The Destiny of the Slave States?
The Southern Debate Over Reopening the Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1853-1861

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Introduction:

Absurdities and Contradictions

In January of 1859, the members of Rocky Creek Baptist Church in Greenville County, South Carolina met and passed the following resolutions:

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

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

Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison commented that “Whoever can reconcile the logic and morality of these resolutions will be competent to reconcile any absurdities and contradictions, however monstrous.”¹ However, these resolutions reflected the worldview of many white Southerners in 1859, who simultaneously praised slavery as a great blessing and condemned the transatlantic slave trade as inexpedient at best and evil at worst.

The United States outlawed the international slave trade in 1808, although illegal slave importations continued thereafter. After 1808, few Americans sporadically argued for reviving the trade. They were generally ignored, until 1853, when Leonidas W. Spratt, owner and editor of the Charleston Standard, called for the trade to be reopened with an editorial entitled “The Destiny of the Slave States.”² Unlike those before him, Spratt succeeded in making himself heard, so much so that New-York Tribune founder Horace Greeley dubbed him the “philosopher of the new African slave trade.”³ The slave trade became one of the most heated issues in the

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South in the 1850s, debated in the pages of newspapers and magazines and on the floors of state legislatures and party, commercial, and church conventions. Eventually, the Confederate States banned the slave trade in 1861, although limited agitation for repeal of the ban would continue until the Union victory in the Civil War rendered the issue moot.

Little has been written about efforts to reopen slave trade. A chapter of W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Suppression of the African Slave-Trade to the United States 1638-1870* is one of the first scholarly works on the topic. Ronald Takaki’s *A Pro-Slavery Crusade* is the only notable academic book whose primary subject is the slave trade debate. There are articles written by Harvey Wish and Barton Bernstein, who write about the movement as a whole, and James Paisley Hendrix, Jr., who writes about Louisiana specifically. William Freehling, Manisha Sinha, and Walter Johnson devote chapters to the episode as part of larger explorations of the antecedents of secession, secessionist radicalism in South Carolina, and the cotton plantation system and society in the Mississippi Valley, respectively.

Yet the movement to revive the trade and its opposition in the South are worth studying, for they illuminate Southern thinking on slavery. The proposal to reopen the trade provoked a fierce debate among Southerners that concerned not only the trade, but the meaning and justification of slavery itself. This debate raises interesting questions. After fifty years of consensus that the transatlantic slave trade was wrong, why did so many Southerners suddenly begin agitating for its revival? And how could so many other Southerners oppose the trade while supporting slavery at the same time?

A combination of theoretical and practical factors motivated both sides of the debate. The most committed advocates were motivated by the shift from a pragmatic defense of slavery (slavery as a necessary evil) to moral and sociological justifications (slavery as a positive good),
and the disconnect between this idealization and the reality of Southern slavery. Less committed supporters of the trade were motivated simply by a desire for more slave labor. The Southerners who resisted the trade did so out of self-interest in maintaining the economic and political status quo, genuine abhorrence of the trade, or both. Those opponents motivated largely by practical concerns conceded many of the advocates’ arguments but still opposed the trade, while those who morally opposed the trade resorted to contorted rationalizations that denied or minimized the gulf between the ideal and reality of slavery. The effort to reopen the slave trade and the resulting opposition thus reflect the contradictions in the Southern society and economy in the decade leading up to the Civil War.

The Abolition of the Slave Trade

During the Revolutionary War, all thirteen states banned foreign slave importations, for a variety of reasons. South Carolina and Georgia later reopened the trade. As part of a compromise with these states, the United States Constitution prohibited any federal law banning slave imports until the year 1808. Yet, even before then, the federal government increasingly restricted the trade. The Slave Trade Act of 1794 prohibited the outfitting of United States-flagged ships for the slave trade, limiting it to foreign vessels. The Slave Trade Act of 1800 prohibited United States citizens from working on or investing in vessels involved in the trade.⁴

Thomas Jefferson had led the efforts to abolish the trade in Virginia in 1778. In 1806, as president, he urged Congress in his State of the Union address “to withdraw the citizens of the United States from all further participation in those violations of human rights which have been

so long continued on the unoffending inhabitants of Africa, and which the morality, the reputation, and the best interests of our country, have long been eager to proscribe.” The following year, Congress passed an Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves, to take effect on January 1st, 1808. In 1820, in response to continued illegal slave trading, Congress passed an act that declared engaging in the slave trade to be piracy and imposed the death penalty for the offense.\(^5\)

The abolition of the slave trade had not been a simple matter of North versus South nor those who were invested in slavery versus those who were not. Like Jefferson, many Southern slaveholders opposed the trade. Some Northerners, especially those invested in slave ships, supported it. The United States House of Representatives nearly unanimously passed an Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves by a vote of 113-5 (the five dissenters being two New Englanders and three Southerners).\(^6\)

Southerners at the time were willing to morally condemn the slave trade because they were willing to morally condemn slavery. Jefferson epitomized this sentiment, decrying slavery as an unnatural and immoral institution that nonetheless had to be maintained because white and black people allegedly could not peacefully coexist. Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* that trying to incorporate mass numbers of free blacks into Virginian society would “produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.”\(^7\) Jefferson hoped for the gradual elimination of slavery, enabled by diffusing slavery over a larger area and encouraging free blacks to emigrate to Africa.

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\(^5\) Du Bois, 94-96 and 118-123.

\(^6\) Du Bois, 106.

Changes in the Defense of Slavery

Yet, from the abolition of the slave trade in 1808 to Spratt’s editorial in 1853, Southern views on slavery changed considerably. In 1785, Jefferson regretted slavery’s “unhappy influence” on both masters and slaves, producing “the most unremitting despotism on one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” In 1837, John C. Calhoun declared on the floor of the United States that slavery “is, instead of an evil, a good—a positive good.” What changed in these decades was an expansion of slavery fueled by the cotton boom, as well as increasing abolitionism in the North; this combination led many Southerners to seek stronger justifications for slavery.

Historians have noted the shift in Southern thought from defending slavery as a “necessary evil” in Jefferson’s time to praising it as a “positive good” in Calhoun’s. Eugene D. Genovese argues that, by the mid-nineteenth century, white Southerners had come to rationalize slavery on the grounds of paternalism. According to its supporters, slavery was the best possible condition for black Americans, whom they considered intellectually unfit for freedom and thus naturally suited for slavery. Slavery was seen as a mutually beneficial relationship, for black Americans were supposedly better off under paternalistic despotism, while white Americans were freed from menial labor. This relationship was claimed to be the heart of Southern society, which was, or rather was idealized to be, traditional, hierarchical, and even somewhat semi-feudal. Slaveholders saw themselves as stern but benevolent patriarchs who cared for the interests of their “black family.”

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8 Jefferson, 172.
In contrast, Southern slaveholders argued that Northern capitalism valued nothing other than profit, and that the free labor system commodified and degraded workers, causing them to be overworked and abused. Hence, defenders of slavery stated that it was better to be a slave in the South, being cared for and uplifted by one’s master, than to be a “free” laborer in the North, being exploited by one’s employer. They criticized capitalism for creating chaos and class warfare in the North, while praising slavery for promoting harmonious order in the South.  

White Southerners praised slavery as a morally good system, justified because masters supposedly loved their slaves and did what was best for them, as fathers do for their children. Yet over the first half of the nineteenth century, with lands in the seaboard South becoming increasingly infertile and unprofitable, and with insatiable demand for labor on the cotton plantations of the Deep South, these slaveholders sold their slaves in massive numbers for a quick profit. Over a million slaves were shipped west in the domestic slave trade, more than the total number of slaves imported to the Thirteen Colonies and the United States during the time of the transatlantic slave trade. This process broke apart roughly one in three slave marriages and separated a fifth of enslaved children from one or both of their parents, causing so much trauma that it is now referred to as the “Second Middle Passage.”

White Southerners came to praise slavery as a harmonious social system that lacked the alienation and class antagonisms of Northern free labor capitalism. However, with the cotton boom, slave prices rose dramatically due to a combination of rapidly increasing demand for slave labor and a supply of slaves that was limited to relatively slow natural increase. Following a decline after the Panic of 1839, there was an unprecedented increase in slave prices from the

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11 Genovese.
early 1840s until the Civil War. The price of an unskilled “prime” male field hand rose from around $700 in the early 1840s to between $1,200 and $1,500 in the mid-1850s to as high as $1,900 in the late 1850s. Slave ownership became increasingly concentrated among a smaller elite. Roughly 30% of white families in the South owned slaves in 1830; by 1860, only 25% did. This created widening inequality and increasing antagonism between the Southern slaveholding elite and the white working class of yeoman farmers, craftsmen, and wage laborers, all in a society that was supposed to lack class conflict.

The Attempted Revival

The South in the 1850s was full of contradictions between ideals and reality. Slaveholders were supposed to be paternalistic, but they sold the members of their “black family” out west for a quick profit. Slavery was said to create harmony, but instead it fostered inequality and division among white Southerners. Slavery was heralded as the superior socioeconomic system, but the free labor North was overshadowing the South in economic and political power. The most committed advocates of the slave trade recognized these contradictions, and they hoped that the trade would resolve them.

Historians have often viewed the movement to revive the slave trade as a response to the South’s crises or as an outgrowth of proslavery extremism. W.E.B. Du Bois characterizes agitation for the trade as a “revolt” by the Deep South against the Upper South’s monopoly on labor supply. Harvey Wish and Barton Bernstein portray the movement as a response to

considerations about the South’s need for labor, the drain of slaves from the Upper to the Deep South, and the population imbalance with the North. Ronald Takaki argues that advocates of the trade were responding to the South’s sense of crisis, which resulted from the growing relative economic and political power of the North, the increasing concentration of slave ownership, and the moral quandary of having to justifying slavery against rising abolitionism. Manisha Sinha and William Freehling see the revival of the slave trade as an outgrowth of radical Southern proslavery thought, while Walter Johnson argues that the revival stemmed from proslavery theory, which in turn was a consequence of the political economy of the South during the cotton boom.  

Many of the authors who have written about the trade have treated it as part of the larger story of secession, with the exceptions of Hendrix and Johnson. Du Bois states that reviving the trade was an “ulterior purpose” of secession. Takaki argues that, while there were some true believers, many supporters of the trade were radical secessionists aiming to use the slave trade to rally support for Southern separatism, dismantle the National Democratic Party, and ultimately divide the Union—and that they succeeded in doing just that at the 1860 Democratic National 

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Convention. In contrast, Hendrix attempts to show that Takaki’s “devil theory,” while possibly applicable to South Carolina, does not apply to the debate over the slave trade in Louisiana. Freehling and Sinha do not consider the trade to be a direct cause of secession, but still argue that it is part of the story. Freehling states that the failure to revive the trade, among other failures of proslavery radicals, fueled the sense of frustration and desperation that led to secession. Sinha argues that South Carolina radicals, the main drivers of secession, made agitation over the trade into a major part of the “southern nationalist platform.”

However, Johnson pushes against attempts to draw a “straight line” from the trade to secession. He argues that agitation for the trade was part of a larger desire to secure and expand a patriarchal, white “pro-slavery empire,” and this goal went beyond the South’s relationship to the North. Similar to Hendrix, Johnson notes that there is an oft-overlooked distinction between the “nullifier” advocates of the slave trade in South Carolina, who wanted the trade even at the price of secession, and the advocates of the trade in the Mississippi Valley, who favored apprenticeship so as not to provoke disunion.

This thesis will examine the full spectrum of support for and opposition to the slave trade in the South. Previous historians who covered this topic are all somewhat right in their analysis of the supporters of the trade, for those advocating the slave trade had a variety of motivations. However, many of these historians tend to focus on the most extreme and committed supporters of the trade, and so fail to capture the whole picture of what animated support for the trade. Additionally, except for Takaki, these historians devote scant attention to the Southern opposition to the trade, and do not explore what this opposition signifies about Southern understandings of slavery.
The supporters of the slave trade can be divided roughly into three groups. The first group were the ideologues, epitomized by Leonidas W. Spratt. These were the true believers who saw the trade as not only good policy, but also a moral and political cause. The most committed argued that reviving the trade was necessary to save the South from its crises and contradictions and fulfill its “destiny” to expand into the western territories and dominate the union, politically and economically. These advocates of the trade would support secession if secession were necessary for the trade, but some advocated for remaining in the Union if the North consented to a revival of the trade.

The second group consisted of those for whom the slave trade was a purely symbolic issue. These symbolists agitated against the slave trade ban because they saw it as a “stigma” on the South, as former United States Representative William L. Yancey of Alabama called it. However, they were not so much concerned with actually reviving the trade—indeed, some of them stated that they opposed reopening the trade on practical grounds even as they called for a repeal of the federal slave trade ban. Yancey and other secessionists who were using the slave trade purely as a wedge issue fell into this camp. However, not everyone in this group was a radical. Some, like Governor A.B. Moore of Alabama, were moderates opposed to immediate secession.

Finally, there were the pragmatists who supported the trade for practical reasons—the group, common in the Mississippi Valley, that Hendrix and Johnson identify while most other authors ignore. Neither declaring the trade to be the South’s salvation nor making a repeal of the slave trade ban into a point of Southern pride, they believed merely that the trade was good policy. While desiring a full revival, they were willing to accept half-measures such as the importation of African “apprentices” or Asian “coolies.” This group included former United
States Senator Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, as well as many of the advocates of the trade in Louisiana like State Senator Edward Delony. While not completely ignoring the question of morality, they focused more on the economic and political benefits of reviving the trade.

The movement to revive the trade was conceived by the ideologues in response to the contradictions of Southern society apparent to them. The issue was then propelled by the symbolists who saw the trade as a symbolic issue and the pragmatists who saw the trade as a policy matter. These two other groups ignored or minimized the questions raised by the ideologues about Southern society and its crises, and instead they focused on the politics and economics of the trade.

The opponents of the trade can be roughly divided into two groups: the pragmatists and the moralists. The former opposed the trade primarily or solely on grounds of expediency. Many conceded that the slave trade was morally sound and, if implemented, would have a variety of positive effects. However, they argued that the economic, political, and social costs of reviving the trade were not worth it.

Then there were the moralists who opposed the trade on moral grounds, arguing that the trade was either inherently wrong or that it would inevitably have bad effects. Consequently, its economic or political merits (or lack thereof) were irrelevant. This group included onetime Speaker of the United States House of Representatives James Lawrence Orr of South Carolina, J. Johnston Pettigrew of the South Carolina House of Representatives, and many Southern religious leaders. The moralist opponents of the trade were in an awkward position. All were proslavery, so they had to resort to contorted arguments that praised slavery while condemning the slave trade—the same “absurdities and contradictions” that the Rocky Creek Baptist Church subscribed to. In doing so, these opponents of the trade highlighted and covered over the
contradictions between the ideals of Southern proslavery thought and the reality of Southern slavery.

This thesis will examine all these varieties of Southern opinion on the trade. They will be analyzed through Southern primary sources, including newspaper articles, magazine articles, and legislative documents. Chapter one explores the debate in South Carolina through four committee reports of the South Carolina General Assembly, the 1856 Governor’s Message, a speech by James Lawrence Orr, and editorials and articles from the *Charleston Courier* and *Standard*. This chapter argues that the debate in South Carolina was largely between ideological proponents and moralistic opponents of the trade, fueled by the division between two preexisting political factions in that state.

