedy

Throughout 5,000 years, the Carolina Lowcountry was occupied by many Native American cultures, which left a rich archaeology legacy. In Sea Pines Forest Preserve, on Hilton Head Island (on the "toe"-end), remains of an early settlement may be seen today in a 3,400-year-old "Indian Shell Ring" — most likely a ceremonial area. The Yemassee Indians numbered over, 1,200 in as many as ten locations.

Five hundred years ago, written history began when the area was discovered by Spanish Captain Pedro de Salaza in 1514. The second landing by Europeans on the North American continent was in Beaufort County. Three centuries of European exploration (French, Spanish, English, Huguenot, and African slave labor) traced their history here. From the 16th century forays of the Spaniard's chronicle the settlement and development of what is now Beaufort and Jasper counties.

English development of the Lowcountry of South Carolina began on March 24, 1663, from a grant to eight Lord Proprietors from King Charles II. To honor King Charles I, the proprietors named their territory "Carolina." Out of this area, Colleton River was founded when the king granted the 12,000-acre tract to Sir John Colleton for *loyalty* and *consistency* to the crown. (The Colleton Neck Barony was also known as the "Devil's Elbow" as its source from Port Royal Sound around Spring Island back into the backwaters was in the shape of an elbow.) After the Yemassee Indians rebellion in 1715, the English expelled them and began their own settlements.

The Caribbean influence in architecture in Charleston and the Lowcountry can be seen because the

king also had Caribbean properties. The low-lying, fertile and humid land of the South Carolina Lowcountry was where the Lower South was born having been primarily settled by British colonists from the island of Barbados. The British cultivated sugar "white gold" on large plantations in Barbados. It is said that Barbados gave birth to the new colony in 1670, when planters and slaves sailed from Speightstown, Barbados. They landed on South Carolina's Ashley River (Albermarle Point), establishing Charles Towne on behalf of England. Half of the white settlers and black slaves in the next few years came from Barbados. (Six of the governors of South Carolina were Barbadians between 1670 and 1730.) South Carolina most closely copied the economic and social model of the Caribbean. The plantation system arrived in the Lowcountry, having traveled from the islands settled by the East India Company in the early 1600s.

The Lowcountry became known for its agricultural wealth, large slave-holding estates and non-slave holding farms. Slaves from Africa were brought into the colony to provide labor for the indigo and Sea Island cotton growing plantations, and by 1720, formed the bulk of the population.

Bluffton was built on two parcels of land in the "Devil's Elbow Barony" owned by Benjamin Walls and James Kirk. Originally, the community was known as "Kirk's Landing" or "May River," eventually to just "Bluffton." In 1830, the high river bluffs overlooking the May River fostered a summer haven. It was a place for wealthy planters to bring their families suffering from the oppressive heat, and to escape the disease-carrying mosquitoes, and yellow fever and malaria that plagued Lowcountry plantations. Strong southerly breezes kept away the mosquitoes and made the hot, muggy days bearable. Houses were built to take maximum advantage of the life-saving cool ocean breezes. Most of the houses were unoccupied for most of the year since they were built as summer homes.

At the end of Calhoun Street, a steamboat landing was built in the 1850s. Bluffton became a significant center of commerce, where isolated plantations in the vicinity could receive their goods from Savannah and Beaufort via the May River. With the landing, Lowcountry crops were shipped to ports around the world, and the general stores could be stocked and sold. Bluffton was also a stopover for travelers between Savannah and Beaufort. Business bought year-round residents, and the town was incorporated in 1852. The planter families sent their children to school and socialized and discuss politics in the town.

Aristocrat Robert Barnwell Smith was born in Beaufort, S.C. (of English ancestry) on December 21, 1800. Although Smith's family connections were distinguished, his own branch did not prosper, and with his brothers, he changed his surname in 1837 to honor an illustrious ancestor, William Rhett. William Rhett's dying wish was that the Rhett name be carried on, thereby Robert Barnwell Smith benefited from his will when he changed his name. He would later become famous as "Robert Barnwell Rhett." He had gained his wealth through the purchases of two plantations. During 1830, Rhett as a young legislator told a crowd he would instead submit to a tyrannical government. If they did not they must be ready to shatter apart the nation. He was enraged about the state's conflict with President Andrew Jackson over the Federal Tariff. By the 1850s, he had nearly 200 slaves, an inherited house in Charleston, and heavily in debt to the Bank of South Carolina.

On a sweltering summer day in July 31, 1844, under the protecting boughs of a sprawling live oak tree in Bluffton a meeting of prominent planters ignited the fires that eventually sparked a movement that took root, called the "Bluffton Movement." The tree, with its long, twisting branches, had been used during the 1800s to discuss the politics of the day. A town meeting had been called of prominent men (so-called "Bluffton Boys") to launch a protest against the extremely high Federal tariff of 1842 made on imported goods. Planters burning hot with passion and angered by tariffs placed by the Federal government came from miles around. A fiery, public audience of 500 incensed planters gathered under the limbs of the massive, and ancient 75-foot tall live oak (so called because they never lose their foliage) to listen to U.S. Rep. Robert Barnwell and Dr. Daniel Hamilton. (It is thought that the property was owned at that time by the Baynards, who owned property on Hilton Head. There is a tabby chimney still visible that was for a separate kitchen or big house or slave quarters.)

