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CONTENTS

<i>James Buchanan and the Crisis of the Union.</i> By Frank W. Klingberg . . .	455
<i>Genesis of Agricultural Reform in the Cotton Belt.</i> By James C. Bonner . .	475
<i>The Defense of Slavery in the Northern Press on the Eve of the Civil War.</i> By Howard C. Perkins	501
<i>The Tennessee Constitution of 1796: A Product of the Old West.</i> By John D. Barnhart	532
<i>Notes and Documents</i>	
David Ramsay on the Ratification of the Constitution in South Carolina, 1787-1788. Edited by Robert L. Brunhouse	548
French Substitutes for American Cotton, 1861-1865. By Earl S. Pomeroy . . .	555
<i>Book Reviews</i>	
Farish, <i>Journal and Letters of Philip Vickers Fithian, 1773-1774: A Planta- tion Tutor of the Old Dominion</i> , by Maude H. Woodfin	561
Miller, <i>Origins of the American Revolution</i> , by Curtis Nettels	562
Crowl, <i>Maryland During and After the Revolution: A Political and Economic Study</i> , by Thomas P. Abernethy	563
Castañeda, <i>Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936. Volume V, The Mis- sion Era: The End of the Spanish Regime, 1780-1810</i> , by George P. Hammond	564
Fries, <i>Records of the Moravians in North Carolina. Volume VI, 1793-1808</i> by Hugh T. Lefler	566
Post, <i>Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850</i> , by Chester McA. Destler .	567
Grace Madeleine [Sister], <i>Monetary and Banking Theories of Jacksonian Democracy</i> , by Thomas P. Govan	569
Davis, <i>Plantation Life in the Florida Parishes of Louisiana, 1836-1846, as Reflected in the Diary of Bennett H. Barrow</i> , by J. Carlyle Sitterson .	570
Williams and Barker, <i>The Writings of Sam Houston, 1813-1863. Volume VII, November, 1824-March, 1860; Volume VIII, April, 1825-July, 1863, with Index</i> , by William C. Binkley	572
Bragg, <i>Louisiana in the Confederacy</i> , by Roger W. Shugg	575
Carman and Luthin, <i>Lincoln and the Patronage</i> , by David M. Potter	575
Arnold, <i>Defence and Prison Experiences of a Lincoln Conspirator: Statements and Autobiographical Notes</i> , by Paul M. Angle	577
Shaw, <i>William Preston Johnston; A Transitional Figure of the Confederacy</i> , by E. Merton Coulter	578
Watters, <i>The History of Mary Baldwin College, 1842-1942</i> , by Leota S. Driver	579
Goldman, <i>John Bach McMaster; American Historian</i> , by John E. Pomfret .	581
Osborn, <i>John Sharp Williams; Planter-Statesman of the Deep South</i> , by Charles S. Sydnor	582
Raper, <i>Tenants of the Almighty</i> , by H. C. Nixon	583
Alexander, <i>The Arkansas Plantation, 1920-1942</i> , by Thomas S. Staples . . .	584
<i>Historical News and Notices</i>	586
Personal	587
Historical Societies	588
Bibliographical	588
<i>Contributors</i>	600

James Buchanan and the Crisis of the Union

BY FRANK WYSOR KLINGBERG

In the eighty-three years since the election of Abraham Lincoln, there has been a compression of events which places the firing upon Fort Sumter, on April 12, 1861, hard upon the heels of the Republican victory at the polls on November 6, 1860. The magnitude of the Civil War itself has tended to telescope the important one hundred and fifty days of possible compromise which intervened. Yet there is good reason to believe that President James Buchanan, as well as many other leaders, expected to avoid open conflict. The mood of the country had sobered at the realization that a sectional party had elected a president. Public opinion, in general, was entirely remote from the thought of war.¹ In the Ohio Valley, for example, the hour of decision was still half a year away. South of the Ohio the tier of border states which had voted for John Bell was ready to work desperately for compromise and Union. It is, of course, now well known that no complete consolidation of opinion ever occurred either in the North or in the South.²

The mass of opinion in the country found expression, therefore, on December 3, 1860, when Buchanan clearly enunciated his position as

¹ For an able summary of divided sentiment in the South, see Avery Craven, *The Repressible Conflict, 1830-1861* (University, La., 1939), 1-30, and especially pp. 4-6. For attitudes in the border states and the North and Middle-West, the shades of opinion are quickly summarized in Carl Russell Fish, *The American Civil War* (New York, 1937), 69-70, 75-78, and in Wood Gray, *The Hidden Civil War* (New York, 1942), 13-30.