Chapter two examines how the debate attracted national attention and spread throughout the wider South. This includes the consideration of anti-slave trade resolutions in the United States Congress, reactions of the Southern religious press and leadership, and the failure of pro-trade measures in various state legislatures, culminating in the legislative efforts to revive the trade in Louisiana under the guise of importing “apprentices.” This chapter will examine a resolution and speech delivered by Representative Emerson Etheridge in Congress; articles on his resolution from the *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer* and the *Richmond Whig*; articles on the slave trade from *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, *The Southern Episcopalian*, and the *Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South*; two reports of the Louisiana State Legislature; and articles from the New Orleans *Delta, Picayune*, and *Crescent*. This chapter will conclude that the discussion of the trade changed as it spread outside South Carolina, with the trade becoming more a question of expediency in the Deep South and being less connected to preexisting political and geographic divisions.
Chapter three addresses the only success of the advocates of the slave trade at the Southern Commercial Convention, and then examines the rapid decline in the issue’s visibility during the 1860 election and subsequent secession crisis, concluding with the Confederate ban on the slave trade in 1861. This chapter examines articles on the Southern Commercial Convention from the Montgomery Advertiser, Greensboro Alabama Beacon, Richmond Dispatch, and Alexandria Gazette; a committee report from the convention; articles from the Charleston Mercury and New Orleans Delta on the decline in agitation on the trade; a letter by Governor A.B. Moore of Alabama; the protest submitted by the Alabama delegation to the Democratic National Convention; a speech by William L. Yancey at the Alabama State Convention; the proceedings of the state conventions of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and South Carolina; coverage of the Virginia State Convention by the Richmond Enquirer; the provisional and permanent constitutions of the Confederate States of America; an article from the Charleston Mercury on the Confederate slave trade ban; and a letter by Leonidas W. Spratt. This chapter will argue that agitation over the slave trade receded because most of its advocates were willing to sacrifice the trade for the sake of Southern unity.
Chapter One:
The Proposed Slave Trade Revival in South Carolina

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the battle over the revival of the transatlantic slave trade began in South Carolina. The trade was first brought to the attention of the South Carolina General Assembly in 1854, and it would become one of the most prominent and divisive issues in state politics for the remainder of the decade. From its origins in South Carolina, the debate over the trade would eventually spread throughout the South, as events in South Carolina inspired some in others slave states to push for a reopening of the trade.

The movement to revive the trade in South Carolina was started by one man: the owner and editor of the Charleston Standard, Leonidas W. Spratt. The younger son of a wealthy upland planter, Spratt received a college education but inherited no land. It is not clear whether Spratt ever owned any slaves. After a brief period practicing law in Florida, Spratt returned to his home state and married a wealthy heiress. He then used his newfound fortune to buy the Southern Standard, a failing moderate newspaper, with the intention of using it as a mouthpiece for the revival of the transatlantic slave trade. Spratt would zealously advocate for the trade as a

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journalist and later as a delegate to the Southern Commercial Convention and a member of the South Carolina House of Representatives.  

Spratt and his followers were responding to the contradictions and crises of the Southern economy and society. Slavery was supposed to be paternalistic, but slaveholders sold their slaves and shipped them west in the “Second Middle Passage.” Slavery was thought to create a well-ordered society, but slave ownership was becoming concentrated among a smaller elite, and non-slaveholding white craftsmen and laborers were increasingly agitated about competition with slave labor. Southern slavery was praised as superior to Northern free labor capitalism, but the North was outpacing the South in population growth and economic development. Slavery was said to be a blessing to both races, but many Southerners still felt uncomfortable about its morality and antislavery Northerners were increasingly militant in opposing the spread of the peculiar institution.

To the advocates of the slave trade in South Carolina, a revival of the trade would resolve all these contradictions and bring the reality of slavery in line with its ideals. The slave trade would end, or at the very least reduce, the drain of slaves to the Deep South, and encourage slaveholders to keep their slaves. The trade would lower prices, allowing all Southern white men to buy slaves of their own and join the master class. The trade would expand the South’s population and land under cultivation, restoring the balance between the North and the South. And the trade would prove the morality of slavery by showing how “savage” Africans could be redeemed by the civilizing influence of Southern white paternalists.

Despite the promises of Spratt and his allies that the trade would cure all that ailed the South, many South Carolinians remained opposed to the trade. They worried that the trade would

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17 Freehling, 168-169; and Sinha, 109.
exacerbate, rather than mitigate, the crises of Southern society that Spratt identified. The trade would do nothing to stop the flow of slaves out west. The trade would lower prices but also lower wages, which would antagonize the Southern white working class and turn them against slavery. The trade would further arouse the North’s ire towards the South, as well as inviting condemnation by the United Kingdom and other foreign countries. And the trade would undermine Southerners’ claims to be paternalistic by involving them in a traffic universally recognized to be inhumane, and by introducing “wild” Africans who would have a degenerative effect on the domestic slave population.

By 1850s, many South Carolinians could no longer ignore the disconnect between the ideal and reality of slave society, and the problems this disconnect was generating. Advocates of the slave trade drew attention to the contradictions of slavery and hoped that the trade would resolve them. Opponents of the trade either denied the contradictions’ existence, minimized their extent, or reasoned that the trade would worsen these problems. While, for all their faults, the advocates of the trade were consistent, opponents of the trade relied on contorted rationalizations to gloss over the South’s crises. The debate over the slave trade in South Carolina was thus a result and a reflection of the contradictions of Southern slavery.

**Spratt’s Editorial to the 1857 Senate Election**

In August of 1853, Leonidas Spratt began his advocacy for the revival of the transatlantic slave trade. Spratt’s work initially attracted little attention. The following year, the grand jury for the Williamsburgh District sent a presentment to the South Carolina General Assembly in the fall term declaring the federal ban on the slave trade to be a “public nuisance” and asking the state to
use its influence to repeal the law.\textsuperscript{18} In the House of Representatives, the presentment was referred to the Committee on the Colored Population, which reported in December that it recommended no further action on the subject.\textsuperscript{19} However, the issue would not stay dead.

While Spratt’s initial efforts stemmed from a sincere belief in the trade’s purported benefits, Ronald Takaki notes that the issue quickly became a wedge in state politics. South Carolina politics in the 1850s was factionalized, with intense conflict between radicals and moderates. All South Carolinian politicians were proslavery, and nearly all were secessionist, in that they believed South Carolina had the right to secede. However, they disagreed whether South Carolina should exercise that right at the moment. Radical secessionists, self-styled as “Southern Rights Democrats,” agitated for Southerners to form an exclusively Southern political party that would rally the slave states together and lead them to secession. Moderate cooperationists, or “National Democrats,” believed that slavery could be best preserved by remaining in the Union and supporting the National Democratic Party, which was increasingly sympathetic to slavery. The debate over the slave trade would become another point of contention between these two factions.\textsuperscript{20}

After the grand jury presentment died in committee, Spratt and his followers continued to fight for the trade. While criticized by the \textit{Charleston Courier} and other National Democratic newspapers and politicians, Spratt won the support of many, but not all, of the state’s Southern

\textsuperscript{18} “Williamsburgh District, Presentment Complaining of the Federal Law Abolishing the African Slave Trade,” 1854, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, series 165010, item 00022.
\textsuperscript{19} “Committee on Colored Population, Report on the Presentment of Williamsburgh District Recommending Abolishing the African Slave Trade,” December 12\textsuperscript{th}, 1854, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, series S165005, item 00010.
Rights Democrats, including leading “Fire-Eater” and former United States Senator Robert Barnwell Rhett and his newspaper, the *Charleston Mercury*. In 1856, Spratt and his allies converted Governor James Hopkins Adams, a Southern Rights Democrat, to their cause. Governor Adams endorsed reopening the slave trade in his annual message to the state legislature. Both houses of the General Assembly then formed a special committee to respond, with each committee chaired by a prominent Southern Rights Democrat known to support the trade: M.C.M. Hammond of the House and Alexander Mazyck of the Senate. Unsurprisingly, in 1857, both committees reported that they agreed with the governor that the trade ought to be revived. However, J. Johnston Pettigrew, a member of the House special committee, wrote a minority report assailing the slave trade.21 The advocates of the trade had successfully attracted most of the state’s radicals to their cause, but this earned them the opposition of moderates like Pettigrew.

Pettigrew was similar to Spratt in many respects. Both were the well-educated but landless younger sons of wealthy planters. Both benefitted from and identified with the plantation economy without being directly involved. Pettigrew owned only one slave, an inheritance from his father, who remained on the family plantation in North Carolina. Both Spratt and Pettigrew pursued law as an initial career, but law was not their passion, and both earned reputations in Charleston as intellectuals. The two had worked together in the past; Pettigrew edited articles and contributed editorials to the *Standard*, and on one occasion managed the paper while Spratt was out of town. However, Pettigrew opposed the revival of the slave trade as needlessly provocative. Hailing from a prominent Whig family in North Carolina, he was a moderate and supported remaining in the Union, at least for the time being. The

21 Bernstein, 21-22; Freehling, 179-180; Sinha, 108-115; and Wish, 572-574.
unofficial leader of the South Carolina National Democrats, James Lawrence Orr, a United States Representative and future Speaker of the House, had engineered Pettigrew’s placement on the committee to ensure a dissenting report.\textsuperscript{22} Spratt and Pettigrew, two former business associates, found themselves leading opposite sides of the debate over the slave trade.

Each house of the General Assembly voted to indefinitely postpone consideration of the reports and resolutions introduced by the special committees, but legislators continued to argue over the slave trade. In 1857, both leading candidates for the state’s United States Senate seat were opposed to the trade: former Governor James Henry Hammond, who had always opposed the trade for moral and practical reasons, and Robert Barnwell Rhett, who had recanted his past support for the trade on pragmatic grounds. However, in 1858, the now former Governor Adams ran for the state’s other senate seat. While most of the state’s radicals had come to support the trade, a minority of Southern Rights Democrats opposed a revival of the trade, and they united with the National Democrats (who were the minority in the assembly) to elect James Chesnut, an anti-trade Southern Rights state senator who opposed the trade for practical reasons. The slave trade was the decisive issue in this election.\textsuperscript{23}

Throughout the 1850s, South Carolinian politicians and journalists debated the slave trade’s moral legitimacy, social implications, and potential economic impacts. Proponents of the trade claimed that there must be no moral distinction between slavery and the slave trade, that a reopening of the trade would strengthen Southern aristocratic society, and that the prohibition of trade was limiting Southern economic expansion. Opponents of the trade argued that the trade would undermine slavery’s paternalistic justification, that the trade would exacerbate class

\textsuperscript{23} Bernstein, 30.
tensions within Southern society, and that factors other than the size of the slave population were limiting growth.

**Arguments for the Slave Trade**

Advocates of the slave trade in South Carolina argued for a revival on the grounds that the trade was morally good, socially desirable, and economically beneficial. Supporters of the trade made the simple moral argument that slavery was good and that the slave trade would expand slavery. Therefore, the slave trade was morally permissible, if not obligatory. Proponents carried the logic of slavery as a “positive good” to its extreme: if slavery was justified because it benefitted black Americans, then white Southerners should enslave native Africans to further spread civilization and Christianity.

The paternalistic argument that reopening the slave trade would “save” Africans was one of the advocates’ more common arguments. The original grand jury presentment argued for reviving the trade on the grounds that it would benefit the Africans taken into captivity, as they would be brought “from a condition of absolute barbarity into one of comparative civilization, from a condition of heathen darkness into one of Christian light, from a condition of desperate and chaotic misrule into one of benign and regulated law.” Governor Adams repeated this argument in his legislative message, stating that slavery was “mutually beneficial” for both races because it elevated slaves “to a degree of civilization which the black race has never attained in any other age or country.”

24 “Williamsburgh District, Presentment.”

Some advocates of the trade went further and made a Malthusian claim that Africa could not support its population, and therefore the slave trade was the only way to save the continent from ruin. The Senate special committee report declared that, as there “is not and cannot be…voluntary emigration” from Africa, the slave trade was Africa’s only means to humanely control its population. The report compared Africa to Ireland, stating that banning the slave trade would be akin to stopping emigration from Ireland in the midst of the famine. These advocates of the slave trade argued that the trade both exposed Africans to civilization and improved their material condition, saving them not just from damnation but also from starvation.

However, in trying to convince people that the slave trade was morally acceptable, supporters of the trade faced an uphill battle due to the widespread conviction among white Americans that the slave trade was inherently cruel and inhumane. Advocates made a number of rebuttals, some of which contradicted one another. Their two main arguments were to deny the historical cruelty of the trade or to state that the trade was inhumane in the past but could be conducted humanely now.

The Senate report denied the cruelty of the slave trade, giving three reasons. First, many of those who condemned the slave trade were “no less severe in their condemnation of slavery itself.” Since they were obviously wrong about slavery, it is likely that they were wrong about the trade, so Southerners should “receive all such accounts with something more than doubt and suspicion.” Second, slave traders had a financial interest in maintaining the wellbeing of their slaves, as every slave who suffered injury or death was a monetary loss. So, their self-interest

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27 Mazyck, 5 and 8-9.
would prevent them from being cruel or harsh. Third, the slave trade was probably not as cruel as alleged because people are, on the whole, naturally good.

“And we also know that men who take pleasure in torturing others, or witnessing their sufferings, are rare exceptions, and that nearly all men are prompted by a wholesome instinct of their nature, to sympathize in the afflictions of their fellow beings and experience pain rather than pleasure at the sight of suffering; and when interest [referring to the financial interest in keeping one’s slaves alive and healthy] concurs with this natural sentiment, wanton cruelty is extremely improbable.28

That slave traders would not hurt slaves because people have a natural tendency to empathize with their fellow man is a curious argument. Yet such a thing made sense to the advocates of the trade, who believed that slave traders were helping the people they enslaved. Proslavery Southerners often showed a tendency to dismiss allegations that slavery was cruel as obviously false, and many supporters of the trade applied that tendency to allegations about the slave trade as well.

Other supporters of the trade conceded that the trade was cruel throughout history, but argued that the trade could be conducted humanely now. The House special committee majority report contradicted the Senate report by admitting that, historically, the slave trade was barbaric. However, the report argued that the trade was not inherently cruel. The committee pointed to new technology, such as steam power, that would allow for a much quicker Middle Passage. As evidence, the report cited the low mortality rates on ships moving African indentured laborers to British and French colonies in the Caribbean or carrying European immigrants to the United States.29 Many advocates of the trade were willing to concede that the trade could be cruel, but

28 Mazyck, 9.
believed that this problem could be solved through technology or regulation. They did not think there was anything inherently cruel about the business of the slave trade.

Some supporters of the slave trade also countered objections to the transatlantic slave trade by pointing to the booming domestic slave trade. In an editorial in the Charleston Standard, Leonidas Spratt repeated the usual paternalistic argument that being sold into the slave trade would benefit the “poor, uninformed, brutal” African who is brought from heathen barbarianism to civilized Christianity. He then compared this to a planter he knew who was looking to purchase slaves in Charleston and bring them west.