Notorious Congressman Rhett, an eloquent teetotaler and a man of great arrogance, spoke about the problems facing the South and South Carolina's need to secede. He professed it was time to consider separation from the Union. He said the South had to take decisive action to counter the effect of the Tariff of 1842, which crippled the Southern plantation-based economy. He soon became known as the "Father of Secession." After Lincoln won the presidential election in 1860, Rhett drafted South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession.

A fiery, public audience of 500 incensed planters gathered under the limbs of the massive, and ancient 75-foot tall live oak (so called because they never lose their foliage) to listen to U.S. Rep. Robert Barnwell and Dr. Daniel Hamilton. (It is thought that the property was owned at that time by the Baynards, who owned property on Hilton Head. There is a tabby chimney still visible that was for a separate kitchen or big house or slave quarters.)

Notorious Congressman Rhett, an eloquent teetotaler and a man of great arrogance, spoke about the problems facing the South and South Carolina's need to secede. He professed it was time to consider separation from the Union. He said the South had to take decisive action to counter the effect of the Tariff of 1842, which crippled the Southern plantation-based economy. He soon became known as the "Father of Secession." After Lincoln won the presidential election in 1860, Rhett drafted South Carolina's Ordinance of Secession. **Sources:** Bluffton, South Carolina History, www.blufftontoday.com, *Treasury of Southern Folklore*, edited by B.A. Botkin, <http://www.nps.gov/>

* * *

2019 Lecture Series for the LCWRT

Mar. 27, 2019 Dr. Larry Roland "End of Reconstruction in Beaufort-Hampton Counties"

April 24, 2019 Dr. Jim Spirek "Wrecks of Beaufort Sound"

May 22, 2019 Ron Roth "Underground Railroad"

We will meet in Magnolia Hall in Sun City every month except January 2019 when we will meet in Pinckney Hall.

* * *

Lowcountry Civil War Round Table Inc.

2018-2019 Executive Committee

Officers

President Michael Sweeney 843-707-7275
318 Shearwater Pointe Drive msweeney9@sc.rr.com
Bluffton, SC 29909

Vice-President Sandra Ottley 710.761.3083
gritsspo@gmail.com

Treasurer Ron Albert ralbert156@sc.rr.com
156 Shearwater Point Dr.
Bluffton, SC 29909 843.707.7167

Secretary David McColloch 843.705.3060
42 Concession Oak Drive mccollochd@hargray.com

Communications Caroline Kennedy 843-705-5654

8 Rose Bush Lane cwkenned@aol.com
Bluffton, SC 29909
John Foster 843-705-6444
204 Benjamin Seabrook Court fosterjp800@gmail.com
Bluffton, SC 29909
Membership Joe Passiment 732-995-2102
26 Schooner Lane passiment44@twc.com
Bluffton, SC 29909
Programs Sandra Ottley/John Kemp 201-845-4178
319 Shearwater Pointe Drive Norwich68@gmail.com
Bluffton, SC 29909

* * *

LOWCOUNTRY CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE, INC.
MEMBERSHIP FORM
ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP PERIOD to AUG. 31, 2019

Please **Print** All Information Below

Last Name First Name Badge Nickname

Additional Household Member Last Name First Name Badge Nickname
Address: _____ State _____
City _____ State _____
Zip Code _____
Phone () _____
E-Mail: _____

(We will keep this confidential!)

CURRENT MEMBER _____ NEW MEMBER _____

Household: Annual Membership (to Aug 31, 2018): \$40.00

We always need volunteers to continue making the LCWRT successful.

Please check the area(s) for which you are willing to volunteer:

____ Program Committee: help select topics & speakers ____ Assist in
Production/Distribution of the *Minie Ball Gazette*

____ Assist on Program Night (Greeter, Collect Tickets or Guest Fees, Tally Program
Attendance)

____ Historian ____ Maintain Membership Roster ____ Work at Sun City Club Fair
Web Site Maintenance

Mail to or leave in "lower" box: **Joseph Passiment, 26 Schooner Lane, Bluffton, SC
29909-4305**

Make Check Payable to: **LCWRT Inc.** Any questions, please call **Joseph Passiment**
at **732-995-2102**

* * *

MINIÉ BALL GAZETTE

is published by

The Lowcountry Civil War Round Table, Inc.
located in the greater Hilton Head area of South Carolina.

Founded in 2000 and dedicated to Civil War history,
education and battlefield preservation.

A Not-for-Profit, Charitable Organization

As qualified under section 501 ©) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code