² An especially vivid picture of the sustained clash of opinion in the crucible of Tennessee is contained in E. Merton Coulter, *William G. Brownlow: Fighting Parson of the Southern Highlands* (Chapel Hill, 1937), 134-77. Also significant of the monographs which have tended to illuminate controversies within each state are Jonas Viles, "Sections and Sectionalism in a Border State [Missouri]," in *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* (Cedar Rapids, 1914-), XXI (1934), 3-22, and P. L. Rainwater, "An Analysis of the Secession Controversy in Mississippi," in *ibid.*, XXIV (1937), 35-42.

Notes and Documents

DAVID RAMSAY ON THE RATIFICATION OF THE CONSTITUTION IN SOUTH CAROLINA, 1787-1788

EDITED BY ROBERT L. BRUNHOUSE

Students of the struggle for the ratification of the Federal Constitution in South Carolina have depended largely upon the admittedly imperfect reports in Jonathan Elliot, *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution* (4 vols., Philadelphia, 1836), for the views of the contending factions. Because of the apparent dearth of contemporary correspondence by the participants it is perhaps worth while to call attention to the fact that during the struggle David Ramsay (1749-1815), now remembered as a historian of the period, wrote several letters to Benjamin Rush which provide a brief commentary on the subject. While these letters offer no new facts or novel interpretation, they do present additional supporting evidence on a development concerning which all too little is known. Three of Ramsay's letters are here printed through the courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia where they are found among the papers of Benjamin Rush.

Ramsay was an ardent advocate of a stronger form of national government. As early as 1778 he was proposing greater powers for the central government than were provided by the Articles of Confederation.¹ In 1787 when he learned that a convention would assemble to canvass the question of a more vigorous government, he wrote to Thomas Jefferson: "Unless they make an efficient federal government [at Philadelphia] I fear that the end of the matter will be an American

¹ *An Oration on the Advantages of American Independence* ([Charleston], 1778), 19n.

monarch or rather three or four confederacies. In either case we have not labored in vain in effecting the late revolution for such arrangements might be made as would secure our happiness."²

After the new Constitution had been framed and published, Ramsay strongly urged its adoption. Privately, however, he entertained some qualifications, particularly with a view to meeting the objections of the Anti-Federalists. This is brought out in the first letter to Rush, November 10, 1787. It stands in striking contrast to his unqualified endorsement of the Constitution advanced elsewhere. He gave no hint of willingness to compromise when he wrote to other friends.³

When the question of calling a state convention to ratify the Constitution was debated in the legislature of South Carolina in January, 1788, Ramsay was a member of that body. The printed records indicate a strong struggle by the Anti-Federalist forces led by Rawlins Lowndes. During the three-day debate Ramsay is recorded as having spoken only twice, on both occasions to refute briefly some point advanced by the opposition.⁴ On the closing day of these debates he wrote to John Eliot in Massachusetts: "Our Assembly is now sitting & the federal constitution has been discussed before them for the sake of informing the country members. There appears a great majority for it. Indeed it seems to be the prevailing sentiment here that if Virginia & her neighbors should refuse it that we would confederate with New England. For my part I am fully of that sentiment. I would much rather be

² April 7, 1787, in Jefferson Papers (Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress). In a letter to his new father-in-law, Henry Laurens, February 26, 1787, Ramsay explained that the state legislature had decided to send five delegates to the Philadelphia convention, and then remarked: "You are proposed by many. I am daily asked whether your attendance might be expected on this grand occasion which as fame says has called out General Washington. Wishing an account of the services you would render, that you would go, and at the same time that your health would not permit, I have declined answering repeated questions on this subject." (Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.) Laurens was elected a delegate but failed to attend because of the state of his health.