“But such is not the condition of the five or six girls and boys in contemplation of my friend from Mississippi. These to suit him must have been well raised and have become attached to a home as good as he could offer; they must have relatives and friends, perhaps lovers—for such things happen sometimes even to slaves—or wives and husbands. They must leave a life to which they are accustomed for one to which they are not accustomed, and a land particularly favored for one not more favored in the West, and it is doubted whether such a change of condition, such a rupture of ties, such an abandonment of all that is dear and familiar, from no motive of their own, but from the feeling or interested of some other person in no way related to them, is not the sadder object of the two.30

Spratt argued that the domestic slave trade must be less justifiable than the international trade, for the domestic trade had all of the international trade’s inhumanities—separating families, moving people to unfamiliar places—and none of its supposedly-redeeming qualities, since an American-born slave, already living in a civilized and Christian society, did not benefit from being sold from one part of the country to another. Spratt was willing to admit that the domestic trade was distasteful—although he fell short of calling it wrong—and his solution was to reopen the international trade so that American-born slaves did not need to be uprooted and removed

from their homes and families to meet the Deep South’s demand for labor. Spratt and other proponents of the slave trade thought it was inconsistent to call the transatlantic slave trade wrong and yet have no qualms with the domestic slave trade. Ironically, many modern historians would agree, as the domestic trade is now called the “Second Middle Passage.”

Those who supported the trade in South Carolina also made a social case for reviving the trade: that the slave trade would strengthen Southern society and resolve its internal conflicts. Proponents of the trade, like Governor Adams, contrasted Southern “aristocracy,” where there was order because both races accepted and fulfilled their natural roles, with Northern “democracy,” where there was chaos because people wrongly believed that all men were created equal. Proponents of the trade worried about the increasing concentration of slave ownership and the disequilibrium between demand for and supply of slave labor. They argued that, without the ability to import slaves, South Carolina’s need for labor would be met by “hireling” labor, increasing the number of white wage laborers and threatening aristocracy. In contrast, opening the trade would lower the price of slaves so that poor white Southerners could buy slaves of their own, thereby expanding and strengthening the aristocratic class and removing the South’s potentially troublesome white working class.

In his legislative message, Governor Adams argued that only the slave trade could save aristocracy. Adams stated that the South clearly needed more labor, and the only alternative, free labor, was “from the very nature of things, antagonistic to our institutions.” Northern-style capitalist wage labor would create competition between capital and labor and lead to “unnatural” class conflict—unnatural because it divided the white race. In contrast, Southern aristocratic slavery would promote harmony because “true policy dictates that the superior race should
direct, and the inferior perform all menial service.”  

According to the governor, the South’s need for labor exceeded its supply, and this presented Southerners with two options. Either the South could reopen the slave trade and import more slaves to meet the demand for labor, or else white wage laborers would migrate to the South, sparking class conflict between slaveholding elites and non-slaveholding laborers that would destroy Southern aristocracy.

 Advocates of the trade hoped that reviving the trade would lower the price of slaves and allow more white Southerners to buy into slavery. In his legislative message, Governor Adams also requested that the assembly pass a law exempting one of any slaveholders’ slaves from seizure for debts, to incentivize non-slaveholders to buy slaves. Adams reasoned that securing slavery’s place in Southern society required ensuring as many people as possible were invested in the peculiar institution: “Diffusion is strength—concentration, weakness.”  

The House special committee majority report responded that they agreed “that a more general ownership of slaves among our white population is desirable throughout the South,” but suggested that the “surest inducement for the purchase of slavery property is its cheapness.”  

Importing slaves would lower the price of slaves to the point where poor white laborers could afford to become aristocratic slaveholders. Reviving the slave trade would strengthen Southern aristocracy by expanding the class of aristocrats and eliminating the class of white laborers.

Leonidas Spratt would likewise call for the elimination of the Southern white working class, whom he considered a potential threat to slavery. While not accusing poor whites of being outwardly hostile to slavery, Spratt called white labor “not natural and necessary” for the South and questioned non-slaveholders’ loyalty to the peculiar institution. Spratt argued that their lack

31 Adams, 10-11.
32 Adams, 9.
33 Bryan et al., 44-45.
of investment in slavery explained white laborers’ support for taxes on slaves and laws
restricting slaves from working in certain trades. Spratt opposed these measures as they limited
slavery and therefore harmed aristocracy. Spratt further worried that, in the event of a sectional
war, non-slaveholders would fight “rather for the South than for Slavery at the South.” Spratt had
a solution: if the slave trade were reopened and the price of slaves were lowered, then every
white man could buy a slave. Class distinctions among whites between slaveholders and non-
slaveholders would then disappear, and “all of the ruling race will come to the same social stand
point” and share the same interests. Spratt doubted that anyone who was not personally
invested in slavery would adequately defend the peculiar institution, and so he saw non-
slaveholding white Southerners as a source of trouble. He hoped that reopening the trade would
cut the price of slaves so that all white men could join the aristocratic slaveholding class.

Finally, the advocates had a simple economic argument for reviving the trade. By the
1850s, cotton prices were rising globally as Southern supply could not keep up with international
demand, leading other areas to expand cotton cultivation, especially Egypt and British-ruled
India. Proponents of the trade made a straightforward economic claim: the South obviously
needed much more labor to meet global demand for cotton, and this could only be accomplished
by reviving the slave trade. Some thought the stakes were quite high. Governor Adams argued
that the South needed to reduce labor costs to stay competitive; if not, the South would lose its
cotton monopoly to India.

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34 L.W. Spratt, “The Foreign Slave Trade—Reintegration of Society at the South,” Charleston
Progress, of Social Integrity, and of Social Emancipation to the South (Charleston, S.C.: Steam
35 Bernstein, 18; and Wish, 572.
36 Adams, 9-10.
The House special committee report further elaborated that slavery had been on the path towards gradual elimination in the United States after the American Revolution, until cotton saved the institution from the “approaching danger” of abolition. However, failure to meet existing global demand would encourage cotton production elsewhere, eliminating the world’s need for Southern slavery. The interests of Northern and British textile manufacturers and merchants would no longer be tied to slavery, leaving slavery more vulnerable to criticism from British and Northern abolitionists. So, to save slavery, the South needed to increase cotton production to keep the global industrial economy dependent on slavery, and that required the revival of the trade.37

The advocates of the trade in South Carolina saw the trade as a panacea for all that ailed the South. They made a moral, social, and economic argument. Morally, they wanted to use the trade to vindicate slavery by showcasing its good work. By saving Africans from misrule and starvation in their “savage” continent and exposing them to civilization and Christianity, they hoped the slave trade would prove that slavery was beneficial for both races. The strongest objection to the trade, the horrors of the Middle Passage, was dismissed as either abolitionist propaganda or a relic of the past. Socially, advocates of the trade wanted to secure Southern aristocracy by expanding it—and that required expanding slavery. Importing more slaves would keep free laborers from migrating to the South and would allow the South’s white laborers to buy their own slaves and move from the working class into the aristocracy. Economically, the advocates saw that the South needed more labor, and believed that only the slave trade could supply it. If the South failed to expand production to meet demand, it risked losing its cotton monopoly—and then Southern slavery would no longer be indispensable to the global economy.

37 Bryan et al., 4-19.
Arguments Against the Slave Trade

On each point raised by supporters of the trade, opponents countered with their own arguments for why the trade was morally wrong and socially and economically undesirable. Morally, those South Carolinians who supported slavery but opposed the slave trade had to construct an argument against the trade that did not condemn any aspects of slavery itself. Pettigrew’s minority report noted that most white Southerners supported slavery yet condemned the slave trade, not only because of the practical economic and political problems, but also out of genuine feelings of “horror and disgust” towards the trade.\textsuperscript{38} To explain how one could feel horrified and disgusted by the trade but not slavery itself, opponents drew a distinction between slavery, which was paternalistic and therefore good, and the slave trade, which was capitalistic and therefore bad.

In his minority report, Pettigrew responded to the moral argument that the slave trade would benefit Africans by arguing that claim was both incorrect and irrelevant. Pettigrew dismissed this argument early in the report by stating that, as a South Carolina legislator, his only concern was the interests of South Carolinians, and he had “no right to jeopardize their welfare even for the salvation of the African continent.” Here, he seemed to accept that the slave trade would benefit Africans by exposing them to “the enlightenment of an advancing civilization.”\textsuperscript{39}

However, later in the report, Pettigrew declared that the slave trade would in fact harm many Africans, as the trade was conducted by “Yankee capitalists” who treated slaves as mere commodities, unlike Southern slaveholders who valued their slaves as inferior people in need of

\textsuperscript{38} J. Johnston Pettigrew, \textit{Report of the Minority of the Special Committee of Seven, to whom was referred so much of His Late Excellency’s Message No. 1, as relates to Slavery and the Slave Trade} (Columbia, S.C.: Steam Power Press Carolina Times, 1857): 37.

\textsuperscript{39} Pettigrew, 4.
guidance. Because of the capitalistic outlook of slave traders, the trade would always be cruel and inhumane; regulation or technology could not fix this. Not only would reviving the trade harm Africans by subjecting them to the Middle Passage, it would harm white Southerners by morally contaminating benevolent Southern slavery through association with the odious Yankee-and-British-run slave trade. Pettigrew contrasted paternalistic Southern slavery, which benefitted both masters and slaves, with the capitalistic slave trade, run by Northerners and foreigners who treated people as goods and did nothing to elevate or civilize them. He distinguished between being enslaved in the South, which would help Africans, to being traded by Yankees, which would harm them, and argued that the former could not justify the latter.

Opponents of the slave trade sometimes made a further claim that slavery’s paternalism had resulted from the closing of the trade. Pettigrew’s minority report condemned South Carolina’s earlier history of slavery as brutal and barbaric, citing passages from the old slave codes that proscribed mutilation and death for a variety of offenses. Pettigrew opined that these harsh measures were necessary at the time because the “‘barbarous, wild, and savage’” African-born slaves were “accustomed to obey only visible manifestations of brute force.” Then, the closing of the slave trade led to generations of slaves being born and raised in the South, which encouraged “respectful attachment and obedience” on the part of slaves and “benevolent superintendence” on the part of masters. According to Pettigrew, paternalism was a rather fragile thing, and if the trade were revived, “all this [would] vanish.” The Charleston Courier, the city’s National Democratic paper, would echo this sentiment, warning that, if the trade were

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40 Pettigrew, 39-40.  
41 Pettigrew, 80-83.
reopened, “*Uncle Toms* and *Legrees* would be no longer fabulous personages in the South.”

Fabulous in this case means fantastical, so the *Courier* was arguing that the revival of the trade would make *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and other stories of brutality against slaves believable, rather than ridiculous and inflammatory, as they considered them be. Opponents of the trade argued that, if the trade were revived, slaveholders would have to revert to brute force to control their recently-imported “wild” slaves, creating a much more hostile and violent relationship between the two races that would undermine the paternalistic justification of slavery.

Opponents of the trade also worried that reviving the slave trade would corrupt the American-born slave population. In his minority report, Pettigrew argued that African slaves were “stupid and ignorant” compared to American-born slaves. American-born slaves had learned hard work and obedience through generations of slavery, but, were, by their nature, highly susceptible to negative influences. Pettigrew raised the fear that introducing “wild” Africans would thus degenerate the slave population.

“They [slaves] receive all light from above; it is not only necessary that they should be subjected to good influences, but to none save good influences. The tendency of such is always downwards, and evil communications will corrupt more than good examples can improve. Hence it is, that our planters make such a point of sending an incorrigible negro entirely out of the State. The great improvement, which we, under Providence, have been the means of effecting, is owing to the fact that the slave trade never flourished in America, and for many years has been suppressed. Re-open this flood gate of impurity, and all that we have accomplished in half a century would be lost; the cheapest defence of our institution would be sacrificed to a mere experiment, the good and the bad would be irrevocably confounded, and what would be the moral specific gravity of the compound, it is distasteful to conjecture. So much for the effect upon our slaves.

Pettigrew praised South Carolinians for elevating their slaves to the highest level of civilization they were capable of attaining, but he warned that introducing foreign-born slaves to the

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domestic population would undo all this civilizing work. Allowing this to happen would sacrifice the paternalistic justification of slavery—“the cheapest defence of our institution.”

Remarkably, some opponents of the slave trade condemned the trade on the grounds that it is morally wrong to enslave people against their will. James Lawrence Orr gave a speech in which he distinguished between slavery as it existed in the South, which black Americans supposedly submitted to willingly, and enslavement in Africa, which would occur “against their consent.” He acknowledged that slavery would benefit Africans, but argued that this did not justify it, saying:

“The argument so flippantly repeated by its advocates that it will better the physical and moral condition of the African to transplant him here as a slave, does not satisfy my mind that it would be just or right. Are we to constitute ourselves the judges of what will improve the conditions of other nations, and proceed to execute that judgement, against their consent? If the argument is worth anything for the African, would it not apply equally to the European or the Asian? How many of the sons and daughters of Europe and Asia would be elevated in their moral and physical condition if they were transplanted, even as slaves, in this country? Could they be numbered by less than hundreds of millions? Would it be right to constitute ourselves their judges, and then become the executioners of our judgment, to make them slaves? Away with such doctrines and principles! They have no foundation in humanity, philosophy, morality, or religion.

The irony of slaveholders like Orr decrying the coercive enslavement of foreigners is a consequence of paternalism. According to Orr, the “present slave population” accepted slavery and did not resist because they “have learned from their very infancy that the white man is their superior...they [are not] restive or impatient under his domination.” This process of “domestication” took generations, meaning that enslavement would not benefit the first generation of Africans taken to America, but only their descendants. Therefore, Americans had

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43 Pettigrew, 7 and 24-25.
no right to go to Africa and capture new slaves, although it was perfectly just to own American-born slaves.⁴⁴

In contrast to advocates’ social arguments that the slave trade was needed to save aristocracy, opponents of the trade argued that white Southerners who were not directly invested in slavery posed no threat to the peculiar institution. Opponents did not appeal as much as advocates to notions of “aristocracy,” although they were not opposed to using that term to describe the South. Yet many saw the conflict between free labor and slavery as a false dilemma—as Pettigrew wrote, “fortunately we are not compelled to choose between the two.” Pettigrew noted that “white Carolinians of all classes” supported slavery and would defend it from Northern and British abolitionism.⁴⁵ While class division existed between slaveholders and non-slaveholders, both classes still supported slavery, and so Southern aristocrats did not need to fear the masses of non-slaveholding whites.

Furthermore, opponents of the slave trade argued that poor whites were useful in controlling a potentially unruly slave population. Pettigrew stated that, if South Carolina was going to import “wild” Africans, then, from “a military point of view,” it would be necessary to maintain “a due proportion between the dominant and servient races” to prevent insurrection. He stated that, assuming for the sake of argument, if the advocates of the slave trade did succeed in making every white man a slaveholder, then slaves would outnumber slaveholders, creating a dangerous imbalance.⁴⁶ So, according to opponents of the trade, if reopening the trade actually did succeed in expanding the class of slaveholders, it would do so at the cost of risking Haitian-style slave revolution.

⁴⁴ “Speaker Orr on the Slave Trade and the Union,” The Sun, August 25, 1858.
⁴⁵ Pettigrew, 36-37.
⁴⁶ Pettigrew, 36-37.
However, Pettigrew argued that reviving the slave trade actually would not expand the slaveholding class, using a simple economic argument. White laborers derived their wealth from their labor, reducing the price of slaves would lower the value of labor, and therefore reopening the slave trade would reduce wages for white laborers. Pettigrew concluded that poor whites would still be unable to afford slaves, but now they would find it harder to earn a living, giving them reason to resent the institution of slavery. So, rather than expanding the aristocratic class, reviving the trade would further divide white slaveholders and laborers, and such class animosity within the white race would threaten slavery’s place in Southern society.

Opponents of the trade responded to advocates’ economic arguments by stating that rising cotton prices were no cause for alarm, much less action. Pettigrew’s minority report pointed out that the “high” price of cotton was not limiting manufacturing because raw cotton constituted a small portion of manufacturers’ input prices. Furthermore, the gains of lower cotton prices would go to British and Northern factory owners, not Southern planters. So, the high price of cotton was not the South’s problem, even if encouraged cotton production elsewhere.

Pettigrew also focused on the economic needs of South Carolina, rather than of the South as a whole. He noted that South Carolina had to compete with the states of the inland Old Southwest, such as Alabama and Mississippi. Even if the price of slaves were lowered, South Carolina would still be at a comparative disadvantage due to the relative infertility of its lands. Consequently, Carolinian planters would still find it more economical to sell their slaves west rather than work them in South Carolina—the only difference being that they would now get less for selling them. Pettigrew suggested that, rather than focusing on labor, South Carolina should

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48 Pettigrew, 14-16.
invest in agricultural societies to improve the productivity of its land. While advocates of the trade saw the South’s cotton monopoly as essential to the survival of Southern slavery, opponents of the trade argued both that the limited supply of Southern cotton was not a problem and that reviving slave trade would do little to expand cotton production anyway.

Opponents of the trade either denied or minimized the extent of the contradictions of Southern slavery identified by advocates of the trade, argued that the trade would exacerbate these problems, or both. Opponents stated that slavery would undermine the moral legitimacy of slavery, by associating paternalistic slavery with the capitalistic slave trade, creating more violence between masters and slaves, and degenerating American-born slaves. They ignored Spratt’s challenge that the domestic trade could not be justified if the transatlantic slave was wrong. Opponents of the trade recognized the growing numbers of non-slaveholders in the South, but they believed that this did not threaten slavery and that reviving the trade would only make the problem worse anyway. Finally, opponents recognized that Southern slavery was facing competition in cotton markets, but argued that, if the trade did expand cotton production, the fall in prices would not benefit the South, and, regardless, the trade was unlikely to expand production in the case of South Carolina.

**Motivations for and against the Slave Trade**

The movement to revive the slave trade in South Carolina was propelled by ideologues such as Leonidas Spratt, Alexander Mazyck, and Edward Bryan. They genuinely believed in the trade; as will be seen in Chapter 3, they would continue to advocate for the trade even after secession. So, for them, the trade was not merely a political wedge to rally radical secessionists, although they

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49 Pettigrew, 10-28.
could regard that outcome as a fringe benefit. These advocates were motivated by the need to resolve the contradictions and crises facing Southern society: the drain of slaves from the Upper to the Deep South, the increasing proportion of non-slaveholding Southern whites, and international competition in cotton production. As Ronald Takaki writes, the committed supporters of the trade were responding to the South’s “internal crisis.”\textsuperscript{50} However, their cause soon became swept up in the state’s factional politics.

The Southern Rights Democrats and the National Democrats were divided over the question of how South Carolina fit into national politics. As their name suggests, National Democrats supported the National Democratic Party. They wanted to unite proslavery Southerners with Northerners amenable to the interests of slavery. The Southern Rights Democrats favored a more isolationist posture. They believed Southerners should form their own sectional party that would aggressively defend slavery. The Southern Rights Democrats hated the National Democratic Party, having boycotted National Democratic Conventions since the Nullification Crisis of 1832-1833. This difference in national outlook extended to views on secession. Both factions did not oppose secession in principle, but disagreed over its expediency. The Southern Rights Democrats were more inclined towards secession as a solution to the growing North-South divide. Most had agitated for secession during the crisis of 1850, and many continued to agitate during the 1850s. The National Democrats, in contrast, opposed secession as harmful to the South’s interests, for the time being.\textsuperscript{51}

The two factions also disagreed in their vision of South Carolina’s government. Prior to the Civil War, South Carolina was unique among states in its level of elite control. The Southern

\textsuperscript{50} Takaki, 8.
\textsuperscript{51} Takaki, 185-188.
Rights Democrats wanted to maintain this status quo; the National Democrats pushed democratization. While all white men were enfranchised, South Carolina imposed property qualifications for holding office. Representation in the assembly was apportioned among the state’s parishes and districts on the basis of population and taxes paid, giving disproportionate influence to the wealthier lowcountry. The governor and the state’s presidential electors were chosen by the General Assembly, rather than popularly elected as was common in most other states. The Southern Rights Democrats supported the “aristocratic principle” of government, and decried proposals for electoral reform as steps towards “mob rule.” In contrast, the National Democrats supported electoral reforms that would increase the voice of less wealthy white South Carolinians: the abolition of property qualifications, more equal apportionment of representation in the assembly, and the direct election of the governor and electors.

Based on their ideologies, the Southern Rights Democrats were more capable of sympathy towards the slave trade than the National Democrats. That agitation over the trade would inflame the North did not bother the Southern Rights Democrats; indeed, it served their goal of breaking up the National Democratic Party. To the National Democrats, the trade’s potential to alienate Northern Democrats and split the national party made the trade a nonstarter. Advocates of the slave trade claimed the trade would expand the slaveholding aristocracy to include all Southern whites and thus eliminate the white working class. Such a view aligned neatly with the Southern Rights Democrats’ support for government by the elite and fear of “mob rule” by poor whites. However, the National Democrats did not feel threatened by non-slaveholding, non-aristocratic whites, and so such appeals did not move them.

53 Takaki, 185-188.
Although the Southern Rights Democrats’ ideology made them more inclined to favor the trade, such an outcome was not guaranteed. After Governor Adams endorsed the trade in his legislative message, the slave trade gained the support of most of the state’s Southern Rights Democratic politicians. Yet a significant minority remained opposed, and they united with the National Democrats in 1857 to keep Adams out of the United States Senate. However, members of this minority tended to voice opposition on practical grounds, and so were pragmatist rather than moralist opponents of the trade.

While not a perfect correlation, Ronald Takaki shows in his analysis of voting patterns of members of the General Assembly on slave trade resolutions that division over the trade mapped neatly onto the state’s existing political divide. Support for the trade was concentrated in the lowcountry parishes, while the opposition dominated the city of Charleston and the upcountry districts. Takaki finds a similar geographic correlation for votes on bills for electoral reform and on resolutions espousing secessionist sentiments. Takaki notes that these divisions also overlap heavily with social differences—areas dominated by the Southern Rights Democrats had high proportions of slaves and low proportions of white non-slaveholders, while areas dominated by the National Democrats had the inverse. The slave trade thus served as another wedge in the state’s existing political-geographic-social divide.

The political factionalism involved in the debate over the trade makes it difficult to assess the motives of those involved. While the initial advocates of the trade were true believers, how genuine were those pro-trade Southern Rights Democrats who followed them? Did they actually believe the trade was right and expedient, or were they simply using the trade as a political weapon? This question will be answered more fully in Chapter 3, for the battle between the

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54 Takaki, 193-198.
National and Southern Rights Democrats in South Carolina would only end with the secession crisis following the 1860 election.

The National Democrats were unanimous in their opposition to the trade, which likely stemmed from a combination of genuine abhorrence and self-interest. The idea of reviving the trade offended the ideology of the National Democrats. Whereas Spratt and other Southern Rights Democrats viewed the decline in slave ownership as a crisis and painted non-slaveholding whites as a threat to the peculiar institution, the National Democrats celebrated the state’s poor white population and sought to empower them. The trade also undermined the National Democrats’ political strategy, which required cordial relations with Northern Democrats, who would be upset by agitation over the trade. The trade threatened what the National Democrats stood for, and so their opposition was perhaps inevitable.

After the Senatorial Election and Conclusion

Continued agitation over the slave trade was guaranteed by the presence of ideological supporters of the trade in the South Carolina General Assembly such as Alexander Mazyck, M.C.M. Hammond, Edward Bryan, and, after 1858, Leonidas Spratt. In 1857, 1858, and 1859, one or both houses of the legislature would consider resolutions calling for a revival of the slave trade or a repeal of the federal laws declaring the trade to be piracy. All were tabled indefinitely.\(^{55}\) Despite their lack of success, advocates of the trade were numerous enough in South Carolina to keep the issue alive in the legislature.

In debating the slave trade, South Carolinians were responding to the contradictions and crises of the peculiar institution. Morally, abolitionists were increasingly active in condemning

\(^{55}\) Takaki, 193.
slavery and questioning its paternalistic justification. Socially, the rising price of slaves was concentrating slaves into fewer hands, creating large numbers of white Southerners who had no direct stake in the system. Economically, global demand for cotton was fueling cultivation in other areas that could, with time, overcome the South in cotton production and thus render slavery uneconomical. Arguments over the trade reflected opposing visions of how the South should respond to these challenges to slavery.

Advocates of the trade wanted to make the reality of slavery match its idealization. They sought to create a paternalistic slaveholding aristocracy that included all Southern white men and that was indispensable to the global economy. Supporters of the trade felt that slavery was slowly withering and could only be saved through aggressive expansion, enabled by the slave trade.

Opponents of the trade were more cautious about adjusting the state of affairs in the South. They saw Southern slavery’s supposedly legitimating qualities not as inevitable, but rather as circumstantial. They worried that a sudden change in circumstances—such as the revival of the trade—could fundamentally change Southern society for the worse. Opponents of the slave trade believed that it was unwise to risk subverting the moral and social justifications of slavery by engaging in the “experiment” of reopening the slave trade.

Division over the trade overlapped neatly but not perfectly with the state’s existing political divide. Advocates of the trade were mostly Southern Rights Democrats, supportive of sectionalism and committed to the state’s aristocratic government. Opponents were more likely to be National Democrats, opposed to immediate secession and in favor of greater democratization. The ideology and political interests of Southern Rights Democrats made it possible for them to endorse the trade, although not all did so, while the National Democrats’ ideology and interests guaranteed their opposition to the trade.
The issue of the slave trade probed real questions antebellum white South Carolinians faced over how to defend slavery and slave society. Those who supported the trade took a radical approach, wanting to prove slavery’s moral, social, and economic goodness by rapidly expanding the peculiar institution. Those opposed to the trade were more conservative, seeking to preserve what the South already had as an example of the superiority of slave society in a world increasingly hostile to slavery. Although the debate over the transatlantic slave trade would change as the issue spread to the other slave states, many of the views expressed by Spratt, Pettigrew, and other South Carolinians continued to define Southerners’ thoughts on the trade.
Chapter Two:
The Spread of the Debate over the Slave Trade throughout the South

Governor Adams’ message and the legislative battles over the slave trade in South Carolina attracted nationwide attention, causing the debate about the trade to spread throughout the South. The issue would find its strongest support outside South Carolina in the Deep South in general and Louisiana in particular. Yet, as it expanded, the movement to revive the trade also encountered opposition from many white Southerners. In 1857, the United States Congress considered and passed resolutions condemning any revival of the slave trade. In 1857, the Mississippi Senate postponed consideration of a bill to allow the importation of indentured African laborers. In 1858, the Georgia General Assembly voted down a bill to amend the state’s constitution to remove its ban on the slave trade. In Louisiana, the movement to reopen the slave trade would come closest to legislative success but still fall short, when, in 1858, the legislature nearly passed the African Apprentices Bill.56

As the debate spread, proponents and opponents of the slave trade repeated the arguments made in South Carolina and advanced new reasoning. The debate in South Carolina had been dominated by ideologues and moralists, who argued over the trade’s rightness or wrongness. Yet, in the Deep South, much of the debate was between pragmatists. Many advocates argued for the trade on the grounds of expediency without making the sweeping claims seen in South Carolina of the trade’s potential to morally legitimize slavery and save Southern society. Many opponents of the trade likewise argued that the trade would be economically and socially harmful, while minimizing their moral condemnation.

The overlap of support for or opposition to the trade and other geographic and political divisions was not as precise everywhere as it was in South Carolina. Advocates and opponents of the trade across the South had a variety of motivations. To the more ideological advocates, the trade was a genuine moral cause, either because the logic of paternalism demanded the revival of the trade or the legitimacy of slavery depended on the legitimacy of the trade. To the more pragmatic advocates, the trade was an economic necessity. Likewise, opponents of the trade had a variety of motivations. Moralists saw the trade as inherently wrong, and did not want to contaminate domestic slavery by association with the overseas traffic. Pragmatists merely considered a revival of the trade economically unwise, or feared the social effects of reopening the trade, both on American-born slaves and on non-slaveholding whites. And there were a number of ulterior political reasons opponents had for condemning the trade, particularly fear of disunion. Whereas, in South Carolina, the debate over the slave trade was another wedge between the state’s political factions, as the idea of reviving the trade spread throughout the South, it became an issue in its own right.

The initial push to reopen the slave trade in South Carolina was launched by ideologues, and it became caught up in the conflict between radical secessionist Southern Rights Democrats and moderate cooperationist National Democrats. Yet as the trade was debated among the more pragmatic supporters and opponents of the trade outside South Carolina, support for the slave trade became less tethered to support for secession. This was especially true in Louisiana, where the legislature considered a proposal to effectively reinstate the slave trade without challenging federal law, leading to the curious result that some Louisiana “Know Nothings” and National Democrats, who had no secessionist intentions, supported the provocative African Apprentices Bill.
The debate over the trade thus changed as it spread. In South Carolina, the conservation was dominated by ideologue supporters and moralist opponents of the trade. The ideologues supported the trade partly because it fit their vision of Southern society, and partly because it served as a wedge issue to rally secessionist sentiment and weaken the National Democratic Party. The proposal to revive the trade in South Carolina attracted denunciation from moralists across the South, particularly in the Upper South, who condemned the trade because it contradicted their moral and social ideals. Yet, in the Deep South, the debate was largely between pragmatists on either side, who favored or opposed the trade for its perceived economic and social benefits and costs and minimized the question of the trade’s morality.

Congress

After Governor James Hopkins Adams called for a revival of the slave trade in his message to the South Carolina General Assembly, Representative Emerson Etheridge of Tennessee, a member of the American Party, or “Know Nothings,” introduced the following resolution to the United States House of Representatives on December 15th, 1856.

“Resolved, That this House of Representatives regard all suggestions and propositions of every kind, by whomsoever made, for a revival of the African slave trade, as shocking to the moral sentiment of the enlightened portion of mankind; and that any action on the part of Congress conniving at or legalizing that horrid and inhuman traffic, would justly subject the government and citizens of the United States to the reproach and execration of all civilized and Christian people throughout the world.

Etheridge was motivated to do so because he saw the attempt to reopen the trade as a potential spark for sectional conflict and eventual disunion. The following February, Etheridge spoke on his reasons for introducing the resolution, and focused entirely on the political threat to the union posed by a revival of the trade. Etheridge labeled the trade “the best thing—the very best, because it is impossible” to incite Northerners to support abolitionists “seeking the overthrow of
the Union, to destroy slavery in the States,” which in turn would mobilize Southern support for Fire-Eaters “urging the same means [secession] to preserve and perpetuate it [slavery],” thus leading to disunion.57

Etheridge’s resolution passed 152 to 57, although a 54-17 majority of Southern representatives voted in the negation. Representative James Lawrence Orr, unofficial leader of the moderate South Carolina National Democrats, introduced a more moderate resolution stating that a revival of the trade was “unwise, inexpedient, and against the settled policy of the Government,” intending to attract Southern members who opposed the slave trade without seeking to morally condemn it. Orr’s resolution passed 183 to 3.58 Etheridge would later point out the incongruity of Orr’s resolution, which described the slave trade as merely “against the settled policy of the Government,” when the “settled policy” was that slave trading was so heinous that it warranted the death penalty.59

Etheridge harshly condemned the trade as inherently wrong because he could. Etheridge, a former Whig-turned-Know Nothing, was a staunch unionist who would oppose Tennessee’s secession in 1861. He was elected Clerk of the United States House of Representatives during the Civil War with the support of the Republican Party, before later being removed for turning against the Republicans after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Etheridge supported slavery, but condemned the Supreme Court’s decision in Dred Scott v. Sanford and opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act for increasing sectional tension.60 He likewise considered the

58 Wish, 572-573.
59 Etheridge, 5.
proposal to revive the trade to be another radical provocation that threatened to divide the union. As an avowed opponent of proslavery extremism and secessionism, Etheridge had nothing to lose politically by condemning the trade and its supporters.