³ E.g. to Noah Webster, November 10, 1787, and to Henry Laurens, November 30, 1787 (both in New York Public Library, Emmet Collection); and to Jedidiah Morse, November 30, 1787 (Gratz Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

⁴ *Debates Which Arose in the House of Representatives of South Carolina, on the Constitution*. . . (Charleston, 1788), 14, 25. He concluded one of his remarks with the assumption that the Confederation was already dissolved.

united with Massachusetts, New-Hampshire, Virginia & Maryland. My first wish is union but if that cannot be my second is a confederation with the eastern & middle states. I trust it will be union fully accepted. One thing is certain, that I shall live under it if I live & if it ever operates."⁵ The legislature agreed unanimously to call a convention; but when the Federalists insisted on Charleston as the seat of the deliberative body, they won by only one vote. Ramsay, of course, cast his ballot for Charleston.

The Anti-Federalists found their strongest champion in Rawlins Lowndes. As a result Ramsay entertained small regard for the man and for his opinions. This is brought out in the second letter to Rush, February 17, 1788. To answer Lowndes' arguments Ramsay issued a pamphlet entitled *An Address to the Freemen of South Carolina on the Federal Constitution*, over the signature of "Civis."⁶

Several weeks before the meeting of the state ratifying convention Ramsay wrote a third letter to Rush in which he listed the important arguments advanced by the opposition. This letter emphasizes those issues considered most crucial by an ardent Federalist like Ramsay. It is this particular emphasis which gives the letter its significance.

When the ratifying convention met in May, 1788, adoption of the Constitution was almost a foregone conclusion. Ramsay sat in this body as one of the thirty-one representatives from Saint Philip and Saint Michael's parishes, Charleston. The delegates assembled on May 12 and got down to business the next day. Ramsay headed a committee to find a more suitable meeting hall in the city but his report bore no fruit. The bare journal of the proceedings leaves the impression that the convention was a perfunctory affair. Several committees were appointed, a few votes were taken, and then on May 24 the Constitution was ratified by a vote of one hundred forty-two to seventy-three.⁷

⁵ January 19, 1788 (Massachusetts Historical Society, Eliot Papers).

⁶ Reprinted in Paul L. Ford (ed.), *Pamphlets on the Federal Constitution* (Brooklyn, 1888). "It is merely a local answer to local objections. . .," he explained to Rush.

⁷ *Journal of the Convention of South Carolina which Ratified the Constitution of the United States, May 23, 1788*, indexed by A. S. Salley, Jr. (Atlanta, 1928). Elliot, *Debates*, IV, 318-40, presents an admittedly imperfect report of the "Debates in Convention."

I^a

Charleston Novr 10th 1787

Dear Sir,

As I suppose your convention is about convening & that you are a member^a I shall take the liberty of suggesting my wishes on the subject. I am ready and willing to adopt the constitution without any alteration but still think objections might be obviated if the first state convention after accepting in its present form would nevertheless express their approbation of some alterations being made on the condition that Congress & the other States concurred with them.¹⁰ I think this would cause no delay nor would it endanger the acceptance of the constitution. If the clause which gives Congress power to interfere with the State regulations for electing members of their body was either wholly expunged or altered so as to confine that power simply to the cases in which the States *omitted* to make any regulations on the subject I should be better pleased. I wish also that there might be added some declaration in favor of the liberty of the press & of trial by jury. I assent to Mr Wilsons reasoning that all is retained which is not ceded; but think that an explicit declaration on this subject might do good at least so far as to obviate objections. Should your State adopt this line of conduct (as it will doubtless take the lead) it would probably be followed by the others. The necessity of another convention would be obviated. I would not make these alterations conditions of acceptance: I would rather trust to the mode of alteration proposed in it than hazard or even delay the acceptance of the proposed plan. I think it ought to be matter of joy to every good citizen that so excellent a form of government has passed the convention. It promises security at home & respectability abroad. I do not think any people could be long happy without ballances & checks in their constitutions: nor do I conceive it possible to organize a government with the three necessary checks on more unexceptionable principles out of homogeneous materials than has been done by the convention. It is an apt illustration of the Trinity. The whole power is from one source that is the people & yet that is diversified into three modifications with distinct personal properties to each.¹¹ Its origin is the voice & its end the good of the people. With Mrs Ramsay best respects to Mrs Rush. I am your most obedient

& very humble ser^t

David Ramsay

^a Although parts of this letter have been printed by Edmund C. Burnett (ed.), *Letters of Members of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 8 vols. (Washington, 1921-1936), VIII, 679n, it is here given in its entirety in order to show Ramsay's trend of thought.