In contrast, Orr stated that the slave trade was only inexpedient. Manisha Sinha argues that the relative lack of Southern support for Etheridge’s resolution is evidence that moral opposition to the trade was a minority position in the South. Yet we cannot be certain most Southern representatives’ votes on the resolution reflected their real opinion, rather than political considerations. Orr championed the opposition to Etheridge’s resolution, but, as was seen in Chapter one, Orr and his allies in South Carolina were willing to publicly condemn the slave trade as not only inexpedient but morally wrong.

Orr was a moderate cooperationist National Democrat whose goal was to preserve the alliance between Northern and Southern Democrats, and agitation over the trade in Congress would threaten that alliance. Orr’s goal in opposing Etheridge’s resolution and in introducing his moderated resolution was likely to limit discussion on such a divisive issue. Declaring that a revival of trade would be imprudent was a middle ground between morally praising or condemning the trade. The congressional vote on Etheridge’s and Orr’s resolutions make it look like Southerners only considered the trade to be a matter of expediency and not morality, but, in politics, looks can be deceiving. We do not know the real motivations of those Southerners who voted against Etheridge’s resolution, but Orr’s example suggests that not all who opposed Etheridge’s resolution did so because they thought the trade was morally justified.

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Despite only attracting the support of a few Southern representatives, Etheridge’s resolution did find support in the Southern press. Newspaper support for Etheridge’s resolution displayed the two forms of opposition to the slave trade: moralist and pragmatist. Some papers took the moralistic position, agreeing with Etheridge that the slave trade was wrong. The *Memphis Eagle and Enquirer* commended Etheridge for genuinely representing the Southerners’ “loathing and contempt” for a revival of the trade.62

Other papers took a more pragmatic stance, arguing that, regardless of whether the trade was justified, there was nothing to be gained and much to be lost from agitating for its revival. In response to Etheridge’s resolution, the *Richmond Whig* published a contrived editorial which stated both that Southerners should not allow the rest of the world to dictate their morality, but also that Southerners should accept that the slave trade has been universally determined to be immoral.

“A re-opening of the African slave trade, it cannot be denied, would shock the sensibilities of other nations, not perhaps so humane as we are…While our policy should not be influenced, in any degree, by the wishes of other powers, all will admit that there is no use in unnecessarily braving the settled opinions of other members of the great family of nations.”63

The *Whig* seemed to suggest that the slave trade was actually moral—perhaps other nations would see it as such if they were as “humane” as the South—but concluded, due to global opposition to the slave trade, pursuing a revival of the trade was not in the South’s interests.

The debate in Congress and the reactions in the press show how the political debate over the slave trade began to change as the debate expanded. In South Carolina, there were two viable

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factions in politics and the press: the radical Southern Rights Democrats who wanted immediate secession, and the cooperationist National Democrats who did not favor secession at the moment but were not opposed in principle. Yet, as the issue spread throughout the entire region, it encountered a third faction that was little represented in South Carolina: the unionists who opposed secession in principle. Cooperationists such as Orr found themselves in the middle of the conflict and tried to strike a balance, whereas within the arena of South Carolina politics Orr was uncompromisingly against the trade. As the idea of reopening the slave trade spread across the South, the discussion changed with the political landscape.

**Religious Reaction**

The push to revive the slave trade encountered opposition from many parts of Southern society, but especially from the religious press. Southern religious leaders were near unanimous in their condemnation of the slave trade. They espoused opposition primarily on moralist grounds, ignoring pragmatic considerations about the trade’s social and economic benefits.

*The Southern Presbyterian Review* wrote that, regardless of whatever “advantages might possibly accrue to the Southern country,” the trade is “cruel and unjustifiable.” Similar to James Lawrence Orr in Chapter one, the *Review* distinguished between slavery in the South and enslavement in Africa. Whether the establishment of slavery in the United States had been achieved through “lawful or unlawful measures,” slavery by the 1850s was justified by the paternalistic “present relations” between master and slave, as slaves supposedly happily submitted to slavery. However, the *Review* argued that it would be wrong to forcibly enslave an African and “take away his freedom,” even if slavery would expose him to a higher level of civilization, because that end does not justify the means. The *Review* compared enslavement to
the crucifixion of Jesus; Christ’s death produced “incalculable blessings,” but does that make right the actions of “those who put him to death?”

_The Southern Episcopalian_ argued that the African slave trade was wrong, not in theory, but in practice. The magazine contended that it must be morally right to buy African slaves, as the right to purchase any type of property is an “ancillary right” to the right of owning that property—so, as advocates of the trade often argued, if it is right to own slaves, it must be right to buy them. However, the _Episcopalian_ argued that there is no manner of certifying that “slaves” purchased in Africa were genuine slaves, rather than kidnapped freemen, saying any purchase “may be a lawful transfer from one master to another—it may be a tortuous conveyance of stolen goods.” Participating the African slave trade would encourage slave raids and warring, a “wholesale system of rapine and murder” with which the South would then be associated. “Let the South, then, beware how she allies her institutions with that which is a curse and a crime, lest she too be despoiled of her strength and shorn of her glory.” Just as Pettigrew argued that associating slavery with the slave trade would undermine slavery’s justification, the _Episcopalian_ stated that associating slavery with slaving in Africa would threaten slavery’s legitimacy.

The case of the Southern Methodist Church and the slave trade is unusual, but the church leadership remained firmly against the trade. At the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South in May of 1858, the conference voted to expunge the church’s rule that forbade “the buying and selling of men, women, and children, with an intention to enslave

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them.” However, the resolution repealing the rule was clear that “this Conference expresses no opinion in regard to the African slave-trade,” and the rule was removed only because it is “ambiguous in its phraseology, and liable to be construed as antagonistic to the institution of slavery.”

Ronald Takaki argues that, at the time, Southern Methodists were attempting to distance themselves from Methodism’s history of opposing slavery. Southern Methodists split from the Northern Methodist Church in 1845, and, at the 1854 General Conference, the Southern Church expunged its rules condemning slavery. The conference also attempted to repeal the slave trade rule but fell short of the two-thirds majority; the conference then resolved that “the General Rule…is understood as referring exclusively to the slave trade, as prohibited by the Constitution and laws of the United States.” The repeal of the church’s rule against the slave trade was a result of a desire to make the church more explicitly proslavery, rather than to support a revival of the slave trade.

Despite the odd timing of the vote on the rule, the church leadership made clear its opposition to the slave trade, reiterating that the abolition of the rule against slave trading had nothing to do with the African slave trade. In the pastoral address to the 1858 Convention, six bishops wrote that “If, contrary to expectations, the African slave trade were revived,” the church would oppose the trade and “hold our membership to a rigid responsibility.”

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66 “The Fourth General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South XII, no. 3 (July 1858): 385.
68 James O. Andrew, et al., “Pastoral Address of the Fourth General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” Quarterly Review of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South XII, no. 3 (July 1858): 423.
to make its rules and teachings more explicitly proslavery, the Southern Methodist Church remained firmly opposed to the African slave trade.

The religious press of the South was unanimous in its condemnation of the slave trade. Religious leaders took a strong moralist position, ignoring pragmatic concerns about the trade’s potential economic or social impact on the United States, and instead arguing that the trade was wrong on account of the harm it would cause to Africans. W.E.B. Du Bois writes that, although failing to actually revive the trade, “the agitation did succeed in sweeping away nearly all theoretical opposition to the trade, and left the majority of Southern people in an attitude which regarded the reopening of the African slave-trade as merely a question of expediency.”

Manisha Sinha makes a similar assessment. Yet many Southerners did take a moral stance against the trade, especially the religious press and leadership. Whether or not a majority of white Southerners viewed the trade as a moral issue or a pragmatic one is an empirical question that is impossible to answer. Yet J. Johnston Pettigrew’s report in the South Carolina House of Representatives, Emerson Etheridge’s resolution in Congress, and especially the opinions of the religious press are evidence that the advocates of the slave trade did not “sweep away” all moral opposition to the trade.

**Louisiana**

The slave trade was debated in multiple state legislatures across the South, but supporters of the trade came closest to success in Louisiana. The 1855 Southern Commercial Convention in New

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70 Sinha, 185-186.
Orleans was the first prominent arena outside South Carolina where the slave trade was discussed, although with little fanfare. Dr. J.W.P. McGimsey moved that the convention should call on the federal government to repeal all laws prohibiting the trade. The motion was referred to and then died in committee, attracting only brief mention in the local press.\textsuperscript{71} However, Governor Adams’ message to the South Carolina General Assembly in November 1856 attracted considerable attention. His proposal to revive the trade provoked opposition from most of Louisiana’s leading newspapers, with the exception of \textit{The Daily Delta} of New Orleans, which commended Governor Adams and announced its support for the trade.\textsuperscript{72} The movement to reopen the trade would attract many of the state’s politicians as well as the New Orleans-based magazine \textit{De Bow’s Review}, but the state’s news press remained largely opposed.

In March of 1858, what became known as the African Apprentices Bill was introduced in the Louisiana House of Representatives, inspired by a similar bill that had been considered by the Mississippi Senate one year prior. The bill allowed for the importation of “free” African laborers indentured for a term of not less than fifteen years. In the span of one day, the Agriculture Committee reported favorably on the bill and the House suspended its rules to pass the bill in a single reading, voting for the bill by more than a two-to-one margin. The Louisiana Senate appointed a special committee chaired by a prominent advocate of the trade in the state, Edward Delony, who was both an American “Know Nothing” and a proslavery radical. Unsurprisingly, Delony’s committee reported on the bill favorably. The bill passed two readings in the Senate, the second of which required a tie-breaking vote by the lieutenant governor. The vote on the third reading was delayed by the opposition, who left the chambers to deny the

\textsuperscript{72} “Governor of South Carolina’s Message,” \textit{The Daily Delta}, November 30\textsuperscript{th}, 1856.
Senate quorum. When the Senate reconvened, the body passed a motion to postpone consideration of the bill indefinitely that had been proposed by Democratic Senator B.B. Simms, previously an outspoken supporter of the bill. The defection of Simms, a strong supporter of the National Democratic Party, was attributed, both by contemporary commentators and by modern historians, to intervention by the administration of President James Buchanan, who likely worried about the political ramifications for the National Democratic Party if the bill were to pass.73

In 1859, the Louisiana Legislature would consider three different legislative proposals supporting the slave trade. The African Apprentices Bill was reintroduced in the house in February by Representative F.L. Claiborne. On March 5th, the House voted to lay the bill on the table, postponing consideration indefinitely. In January, Representative E.W. Fuller proposed a joint resolution calling on Congress to repeal the slave trade ban. In February, the Committee on Federal Relations, chaired by Representative Claiborne, reported that it recommended no action be taken on Fuller’s resolution. Representative Bythell Haynes submitted a more passionate minority report condemning the resolution; his report was printed and distributed by the legislature. Meanwhile, in the senate, in January, Senator Delony introduced “An Act Relating to the Purchase of Negro Slaves by the People of the State of Louisiana” that would nullify the federal slave trade ban outright. In February, Senator Delony, as chair of the Committee on Federal Relations, gave a report favoring his own bill. The bill passed two readings. However, on March 7th, Senator Delony moved to lay his bill on the table, likely because he realized his more

radical bill had little chance of becoming law after the house voted down the African Apprentices Bill two days prior. The senate passed Delony’s motion.74

**Arguments for the Slave Trade**

The debate in Louisiana differed greatly from the debate in South Carolina, as the discussion over the slave trade had changed as the debate moved across the South. In South Carolina, the resolutions being debated were largely symbolic, simply calling on the state’s congressional delegation to work to repeal the federal slave trade ban. In contrast, in Louisiana, the state legislature considered permitting the importation of indentured African “apprentices.” Both advocates and opponents of the bill acknowledged that the legislation was legal chicanery designed to effectively reinstate the transatlantic slave trade, or something close to it, without violating federal law. The legislature also considered the more drastic measure of nullifying the federal laws against slave importation. Both the African Apprentices Bill and Negro Purchase Act would have had real, immediate consequences. In South Carolina, the slave trade was a symbolic issue in the conflict between radicals and moderates; in Louisiana, the revival of the trade was a real policy debate.

The advocates of the slave trade in Louisiana emphasized different arguments than those in South Carolina, in part due to the limited nature of the African Apprentices Bill. Whereas support for the trade in South Carolina was dominated by ideologues who argued that the trade was good and expedient, supporters of the trade in Louisiana were mostly pragmatists. They ignored the contradictions of Southern slavery that Leonidas Spratt and his allies were reacting to, and they did not talk about the trade’s potential to save the South from crisis. Supporters of

74 Hendrix, 118-119.
the trade in Louisiana did repeat the familiar paternalistic argument that the trade would benefit Africans. In his special committee report favoring the African Apprentices Bill, Senator Delony stated that the trade would benefit Africans, by moving them “from the most abject servitude, intellectual darkness, and moral degradation, to a condition of assured protection and comparative freedom.”75 However, his report focused on the practical economic and social benefits of the trade.

Advocates of the trade in Louisiana emphasized the straightforward economic argument that the limited supply of slave labor imposed a ceiling on Louisiana’s agricultural output. Unlike in South Carolina, where the state suffered from both a lack of labor and a lack of fertile land, Louisiana had plenty of fertile land that was unused or underused due to a lack of slaves, who were said to be uniquely “adapted” to plantation cultivation. Senator Delony’s report lamented the “undeveloped resources of food and raiment for countless millions of human beings” in Louisiana’s soil, left fallow for want of labor. Senator Delony argued for reviving the trade because, with imported slave labor, Louisiana could clear more land, grow more crops, and thus increase its prosperity.76

Advocates of the trade in Louisiana were also worried about the increasing concentration of slave ownership. Whereas supporters of the trade in South Carolina had been aristocrats opposed to democracy, advocates in Louisiana claimed that a revival of the trade would actually strengthen democracy by reducing inequality. In his report, Senator Delony made a populist

75 Edward Delony et al., “Report of the Special Committee to which was referred a bill to grant the authority of the State of Louisiana for the importation of free black laborers within the state,” in Documents of the First Session of the Fourth Legislature of the State of Louisiana (Baton Rouge, L.A.: n.p., 1858): 4.
76 Delony, et al., 5.
argument that, barring a sudden increase in the supply of slaves from foreign importation, the price of slaves would continue to rise, and slave ownership would become more concentrated.

“With no extraordinary supply of negro laborers from abroad, in a few years, the purchase of a valuable slave will be unattainable except by the wealthy, in whose possession will thus, by the force of circumstances, grow up estates of enormous magnitude, at variance with the general weal, and not altogether consistent with the genius of republican institutions.”