⁹ On September 29 the Pennsylvania assembly voted for a ratifying convention to assemble on November 21. Rush was a member of the convention.

¹⁰ This suggestion doubtless did not meet with Rush's approval, for the Federalists in Pennsylvania vigorously and successfully opposed all qualifications on the ratification of the Constitution.

¹¹ This reference to religion is very unusual for Ramsay, at least in his letters to Rush.

II

Charleston Feb^y 17th 1788

Dear Sir,

I have received your letter by the last fall vessels from Philad^a & their contents have been observed. The piece from the newspaper was inserted agreeably to your desire. By common consent the merits of the new constitution were considered for the sake of diffusing information when the question about appointing a convention was before the house. Mr. Lownds¹² made many objections against it, but they may be referred to a narrow illiberal jealousy of New England & the contracted notions of a planter who would sacrifice the future naval importance of America to a penny extraordinary in the freight of rice mistakenly supposed to be less in British than American bottoms. He was an enemy to independence & though President of the State in 1778 he voluntarily resumed the character of a British subject during their usurpation. He has not one continental or foederal idea in his head nor one of larger extent than that of a rice barrel.¹³ The inclosed was the production of a few moments & intended to take off the force of Mr Lownds objections.¹⁴ It is merely a local answer to local objections & not worth sending so far.

Our convention is to meet in May next. I trust there will be a decided majority in favor of the new constitution. It is a fortunate circumstance that Georgia has adopted it. Indeed I trust it will operate next December.

. . . I shall wait the event of the new constitution. The revolution cannot be said to be compleated till that or something equivalent is established. . . .¹⁵

Dr Rush

Yours forever
David Ramsay

III

Charleston April 21. 1788

Dear Sir,

This day three weeks our convention meets to deliberate on the constitution. I am pretty confident that it will be ratified. Our Antifederalists objections amount to three. They say that the northern States have no business to interfere

¹² Rawlins Lowndes. For the arguments he advanced, see *Debates Which Arose in the House of Representatives*.

¹³ Ramsay to Benjamin Lincoln, January 29, 1788, in Francis Bowen, *Life of Benjamin Lincoln* (Jared Sparks, ed., *The Library of American Biography*, second series, XIII, Boston, 1855), 410-12, contains a similar opinion of Lowndes, and Ramsay added: "He urged that you would raise freights on us, and, in short, that you were too cunning for our honest people; that your end of the continent would rule the other; and that the sun of our glory would set when the new constitution operated. . . He is said to be honest and free from debt. . . His opposition has poisoned the minds of some."

¹⁴ Doubtless Ramsay's pamphlet referred to above; see note 6.

¹⁵ Some references to the printing of his history and to the affairs of his nephew are here omitted.

with our importation of negroes. They contend that it is a matter of domestic police, & that they should be allowed to import them forever.¹⁶ 2dly They object that we will have to pay longer freights to the Eastern & middle States in consequence of a navigation law. Whereas if the British were to be our carriers as at present they would get freight a farthing in the hundred cheaper & also perhaps a penny in the barrel more for their rice.¹⁷ 3d & lastly They say that if we agree to the new constitution we can make no more instalment laws—no more paper money—and that we will be obliged to pay our debts & taxes. Some considerable opposition is expected from the favorers of instalment laws, valuation laws, pine barren laws & legal tender paper laws. Excepting from this quarter our convention has little to apprehend.¹⁸ If a bill of rights is necessary as your opposers assert our constitution is defective for we never had one. If

¹⁶ For assembly debates on this point, see Elliot, *Debates*, IV, 272-73, 285-86, 296-97. The debates in the convention, incompletely collected by Elliot, contain no reference to this subject. Ramsay was opposed to slavery. In his *An Address to the Freemen of South Carolina* (reprinted by Ford; see note 6), 8, he attempted to answer the complaints against the future prohibition of the slave trade by pointing out that as the eastern states "are bound to protect us from domestic violence, they think we ought not to increase our exposure to that evil, by an unlimited importation of slaves." He added that it was possible that Congress might not eventually prohibit the trade. In his letter to Benjamin Lincoln (cited in note 13) Ramsay declared: "Your delegates never did a more politic thing, than in standing by those of South Carolina about negroes. Virginia deserted them, and was for an immediate stoppage of further importation. The [Old] Dominion has lost much popularity by the conduct of her delegates on this head."

¹⁷ See Elliot, *Debates*, IV, 288-89, 296, 298, 299, 305, for arguments pro and con on this subject in the assembly. The extant debates in the convention bear no reference to this topic. Ramsay made some remarks on the subject in his *Address*, 6-7: "We certainly ought to have a navigation act, and we assuredly ought to give preference, though not a monopoly, to our own shipping." The South must encourage eastern shipping, he continued, for it would provide the sinews of a navy to defend the whole coast. He assured his readers that the eastern states could provide sufficient tonnage to carry the entire export of the South. On the subject of freight rates, he declared that the eastern states "can afford, and doubtless will undertake to be your carriers on as easy terms as you now pay for freight in foreign bottoms." He contended that in spite of the numerous gains brought about by the Revolution, the eastern states had been deprived of their market for fish, their carrying trade, and their shipbuilding, and thus had suffered more than the South.

¹⁸ See Elliot, *Debates*, IV, 266, 268, 269, 273, 289, 294, 306, for references on these related topics in the assembly debates; and 333-36 for Charles Pinckney's speech in the convention. Ramsay remarked to Benjamin Lincoln (letter cited in note 13): "I fear the numerous class of debtors more than any other." Publicly, he assumed a more haughty attitude. In the close of his *Address*, 9-10, he declared that some people might oppose the Constitution because of its legal tender provisions. This clause, he wrote, "will doubtless be hard on debtors, who wish to defraud their creditors, but it will be real service to the honest part of the community. Examine well the characters and circumstances of men who are averse to the new Constitution. Perhaps you will find that the above recited clause is the real ground of the opposition of some of them. . ." Charles A. Beard, *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution* (New York, 1913), 289, has shown that Ramsay was a holder of public securities at this time.

Biennial elections are dangerous as the minority contended in Massachusetts our State constitution is wrong being founded on that principle. The objections that operate elsewhere do not operate here & I believe that the objections of our antifederalists are almost peculiar to the State. I hope in my next to congratulate you on South Carolina being the 7th pillar of the new Government. God grant it a speedy & general ratification & operation.

I am yours most sincerely
David Ramsay

FRENCH SUBSTITUTES FOR AMERICAN COTTON, 1861-1865

BY EARL S. POMEROY

In the face of the considerable French dependence on American cotton in the 1860's, French policy affecting the American Civil War followed an uncertain and ambiguous course, risking little and gaining nothing.¹ Domestic policy relevant to the consequences of the War was as incoherent as foreign policy. Continental rulers earlier and later than Napoléon III have met interruptions in essential imports by economic and technical as well as by diplomatic and military expedients. Had Napoléon III found substitutes for American cotton as Napoléon I found substitutes for American sugar, the nature of the post-war southern economy might have been vastly different. Actually France did not approach self-sufficiency in textile fibres in the nineteenth century, but interest in the prospect of self-sufficiency was active in circles both private and official.

The imperial press censorship, which prevented mention of unemployment and industrial discontent,² did not extend to some discussion of prospects for new sources of cotton. *Le Moniteur*, official journal of

¹ For treatments of various aspects of this problem, see especially the following: Frank L. Owsley, *King Cotton Diplomacy: Foreign Relations of the Confederate States of America* (Chicago, 1931); Arthur L. Dunham, *The Anglo-French Treaty of Commerce of 1860 and the Progress of the Industrial Revolution in France* (Ann Arbor, 1930); Lynn M. Case (ed.), *French Opinion on the United States and Mexico, 1860-1867: Extracts from the Reports of the Procureurs Generaux* (New York, 1936).

² *London Times*, January 8, 1863, p. 10; January 13, 1863, p. 6.