Senator Delony painted aristocracy as a threat to democratic values. He feared that the power of the slaveholding elite would continue to dangerously increase unless the trade were reopened. Despite their opposing political outlooks, South Carolinian aristocrat Leonidas Spratt and Louisianan populists Edward Delony came to the same conclusion: the South must drive down the price of slaves, and importation was the only means to do so.

Arguments Against the Slave Trade

Likewise, the opponents of the slave trade in Louisiana emphasized different objections than the opponents of the trade in South Carolina. Representative Bythell Haynes’ minority report against Representative Fuller’s resolutions calling for a repeal of federal anti-slave trade laws did repeat some of the arguments made by Johnston Pettigrew in his minority report against similar resolutions in the South Carolina House of Representatives. Haynes condemned the slave trade as cruel and inhumane, describing it as nothing more than rule by might, even going so far as to suggest that enslaving Africans violated their natural rights.

“Congress has in either case [filibustering being the other] legislated to protect the exposed, weak and undefended, from the violence, lust and brutality of the strong, exerted in opposition to natural right; and had Congress denounced both classes of cases as piratical, they would have violated no rule of language or of law.”

77 Delony, et al., 4.
78 Bythell Haynes, “Minority Report of the Committee on Federal Relations of the House of Representatives, relative to the repeal of the laws of the United States against the African slave
Like Pettigrew, Haynes wrote this while simultaneously arguing that slavery itself was morally good. Unlike Pettigrew, Haynes did not elaborate on the distinction between the two. Apparently, the difference between slavery and the slave trade was so obvious as to not require explanation. Despite this aside into moralism, most of Haynes’ report contained pragmatic arguments against the trade.

Haynes’ main argument was that a revival of the slave trade would be economically disadvantageous for Louisiana. Pettigrew had argued that lowering the price of slaves would not expand production in South Carolina, on account of the state’s relative infertility. In contrast, Haynes agreed with advocates of the trade that Louisiana’s fertile soil offered the potential to drastically expand production, given enough labor. However, Haynes warned that low this would lead to overproduction and drive commodity prices dangerously low. If Louisiana were “overstocked with wild Africans,” then “the quantity of cotton and sugar, and particularly cotton, would be increased to such an extent that we should not be to sell it at the cost of production.” This would render slavery “valueless beyond redemption,” destabilizing the peculiar institution and destroying the prosperity of slaveholders. “Slavery would then become a curse instead of a blessing, as it is now, to both master and servant.” It is notable that, to Haynes, whether slavery was a blessing or a curse depended on economics.⁷⁹

Additionally, Haynes warned that reviving the trade would harm the state’s poor whites. The crash in commodity prices would hurt small farmers who grew the same crops as plantations. Whereas Senator Delony had argued for the trade by stating that slave prices would

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⁷⁹ Haynes, 9.
continue to rise and slave ownership would continue to concentrate without the trade.

Representative Haynes countered that reviving the trade would lead to that same outcome. Haynes predicted that the expansion of slave labor from a revival of the trade would lead to an expansion of plantations, leaving no land left for small farmers.

“The more negroes we have, the less room for the poor man to live near us. As the rich man increases his negroes, he buys out his poor neighbors, and extends his landed possessions as a necessity. The effect of this state of things has already been seen in the counties of our sister States of Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, and in some of our own river parishes.

Haynes worried that slave labor would drive out free labor. Whereas Spratt and his allies may have seen this as a benefit, to Haynes it was a loss. Haynes argued that attracting non-slaveholders to settle in the South was a “desirable end,” as poor whites had proven themselves willing to defend their country even though “the rich had much more to fight for in the way of property.”

The opposition to the trade in Louisiana also focused heavily on the negative consequences of introducing “wild” Africans to the state. The Daily Picayune of New Orleans warned its readers that the African Apprentices Bill would bring “gangs of pagan laborers, fresh from the bloody and barbaric wars of the African coast” to Louisiana, introducing “barbarism and lawlessness” to the state’s “well-trained and contented [slave] population.” Additionally, the Picayune argued that importing nominally-free African laborers would counteract the state’s attempts to “repress the growth of the number of free negroes” through limiting manumission and encouraging free black emigration. The Picayune did not dispute the paternalistic claim that Africans would benefit from being enslaved in Louisiana, but, like Pettigrew speaking against the trade in South Carolina, they stated that their opposition was based “upon considerations of

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80 Haynes, 13-14.
the interests and the honor of the State,” and “not so much on any humanitarian ground.”

Whereas Pettigrew worried in the abstract that “wild” Africans’ degenerative impact on American-born slaves would undermine slavery’s legitimacy, Louisianan opponents of the trade were more practically concerned with the possibility that importing African laborers would increase the risk of rebellion among the state’s slave population and undermine the state’s attempts to limit its free black population.

Motivations for and against the Slave Trade

While the divisions in South Carolina over the slave trade overlapped with the political and geographic divide between radical Southern Rights Democrats concentrated in the lowcountry and moderate National Democrats in Charleston and the upcountry, the issue cut across geographic and political lines in Louisiana. As James Paisley Hendrix, Jr. argues, there is no pattern that explains the voting behavior of the representatives and senators in Louisiana. Hendrix analyzes the votes of legislators on the African Apprentices Bill and compares them with their home district’s level of slave ownership, predominant crop, and support or opposition to secession in 1861, and finds no significant correlation for any of these. Support for and opposition to the trade were well-balanced across the state.

Nor do politics explain the divide over the slave trade in Louisiana. While the state’s American Party tended to attract unionist ex-Whigs, the “Know Nothings” in the legislature split on the African Apprentices Bill. The Louisiana Democratic Party at the time was divided between the more cooperationist faction of Senator John Slidell and the more radical faction led

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82 Hendrix, 111-116.
by former Senator Pierre Soulé, yet the slave trade was not a wedge between them. Ronald Takaki suggests, on the basis of opinions expressed in contemporary newspapers, that Soulé’s followers may have supported the bill as a means of straining the alliance between Slidell and President James Buchanan by showing Slidell’s inability to control his state.\textsuperscript{83} However, Hendrix compares Democratic legislators’ support for or opposition to the bill with their identification with Soulé’s or Slidell’s factions, and again finds no correlation.\textsuperscript{84} Additionally, at the 1860 Democratic National Convention, Soulé would support Stephen A. Douglas, a harsh critic of the slave trade.\textsuperscript{85}

Furthermore, the case of Senator Simms, who switched from support for the bill to opposition, is instructive. Given his loyalty to the Buchanan administration, it is unclear what ulterior motivation Simms could have had in initially supporting the African Apprentices Bill—he did not want to provoke secession or split the Democratic Party. Unlike in South Carolina, divisions over the slave trade among Louisianan politicians and journalists did not neatly map onto their political affiliations.

It is likely that the advocates of the trade in Louisiana genuinely supported the trade on account of its purported benefits, as there is no other clear motivation that can explain the divisions in Louisianan politics over the slave trade. The strongest supporters of the slave trade in Louisiana were ideologues, praising the slave trade out of a desire to defend anything related to slavery. As \textit{The Daily Delta} declared:

\begin{quote}
“Slavery must be defended in its integrity—in its origin, in its sustentation, in its perpetuity—or its defense should be abandoned. We can see no other ground for a logical and candid mind. If it was wrong in its origin, it is wrong in its perpetuation. But if it was right, on the contrary to introduce it…then it is just and beneficent to nourish and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{83} Takaki, 172-174.
\textsuperscript{84} Hendrix, 122-123.
\textsuperscript{85} Takaki, 172-174.
perpetuate it. If the latter is the correct view, as it must be to make slavery defensible, the African slave trade ceases to be a question of morality, and becomes one solely of expediency; and, therefore, the South has a right to an increase of slave labor as long as there is an increasing demand for it.”

The Delta’s editorials arguing for the trade sounded very similar to those of Spratt’s Charleston Standard, and not only because Spratt also contributed editorials to the Delta. Both viewed the trade in an ideological light, and they believed that the trade was not only economically and socially beneficial, but morally good.

Yet the Delta’s moral praise of the slave trade is an exception to the rule in Louisiana. Unlike South Carolina, pragmatists dominated the debate in Louisiana. Advocates for the trade in Louisiana emphasized the economic and social desirability of the trade, not so much its morality. Senator Delony was one of the leading supporters of the slave trade in the state. His report favoring the African Apprentices Bill spent two paragraphs defending the morality of the slave trade, then devoted the remaining three pages to arguing for the trade “on the grounds of sound policy.” The difference between Carolinian ideologues and Louisiana pragmatists is reflected not only in their rhetoric, but also in their actions. Whereas the supporters of the slave trade in South Carolina agitated for symbolic resolutions calling for a revival of the slave trade, the pragmatists in Louisiana tried to pass bills permitting the importation of indentured laborers or nullifying federal laws—legislation with actual consequences.

Additionally, the complexity of the legislation being considered in Louisiana allowed for more nuanced positions than were seen in South Carolina. The New Orleans Daily Crescent opposed agitating for the slave trade in general on grounds that it was futile. The paper compared calling for a repeal of the federal slave trade ban to attempting to “roll back the current of the

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86 “Slavery and the Slave Trade,” The Daily Delta, November 14th, 1856.
87 Delony, et al., 4.
Mississippi at its highest flood, by a single wave of the hand.”

However, the *Crescent* did not oppose the trade in principle, and supported the African Apprentices Bill because it would “mightily increase the commerce, prosperity and wealth of New Orleans” without violating federal law. The ideological nature of the slave trade debate in South Carolina lent itself to a black-and-white dispute where one was either for or against the trade. In Louisiana, the pragmatic nature of the debate allowed for intermediate positions.

Ronald Takaki and William Freehling overlook these pragmatist advocates for the slave trade. Takaki argues that advocates of the slave trade were responding to the South’s “internal crisis,” while Freehling characterizes supporters of the trade as “proslavery ultras.” Both accurately describe support for the trade in South Carolina, but not Louisiana. Hendrix argues that Takaki’s “devil theory”—that advocates of the trade were using the issue to provoke secession—does not explain support for the trade in Louisiana. Walter Johnson draws a “rough division” between supporters of the trade in South Carolina, who agitated for symbolic resolutions supporting the trade, and those in the Mississippi Valley, who directed their efforts to more concrete measures to import African labor without violating federal law.

Takaki and Freehling focus on the most committed advocates of the trade, especially those from South Carolina, and consequently they fail to see how the pragmatist supporters of the trade in

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91 Hendrix, 121-122.
Louisiana and neighboring states had different motivations than the ideologues in South Carolina.

Likewise, opponents of the slave trade in Louisiana were largely pragmatists rather than moralists. Representative Haynes’ report defends the constitutional authority of the federal government to ban the slave trade, briefly describes the immorality of the slave trade in two paragraphs, and then devotes seven pages considering the trade “as a matter of Southern and state policy alone.”93 Opponents of the trade in Louisiana argued against the trade on the grounds that it would be economically harmful, that it would exacerbate social class tensions, or that it would split the National Democratic Party and the union. Although the opposition did sometimes acknowledge that the slave trade was wrong, they focused their rhetoric on practical concerns.

Some of those who opposed the slave trade in Louisiana seemed to do so more out of a general opposition to proslavery extremism rather than any reasons concerning the trade itself. The Daily Picayune of New Orleans, a unionist paper accustomed to criticism from radicals, complained about radicals who would “not allow that there is any political or social question worth thinking of except the negro question, and in their particular way, or that there is any way of dealing with it but under their direction.” The paper complained that such radicals unfairly labeled all those who opposed the admission of Kansas as a slave trade as abolitionists, and continued to say that:

“Other questions of grave moment and wider consequences, affecting the whole internal and social system within a State, and requiring the most delicate handling and free and full investigation, are dealt with in the same summary and dictatorial style. In some quarters the revival of the direct slave trade in Africans from the coast, is affirmed to be a necessity for the South; and, impossible as it is acknowledged to be, under the present power of Government, it is pressed with an insisting and presumptuous tone, which announces that whoever dissents will before long be classed as an Abolitionist.”94

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93 Haynes, 8.
94 “Political Quackery,” The Daily Picayune, March 18th, 1858.
The *Daily Picayune* summed up the frustrations many proslavery moderates felt towards extremists: that they were overzealous and intolerant of any Southerners who did not fully share their opinions. The paper compared the revival of the trade to question of admitting Kansas as a free or slave state, viewing both as political cudgels wielded by Southern radicals to stigmatize moderates for being insufficiently proslavery.

The debate in Louisiana was led by pragmatists on both sides. Unlike South Carolina, the divide over slave trade had little overlap with other geographic and political divisions, which makes it difficult to ascertain motivations. Yet the fact that the advocates of the trade in Louisiana focused their efforts on concrete measures, such as the African Apprentices Bill, rather than symbolic calls for a revival of the trade, suggests that their motivation was primarily material rather than ideological. To put it simply, they wanted more slaves at lower prices. They did not recognize the contradictions of Southern slavery identified by Leonidas Spratt and other ideological advocates of the trade in South Carolina, and they did not give as much weight to arguments about the trade’s moral justification or its potential to save and strengthen Southern society. They instead focused on the economic implications of a revival of the trade.

Similarly, the opponents of the trade in Louisiana cared mostly about practical concerns. They did not discuss much the slave trade’s potential impact on the paternalistic relations between masters and slaves and its implications for the justification of slavery. Rather, they argued against the trade on the grounds that it would be economically counterproductive and socially dangerous. Some opponents, such as Senator Simms, clearly oppose the trade because of ulterior political motivations, such as its threat to the National Democratic Party. Yet the lack of clear political divisions over the issue suggests that many opponents of the trade opposed the trade because they simply thought it to be bad policy.
Conclusion

The debate over the slave trade in South Carolina served as another wedge between the state’s two major political factions. Yet, as the cause spread throughout the South, the trade transformed into an issue in its own right, and the debate became more complicated as the political landscape changed. As the trade was discussed in Congress, the proposal to revive the trade encountered harsh condemnation from unionists and more measured disapproval from cooperationists. The Southern religious press unanimously condemned the slave trade. In the Mississippi Valley, the issue cut across geographic and political lines, with the debate over the trade being less of a battle over the South’s destiny and more of a policy dispute.

Motivations shifted as the issue of the slave trade spread from South Carolina to the rest of the South. Pro-trade ideologues and anti-trade moralists had led the discussion in South Carolina, and moralists continued to constitute the opposition to the trade in the Upper South and among the Southern religious leadership. They argued over whether to revive the trade in the abstract, considering its moral and social justification. However, in the Deep South in general and Louisiana in particular, pragmatists took over the debate. They focused more on the economics of the trade, and they concerned themselves with concrete measures to actually import more labor. In only a few years, the slave trade had gone from being one radical editor’s provocative proposal to a factional issue in South Carolina politics to an issue in its own right across the South.
Chapter Three:
The Peak, Decline, and End of the Slave Trade Proposal

From its origins in South Carolina, the movement to revive the trade had achieved national attention and spread throughout the South. Although condemned by much of the Southern press, the trade was endorsed by some newspapers and magazines, most prominently the Daily Delta of New Orleans, The Richmond Semi-Weekly Examiner, and De Bow’s Review. Bills and resolutions supporting a revival of the trade were introduced in South Carolina from 1857 to 1859, in Mississippi in 1857 and 1860, in Alabama in 1857, in Louisiana in 1858 and 1859, and in Georgia in 1858. All were postponed indefinitely or voted down. Most notably, the Louisiana State Legislature fell only a few votes short of passing the African Apprentices Bill. The movement would finally achieve a symbolic victory with the passing of a pro-trade resolution at the Southern Commercial Convention in May 1859, albeit one only enabled by the absence of moderates from the Upper South.

While encountering too much opposition to affect policy, the movement to revive the slave trade had secured enough support within the South to make its cause one of the most discussed issues of the day. However, by late 1859, with a presidential election looming, few Southerners were strongly advocating the trade. After secession, the Confederate Provisional Congress banned the slave trade in the Confederate States’ provisional constitution with little debate.

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How did one of the biggest controversies in the South in the 1850s, argued prominently at the 1859 Southern Commercial Convention, transform into a nonissue by 1861? Throughout the 1850s, the slave trade divided white Southerners as they argued over its morality and expediency. In the 1860 election, with many Southerners, radical and moderate, threatening secession if a “Black Republican” candidate were elected, disagreement over the slave trade became a threat to Southern unity. Consequently, all but the trade’s most die-hard supporters quickly dropped the issue during the election year, and then supported a constitutional prohibition of the trade to entice support for secession in the largely anti-trade Upper South.

The most committed proponents of the slave trade, like Leonidas Spratt, believed that the trade was crucially important, more important than secession. Consequently, these extreme ideologues opposed the Confederate Constitution and its slave trade ban. However, most advocates of the trade were not so committed. Forced to choose between maintaining Southern cohesion and agitating for the trade, they chose cohesion. Secession killed the slave trade.

The end of the slave trade debate shows the mixture of motivations behind the agitation for the trade. The ideological supporters of the trade, true believers like Leonidas Spratt, were motivated by the trade itself, hoping that its revival would solve the South’s political, economic, and social problems. The most extreme among them continued to agitate for the trade even after secession. The symbolists who treated the trade as a purely symbolic issue, such as William L. Yancey of Alabama, used the trade as a Southern rallying cry, but were not interested in actually reviving the trade. They naturally dropped the trade when it became clear that agitating for it would undermine support for secession in the Upper South. Then there were the pragmatist supporters of the trade, like Robert Barnwell Rhett of South Carolina, who believed the trade was good policy, but not as important as the ideologues made it out to be. After the 1860
election, most of the pragmatists were willing to sacrifice the trade in order to create a united, independent Southern Confederacy. Only a minority of the slave trade’s supporters were as committed as Spratt, while most either never really cared about the trade or were willing to concede on the trade as the price to pay for a united Confederacy.

**Southern Commercial Convention**

In May of 1859, it seemed unlikely that agitation for the slave trade would soon all but disappear. At the Southern Commercial Convention in Vicksburg, Mississippi, the trade was the biggest item of discussion. These annual conventions were intended to promote the economic development of the South and restore the economic balance between the North and South. While initially attracting some merchants and industrialists genuinely interested in development, the conventions became largely dominated by politicians and journalists more interested in politics.

The conventions gained a reputation for grandstanding, as its nonexpert members made implausible proposals for achieving Southern greatness. The Southern Commercial Convention increasingly became a joke among all except the secessionist radicals who attended. *The Daily Dispatch* of Richmond complained that “these Conventions have accomplished nothing as yet, except the manufacture of forensic gas.” Even sympathetic papers like the *Montgomery Advertiser*, while decrying the “proclivity” of Southern newspapers to “sneer at” the conventions, had to concede that the conventions did little more than “pass harmless paper resolves and pronounce eloquent speeches.”

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The conventions were the perfect place to agitate for the slave trade. Advocates of the trade had always pitched the trade as a means, the best means, or even the only means, of restoring the balance between the North and the South—the stated objective of the conventions as well. The conventions’ oft-mocked lack of care about feasibility and results meant that the trade’s economic and political impracticality would not hinder its acceptance.

The slave trade was first raised at the 1855 convention in New Orleans, when Dr. J.W.P. McGimsey moved that the federal government should repeal all laws prohibiting the slave trade. The motion was referred to and buried in committee. At the 1856 convention in Savannah, Colonel W.B. Goulden, the leader of Georgia’s slave trade advocates, repeated McGimsey’s motion. He was seconded by Leonidas Spratt himself. The motion was tabled. A subsequent motion to appoint a committee to investigate the slave trade was defeated. At the 1857 convention in Knoxville, Spratt moved to appoint a committee to report on the trade at the next convention. The motion passed, and the president of the convention, James D.B. De Bow, editor of the pro-trade De Bow’s Review, appointed Spratt as chair. Unsurprisingly, Spratt’s committee reported favorably on the trade at the 1858 convention in Montgomery, sparking a heated debate that ended with a motion to postpone consideration of the issue. At the Vicksburg convention in 1859, Spratt and his allies finally triumphed, as by then moderates largely refused to attend the convention. By a vote of 40 to 19, the convention recommended the repeal of “all laws, State or Federal, prohibiting the African slave trade.”

The report Spratt wrote for the convention repeated many of his usual arguments for the trade: that it would benefit Africans, that it would strengthen Southern aristocracy, and that it would restore the political balance between the North and the South. Previously, Spratt

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99 Bernstein, 25-29.
concerned himself little with questions over whether the trade would spark secession,
considering the future of the Union to not be as important as achieving the South’s “destiny” of
reviving the slave trade. Yet his report included a paragraph declaring that the slave trade could
be revived without leading to secession. Spratt argued that the slave trade would not split the
Union, because the Northern economy was already dependent on Southern slave labor and would
benefit from an expansion of slavery, and the capitalistic North would put money above all other
considerations.

“It [the slave trade] will deprive the North of her preponderance of political power, and it
will be opposed, therefore, by the political tradesmen at the North…So also there are
interests in its favor. To the mercantile and commercial interests of that section it will
give a richer field for operations than they have ever dared to dream of. To the
manufacturing interests it will give the promise of more abundant cotton, and of a wider
market for their fabrics. It is interest, not sentiment or opinion, that gives intendency to
political action, and these interests concurring, can control the North.—The people of that
section love power, but only for its profits.”

Here Spratt and his committee distanced themselves from secessionism. Their motivation was
likely to mollify Southern opposition to the trade, as one of the main objections raised against the
trade in previous conventions had been that the proposal would cause disunion. This shows how
the ideological advocates of the trade supported the trade genuinely and were just using the issue
to stir up secessionist sentiment. This includes Spratt, whose report stated the South should only
secede if it were necessary for a revival of the trade, and Colonel Goulden of Georgia, who was
curiously both a supporter of the slave trade and a staunch unionist. To the ideologues, the
slave trade was a true cause, not just a political weapon.

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Trade, made to the Southern Commercial Convention, at Montgomery, Alabama, May 10, 1858,
by L.W. Spratt, Chairman” (Montgomery, A.L.: n.p., 1858).
101 Spratt, et al., on Spratt; and Ronald T. Takaki, A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to
Yet other supporters of the slave trade were clearly using the trade only as a wedge issue, especially the symbolist advocates who viewed the trade as a purely symbolic matter. The most egregious example is the prominent “Fire-Eater” and former United States Representative William L. Yancey of Alabama. Yancey was a member of Spratt’s committee at the Southern Commercial Convention, having been appointed without his knowledge (he had not been present at the 1858 convention). Yancey submitted his own minority report to the 1859 convention, in which he proposed that the convention resolve that the slave trade ban “ought to be repealed,” because it condemned slavery by association. While trying to rally Southerners to fight this “insult to the South,” Yancey was careful in his report to not express “any matured opinion…as to the expediency of re-opening the slave trade.”¹⁰² Yancey agreed with Spratt that the ban on the slave trade was a moral attack on slavery, but he did not take any position on whether the trade itself was desirable. Yancey would later say that it should be left to individual states to decide whether to allow foreign slave importation.¹⁰³ For Yancey, the slave trade was a symbol to turn the South against the North; he was blatantly unconcerned with actually reopening the trade.

Regardless of their motivations, proponents of the slave trade celebrated their success at the 1859 Vicksburg convention—their only victory after six years of agitation. Yet among Southern opponents of the trade, the Vicksburg convention was quickly dismissed as an unrepresentative body of extremists. The Alabama Beacon of Greensboro reported the convention’s resolution with a curt explanation that the “deliberations do not afford any thing like a correct test of public sentiment” as only “those holding the most ultra views” were in

¹⁰² “Mr. Yancey’s Speech,” Montgomery Weekly Advertiser, February 6th, 1861.
attendance. The *Alexandria Gazette* of Virginia mocked the Vicksburg convention’s low attendance. There were only twenty-seven delegates from eight states; “a powerful Convention, truly.” Opponents of the slave trade were not impressed by an endorsement of the trade from a convention dominated by extremists.

The advocates of the slave trade succeeded at the Southern Commercial Convention only because moderates stopping attending, after previous conventions had devoted more and more time to radical pet causes like the slave trade. The passing of a paper resolution by a powerless, unrepresentative, and often ridiculed body would be the high point of the movement to reopen the slave trade. Despite the convention’s relative unimportance, the capture of the Southern Commercial Convention by advocates of the trade shows that a revival of the slave trade, while lacking majority support across the South, was supported by a significant minority. While not capable of affecting policy, they were at least able to make noise about it. Yet within a year, most Southerners were trying to avoid discussing the trade.

**1860 election**

Many Southerners had noticed the divisiveness of the slave trade years before the 1860 election. South Carolina Fire-Eater Robert Barnwell Rhett, a former United States Senator and the editor of the radical Charleston *Mercury*, was one of the earliest prominent supporters of Spratt and his proposal to revive the slave trade. He would become the earliest prominent convert to the opposition. In mid-1857, *The Mercury* withdrew its support for the trade. *The Mercury* argued that trade was morally good, economically wise, and legally sound, but conceded that the issue

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was a lost cause. The trade was opposed by virtually the entirety of the North and the Upper South, and by much of the Deep South. Continued discussion could not succeed in actually reviving the trade; the only result would be division within the South. If “this scheme is impracticable in Congress, and would disunite the South itself, why agitate it?” Perhaps, if the Union were to be dissolved, the slave trade could realistically be revived, and then discussion would be warranted. Until then, “silence” is the “better policy.”

Rhett represents the pragmatic advocates of the slave trade, like state senator Edward Delony and other Louisianans in Chapter two. Neither supporting the slave trade as a moral cause (like Leonidas Spratt) nor using the trade only as a symbol (like William Yancey), these Southerners genuinely supported a reopening of the trade for practical reasons. However, when forced to choose, most would decide that Southern unity was more important than reviving the trade. After Rhett’s defection, The Mercury would continue to praise the slave trade as a theoretical principle while condemning its agitation as inexpedient, until late 1859. Then, Rhett shut down all discussion of the trade, considering it too divisive to even mention. Rhett clearly still saw merit in the idea of reviving the slave trade, as The Mercury argued the South should honestly consider its revival—but only after establishing an independent, exclusively-Southern confederacy. On the slave trade, Rhett was the inverse of his fellow Fire-Eater Yancey. Whereas Yancey did not really desire a revival of the trade but agitated for the trade in order to provoke secession, Rhett did desire a revival of the trade but stopped discussing it in order to secure Southern unity.

107 Takaki, 228.
The 1860 election made the issue of Southern unity more urgent. In the 1856 election, the newly-established Republican Party—referred to disparagingly in the South as the “Black Republican” Party—won one hundred fourteen electoral votes, out of two hundred ninety-six total. The party continued to grow through the absorption of antislavery Democrats, ex-Whigs, and American “Know Nothings.” A Republican victory in 1860 was a possibility that could not be ignored. Given the slave trade’s controversial nature, many supporters of the trade came to think like Rhett. They believed that the trade was not even worth discussing, as it risked breaking the Democratic proslavery coalition and handing control of the federal government to the Republicans.

Consequently, the movement to revive the trade suffered another high-profile defection: Governor A.B. Moore of Alabama. Moore was one of the symbolist supporters of the slave trade, viewing the trade primarily through a symbolic lens. Like his fellow Alabaman William Yancey, Moore advocated for abolishing the federal slave trade ban, while not arguing for an actual revival of the trade, because he saw the ban as an insult to the South. Yet, unlike Yancey, Moore was no radical; as a cooperationist who supported the National Democratic Party and opposed immediate secession, Moore was considered a moderate on slavery (by Alabama standards). Moore must have genuinely believed that the slave trade ban was a symbolic attack on the South, as he had no interest in using the issue to stir up sectional unrest. Then, in mid-1859, Moore announced his opposition to further “agitation” of the issue, in a letter reported favorably by most papers in his state and the wider South.108

Moore argued that now was not the time to discuss the slave trade, for the South could only prevent a catastrophic “Black Republican” victory in 1860 by remaining unified. “Division

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108 Wish, 588.
and distraction, in the Southern States, will be fatal.” Like Rhett, Moore believed that the question of the trade could only be settled after securing the institution of slavery itself. Even if the South were to remain united, Moore worried—correctly, in hindsight—that the Democratic Party may lose the election on account of “schisms, divisions and want of harmony” between the Southern and Northern wings of the party. If this were to happen, the Southern states “cannot hesitate” to withdraw from the Union. For Moore, the slave trade was not worth seceding over, but a Republican president and congress were.

According to Moore, the Republican Party posed a dire threat to the South and its way of life, and discussion of the slave trade would divide the South at a time when unity was necessary for survival. Whereas the more extreme advocates of the trade like Leonidas Spratt saw the trade as a cure for all that ailed the South, Moore recognized the trade as a source of weakness and division in the South’s existential electoral contest with “the anti-slavery party.” Hence, discussion of the trade had to be put aside until the election was over.

Many other advocates of the trade likewise temporarily silenced themselves for the sake of maintaining Southern unity. The leading pro-slave trade paper in Louisiana, *The Daily Delta* of New Orleans, reported in December of 1859 that “the supporters of the revival of that traffic have everywhere… earnestly deprecated any efforts to make it a party question.” The *Delta* noted that advocates did not think “the question should be introduced into the [Democratic National] Convention,” whereas the question of a federal slave code for the territories would almost certainly cause controversy at the convention.110

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Although many Southerners wished to avoid discussing the slave trade, the divisive issue still surfaced at the 1860 Democratic National Convention in Charleston, if only briefly. The chairman of the Alabama delegation, secessionist Leroy Pope Walker, introduced a resolution declaring that the federal government must provide “protection and equal advantage to all descriptions of property recognized as such by the laws of any of the States as well within the Territories as upon the high seas.” The proposed plank was interpreted as committing the federal government both to the creation of a slave code in all federal territories and to protecting the transatlantic slave trade—both radical, and provocative, goals. The convention voted down the resolution, after which Walker led the Alabama delegation in a walkout. They were followed by delegates from Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina, Florida, and Texas. The Democratic Party split into separate Northern and Southern parties, with the former nominating Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois and the latter Vice President John C. Breckinridge from Kentucky.\textsuperscript{111}

Ronald Takaki argues that the issue of the slave trade served as a wedge for secessionist radicals like Walker to “help bring about” the splintering of the National Democratic Party and the subsequent election of a Republican president, in order to divide to union.\textsuperscript{112} Walter Johnson makes a similar argument that advocates of the trade “effectively demolished” the National Democratic Party in Charleston.\textsuperscript{113} However, both authors overstate the importance of the slave trade at the convention.

The real divide between the party’s Northern and Southern wings was over the status of slavery in the territories, not the slave trade. At the Alabama Democratic Party Convention, the

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\textsuperscript{111} Takaki, 227-230.
\textsuperscript{112} Takaki, 227-230.
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state party passed twelve resolutions instructing its delegates how to vote, ten of which concerned slavery in the territories, and none of which mentioned the slave trade. The delegates were instructed to withdraw if the National Democratic Party failed to incorporate the “substance” of the resolutions into its platform. In the formal protest submitted by the Alabama delegation to the convention, the delegation wrote that that they withdrew because they disagreed with the national party on the issue of popular sovereignty.

“We deny to the people of a Territory any power to legislate against the institution of slavery; and we assert that it is the duty of the Federal Government, in all its departments, to protect the owner of slaves in the enjoyment of his property in the Territories.

The slave trade was not mentioned in the protest.\textsuperscript{114} Slavery in the territories split the Democratic Party in 1860, not the slave trade. Although some supporters of the trade may have hoped to use the trade to divide the party and spark secession, it was clear by 1860 that a revival of the trade was not popular enough of an issue to do so, even in the Deep South. But the extension of slavery into the territories was.

\textbf{Secession}

In December of 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union. Its convention did not address the issue of the slave trade, likely because it would have been imprudent to bring up one of the most divisive issues in state politics at a time when unity was needed.

In January of 1861, more Southern states called secession conventions, and Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and (on February 1st) Texas withdrew from the Union. The slave trade was debated in the Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana conventions. On January 23rd, the Georgia State Convention voted to maintain the state’s constitutional ban on the slave trade, while also repudiating the federal law declaring the slave trade to be piracy and substituting imprisonment for the death penalty as punishment for slave trading.115 On January 26th, the Mississippi State Convention resolved that it was not the “purpose or policy of the people of the State of Mississippi” to reopen the slave trade.116

The Alabama State Convention would take a stronger stance against the trade. At the convention, William L. Yancey spoke against the trade. Yancey clarified that his past agitation for the repeal of the federal slave trade ban was “not so much for the African Slave Trade,” but rather because the ban represented a “stigma” on the South. Yancey concluded by saying that he proposed that the new Confederacy should prohibit the international slave trade, for two reasons. “First, because we will have as many slaves in our Confederacy as our territory can profitably support. Second—because we should offer inducements to the slave States, which have not yet seceded, to do so.”117 A few days later, on January 28th, the Alabama State Convention instructed

117 “Mr. Yancey’s Speech.”
its delegates to the Confederate Provisional Congress that it was the “will of the people” of the state that they “insist” on a slave trade ban.\textsuperscript{118} 

In contrast, the Louisiana State Convention was too divided over the slave trade for either supporters or opponents to claim victory. On January 30\textsuperscript{th}, the convention considered and tabled four motions variously supporting and opposing a ban on the slave trade. The only resolution on the subject that the convention passed stated that, in voting down a previous pro-trade resolution, the Convention did not mean “to express any opinion on the subject of said resolutions.” After the Confederate Provisional Congress banned the trade, the convention considered a resolution supporting the congress’s decision, but discussion of the resolution was postponed twice and finally tabled.\textsuperscript{119} 

Given the actions of the state conventions, it is not surprising that the Confederate Provisional Congress included a slave trade ban in the provisional constitution written in February. The ban encountered some opposition headed by Robert Barnwell Rhett and James Chesnut, both deputies from South Carolina. Both men were pragmatists who opposed the trade as policy, but not necessarily in principle. Rhett and Chesnut proposed amendments that would replace the constitutional ban with a weaker clause that merely gave the Confederate government the authority to ban the slave trade. This would allow the trade to be revived in the future through an act of the Confederate Congress, rather than a much more difficult constitutional

\textsuperscript{118} Journal of the Convention of the People of the State of Alabama, Held at the City of Montgomery, Commencing on the 7\textsuperscript{th} Day of January, 1861 (Montgomery, A.L.: Shorter & Reid, State Printers, 1861): 130-132.

amendment. Their amendments were tabled indefinitely, with all six other Confederate states voting against South Carolina (votes were counted by each state’s delegation).\textsuperscript{120}

The Provisional Congress approved the provisional constitution with a strong slave trade ban. Article I, Section 7 of the provisional constitution read:

“One. The importation of African negroes from any foreign country other than the slave-holding States of the United States of America, is hereby forbidden; and Congress are required to pass such laws as shall effectually prevent the same.

2. The Congress shall also have power to prohibit the introduction of slaves from any State not a member of this Confederacy.

Similar clauses would be included in the permanent constitution written in March.\textsuperscript{121} Subsection 1 was a carrot to encourage the Upper South states, who were strongly opposed to the slave trade, to join the new Confederacy. Subsection 2 was a stick; the Confederacy was threatening to cut the Upper South states out of the lucrative domestic slave trade if they remained in the Union. As Yancey had put it, the Deep South needed to provide “inducements” for secession.

The Upper South states were not interested in seceding if it led to a resumption of the slave trade. At the Virginia State Convention in February, a delegate proposed a resolution that “Virginia will not become a member of any confederacy, the government of which, by the constitution of which, the re-opening of the African slave trade is not prohibited.” Other delegates attacked the resolution as superfluous due to the slave trade ban in the Confederate Provisional Constitution, although the sponsor still argued for his resolution on the grounds that


\textsuperscript{121} Provisional and Permanent Constitutions, of the Confederate States (Richmond, V.A.: Tyler, Wise, Allegre and Smith, Printers: 1861): 6 and 21.
the permanent Confederate States Constitution could omit a ban. No one argued against the substance of the resolution, but the convention ultimately voted to table it.  

The Upper South’s widespread opposition to the trade was rooted in both moral and material reasons. Morally, politicians, journalists, and religious leaders across the Upper South expressed outrage at the slave trade, condemning the trade as antithetical to the paternalistic justification of slavery. Materially, as net slave-exporters, the Upper South states would be harmed by competition with African sources of slave labor. A constitutional prohibition of the African slave trade guaranteed that the Upper South states would not risk the value of their slaves by joining the Confederacy. The clause authorizing the Confederate Congress to ban all foreign slave importations threatened to lower the value of slaves in the Upper South if the states did not secede, as Upper South planters made more profit selling their slaves to the fertile Cotton states than they did working them on their own less productive lands. However, given the Deep South’s insatiable demand for labor and inadequate supply, it is unlikely that the Confederate government would have prohibited all foreign slave importations if none of the Upper South states seceded.

The Confederate Constitution’s ban on the slave trade was seen as a betrayal by some radicals. In response to the provisional constitution, *The Charleston Mercury* opined that it was “unfortunate” that the “stigma of illegitimacy and illegality should be placed upon the institution of slavery by a fundamental law against the slave trade,” when the question of reviving the trade should be “a matter of policy, not principle.” *The Mercury* complained of “too great a deference and delay for the Border States still in the Union.”

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However, after the permanent Confederate States Constitution was sent to the states for ratification in March, the ban on the slave trade elicited controversy only in South Carolina. Supporters of the slave trade in the state convention spoke against ratification. South Carolina eventually ratified the constitution by a vote of 138 to 21 on April 3rd, after the constitution had been ratified by the other Confederate states and become effective. Among those that voted against the constitution were outspoken advocates of the trade such as Leonidas W. Spratt, James Hopkins Adams, and Alexander Mazyck.\textsuperscript{124}

The supporters of the slave trade continued to argue against the slave trade ban at the South Carolina State Convention. Two days later, over the objections of longtime opponent of the trade James Lawrence Orr, the convention passed a resolution stating that, once the Confederacy was established and at peace, South Carolina would call for a national convention to consider amendments to the constitution, including one that eliminated the constitutional ban on the slave trade, while granting the Confederate Congress the power to ban the trade.\textsuperscript{125}

In no other state did the ban pose any noticeable obstacle to ratification. The slave trade had proven to be such a divisive issue in the South that, by 1861, only the most committed ideological supporters of the trade were continuing to advocate for it. Only in South Carolina did they form a political bloc powerful enough to cause trouble.

Most advocates of the trade were willing to sacrifice the slave trade in order to create a united, independent Southern confederacy. But to a dedicated minority, secession was pointless without the trade. In a letter written after the adoption of the provisional constitution, Spratt

\textsuperscript{124} Takaki, 237-239.
\textsuperscript{125} Journal of the Convention of the People of South Carolina, Held in 1860, 1861, and 1862, Together with the Ordinances, Reports, Resolutions, Etc. (Columbia, S.C.: R.W. Gibbes, Printer to the Convention, 1862): 243-249.
wrote that, if the constitutional ban were adopted permanently, “then our whole movement is defeated.” The South seceded for slavery, but a majority of white Southerners owned no slaves and “constitute not a part of slave society but a democratic society.” The South had achieved one “revolution” in gaining independence, but “another revolution may be necessary” to diffuse slave ownership and thus secure “slave society” in the South.\footnote{L.W. Spratt, “Philosophy of Secession; A Southern View, Presented in a Letter addressed to the Hon. Mr. Perkins of Louisiana, in Criticism on the Provisional Constitution adopted by the Southern Congress at Montgomery,” call number 2847conf, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Libraries, Chapel Hill, N.C., accessed online.}

**Conclusion**

The slave trade was a divisive issue in the South in the late 1850s. A revival of the trade pitted the Upper South against the Deep South, and, even within the Deep South, the proposal was controversial. Many of those advocating the trade were willing to sacrifice the trade for the sake of Southern unity during the secession crisis. That is not to say that they were using the trade merely as a secessionist ploy all along. Such an analysis is accurate in the case of someone like Yancey, who eloquently argued for abolishing the laws declaring the trade to be piracy while carefully refusing to express any opinion on the trade itself. However, many pragmatist supporters of the trade desired actually reopening the slave trade—they just cared more about Southern unity, as in the case of Robert Barnwell Rhett.

Only the most extreme ideological advocates of the trade considered a revival of the trade to be more important than secession. This led to the controversy in the South Carolina State Convention, as these diehard supporters made a last stand for their cause. While Spratt and his allies may have denounced the “great calamity” of the Confederate slave trade ban, most
Southerners welcomed the ban as either a moral imperative or a pragmatic concession necessary to achieve unity.
Conclusion:

The Significance of the Debate over the Slave Trade

Except for the continued agitation of Spratt and a few other extreme ideologues, the Confederate Constitution’s ban on the slave trade ended discussion of the trade. Bringing up the issue would create division that the South could not risk during wartime. Perhaps if the Confederacy had won its independence and maintained slavery, the trade might have again become a major debate in the South. However, the Union victory in the Civil War rendered the issue moot.

The advocates of the slave trade can be roughly divided into three groups based on their motivations. First, there were the ideologues, like Leonidas Spratt, who genuinely believed in their cause and thought the slave trade was morally good and expedient. They hoped that a revival of the trade would resolve the moral, social, and economic contradictions and crises the South was facing. The most extreme saw themselves as prophets, leading the South in fulfilling its “destiny” to become the most prosperous and well-ordered society in the world. This group was dominant among supporters of the trade in South Carolina and focused their efforts in state legislatures on symbolic resolutions calling for a revival of the trade.

Second, there were the symbolists who used the trade as a purely symbolic issue, like Representative William L. Yancey and Governor A.B. Moore of Alabama. They saw the federal slave trade ban as a stigmatization of the peculiar institution, even as they either argued that the trade should not be actually revived or did not express any opinion. This group agitated for resolutions condemning the slave trade ban without promoting the trade itself.

Finally, there were the pragmatists who argued that the trade was good policy, focusing on the trade’s economic and political consequences and either ignoring or minimizing the question of morality. These were the supporters of the trade who simply wanted more slaves.
This group was common in the Deep South, especially Louisiana, and they aimed to pass laws with actual consequences, such as the African Apprentices Bill, rather than symbolic resolutions.

The opponents of the slave trade fell into two camps. The moralists argued that the trade was morally wrong, and so any potential benefits of the trade were irrelevant. This group was common in the Upper South, as well as among the religious leadership of the entire South. Then there were the pragmatists who opposed the trade as merely inexpedient; they either conceded that the trade was not immoral or did not really consider the question of morality. The pragmatists were more common among opponents of the trade in the Deep South, especially Louisiana. Of course, the division was not always clear-cut. Many opponents of the trade, such as Johnston Pettigrew and James Lawrence Orr in South Carolina, advanced both moral and pragmatic arguments against the trade.

The debate over the slave trade among the ideologues and moralists was a discussion of the ideals of Southern slave society, and whether slavery succeeded in achieving those ideals. Proponents of the slave trade saw a disconnect between the idealization and the reality of the South. Slavery was said to be paternalistic, but slaveholders sold their slaves like commodities. Slavery was supposed to create a harmonious social order, but the increasing concentration of slave ownership created conflict between the Southern white slaveholding and working classes. Slavery was seen as the superior system, but the slave South’s population and economy were being outpaced in by the free labor North’s. The ideologues stated that the trade would resolve all these contradictions. The moralists had to respond by either denying such contradictions existed or denying that the trade would solve them.

This aspect of the debate is useful for highlighting the contradictions and weaknesses of Southern slave society, as well as showing how Southerners responded. The ideological
supporters of the slave trade saw the contradictions for what they were, but concluded that more
slavery was the answer. Moralist opponents of the trade had to rationalize their way out of these
contradictions. Many condemned the slave trade in terms an abolitionist would agree with, while
making a paternalistic case for why slavery itself was different. In some cases, they simply
ignored objections, such as Spratt’s argument that the domestic slave trade could not be justified
if the international slave trade was wrong. The moralists never gave a direct response to this
argument, perhaps because there was no rationalizing their way past that objection.

The moral debate over the slave trade also illuminates how white Southerners
rationalized slavery itself. Even John C. Calhoun never argued that slavery was always and
everywhere a positive good—he only defended the “present relations” between master and slave.
Most Southerners likewise qualified their support for slavery, requiring that certain paternalistic
conditions be met. Many worried that a revival of the trade would undermine these conditions,
and consequently they condemned the slave trade while praising slavery. Only a minority of
radicals believed so strongly in the theory of slavery as a positive good that they assumed
enslavement de novo of free Africans would be a positive good as well.

In contrast to the ideologues and moralists, the pragmatists on either side ignored the
contradictions of slavery’s justification. In fact, they tended to overlook slavery’s justification
altogether, accepting the peculiar institution as a given. They took a businesslike view of the
slave trade, weighing its potential costs and benefits as with any other economic proposal. To
them, the trade was a “matter of policy, not principle,” as The Charleston Mercury wrote.

The distinction in rhetoric and actions between the ideologues and moralists in the
seaboard South and the pragmatists in the inland Deep South suggests more general differences
in the outlook of these slaveholders. The planters of the old Southern seaboard states seem to
have been more strongly committed to the paternalistic and aristocratic theories of slavery—with the conception of slavery as a social system—and hence they were greatly concerned with the question of the trade’s morality. However, the cotton and sugar planters of the new inland states seemed to be more capitalistic in their approach to slavery, viewing it as a business or an industry. They cared more about the economics of slavery than its moral and social justification; consequently, they focused on the trade’s practical effects and ignored questions about morality.

This thesis has been a rough sketch of the debate over the slave trade from 1853 to 1861. Not much has been written about this topic. Most of what has been written, such as the works of Manisha Sinha, William Freehling, and Walter Johnson, has focused on the advocates of the trade, and particularly the most devout advocates. Ronald Takaki’s chapter on the opposition to the trade and James Paisley Hendrix, Jr.’s analysis of the movement in Louisiana are exceptions. It would be beneficial if there were more analysis of the more moderate proponents of the trade, as well as of the varieties of opposition to the trade. The debate reveals much about the South in the decade leading up to the Civil War, including its economic and social contradictions, the response of white Southerners to these contradictions, and their conception and justification of slavery in general.
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