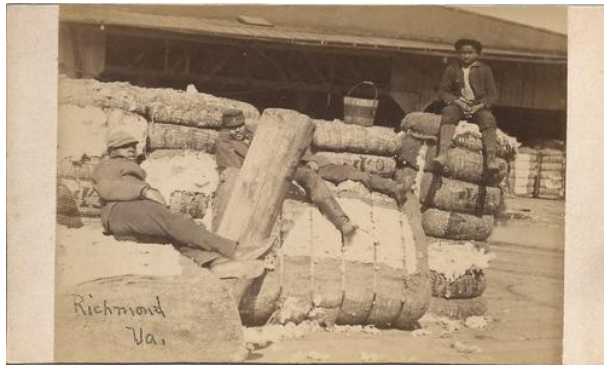


## Chapter 223 - James Henry Hammond Tells The North That “Cotton Is King”

Time: March 4, 1858

### Senator Hammond Hails Southern Superiority



Bales of Cotton at Market in Richmond

On March 4, 1858 Fire-eater Senator James Henry Hammond responds to attacks levelled by Henry Seward of New York, in what becomes known as his “Cotton Is King” address. He begins by asserting that the Pro-Slavery Kansas Constitution authors acted legally, and Congress has no right to question its sovereignty, as expressed in its final document. It oversteps its boundaries in doing so.

*Congress does not hold the sovereignty of Kansas....(It has) power to admit a State— "admit," not create...And when a State knocks at the door for admission, Congress can with propriety do little more than inquire if her constitution is republican. That it embodies the will of her people must necessarily be taken for granted, if it is their lawful act.*

If the Lecompton Convention decided to adopt positions held by minority factions, so be it. Proper constitutions protect the rights of minorities.

*If this was a minority constitution I do not know that that would be an objection to it. Constitutions are made for minorities... (as) the Constitution of this Government was made by a minority. (Besides) the convention was, or might have been, elected by a majority of the people of Kansas.*

He then shifts his aim toward the Republicans, singling out Seward for charging that frauds were committed solely by the pro-slavery party, not the Northern emigrants who arrived with Sharp’s rifles and Bowie knives.

*I hear, on the other side of the Chamber, a great deal said about "gigantic and stupendous frauds;" and the Senator from New York, yesterday, in portraying the character of his party and the opposite one, laid the whole of those frauds upon the pro-slavery party... To listen to him, you would have supposed that the regiments of immigrants recruited in the purlieus of the great cities of the North, and sent out, armed*

*and equipped with Sharpe's rifles and bowie knives and revolvers, to conquer freedom for Kansas, stood by, meek saints, innocent as doves, and harmless as lambs brought up to the sacrifice. General Lane's lambs!*

He asks why, if the Free-Staters were in the majority all along, they didn't legally pass their own constitution? He answers that by asserting that their intent all along was to destroy the Democratic Party through agitation over slavery.

*The most reliable sources of information (say) that they have a majority, and have had a majority for some time. Why has not this majority come forward and taken possession of the government, and made a free-State constitution and brought it here?...There can be but one reason... their purpose of destroying the Democratic party at the North, and now their chief object here is, to agitate slavery.*

He again targets Seward, claiming that he wants to conquer the South, abolish slavery, and remake the Supreme Court.

*The North intends to rule...to conquer the South. He said that it was their intention "to take this Government from unjust and unfaithful hands, and place it in just and faithful hands;" that it was their intention to consecrate all the Territories of the Union to free labor; and that, to effect their purposes, they intended to reconstruct the Supreme Court*

The effect will be to destroy the South, the aim all along of the Whigs and now the Republicans.

*You will...plunder us with tariffs...bankrupt us with internal improvements and bounties on your export...cramp us with navigation laws, and other laws impeding the facilities of transportation to southern produce...create a new bank, and concentrate all the finances of this country at the North, where already, for the want of direct trade and a proper system of banking in the South, they are ruinously concentrated? Nay, what guarantee have we that you will not emancipate our slaves, or, at least, make the attempt? We cannot rely on your faith when you have the power.*

At this point, Hammond boldly asserts that the South is fully prepared to resist any threat from the North, given its vast resources. These begin with control over the Mississippi Valley.

*The great valley of the Mississippi, now the real, and soon to be the acknowledged seat of the empire of the world. The sway of that valley will be as great as ever the Nile knew in the earlier ages of mankind. We own the most of it... On this fine territory we have a population four times as large as that with which these colonies separated from the mother country, and a hundred, I might say a thousand fold stronger.*

The South's population has grown rapidly and is capable of mustering one million men if needed.

*Our population is now sixty per cent. greater than that of the whole United States when we entered into the second war of independence... Upon our muster - rolls we have a million of men. In a defensive war, upon an emergency, every one of them would be available. At any time, the South can raise, equip, and maintain in the field, a larger army than any Power of the earth can send against her, and an army of soldiers-men brought up on horseback, with guns in their hands.*

The wealth of the South is also unequalled in the North.

*But the strength of a nation depends in a great measure upon its wealth, and the wealth of a nation, like that of a man, is to be estimated by its surplus production... It appears, by going to the reports of the Secretary of the Treasury, which are authentic, that last year the United States exported in round numbers \$279,000,000 worth of domestic produce, excluding gold and foreign merchandise re-exported. Of this amount \$158,000,000 worth is the clear produce of the South; articles that are not and cannot be made at the North....*

*But the recorded exports of the South now are greater than the whole exports of the United States in any year before 1856. With an export of \$220,000,000 under the present tariff, the South organized separately would have \$40,000,000 of revenue. With one-fourth the present tariff she would have revenue adequate to all her wants, for the South would never go to war... and we never shall dream of a war. Why the South has never yet had a just cause of war. Every time she has drawn her sword it has been on the point of honor, and that point of honor has been mainly loyalty to her sister colonies and sister States, who have ever since plundered and calumniated her.*

Hence the North will never be foolish enough to make war on the South – because its “Cotton Is King!”

*But if there were no other reason why we should never have war, would any sane nation make war on cotton?*

*What would happen if no cotton was furnished for three years? I will not stop to depict what every one can imagine, but this is certain: England would topple headlong and carry the whole civilized world with her, save the South.*

*No, you dare not make war on cotton. No power on earth dares to make war upon it. Cotton is king.*

It is also cotton alone that's saved the nation from the financial panic of 1857.

*When the abuse of credit had destroyed credit and annihilated confidence, when thousands of the strongest commercial houses in the world were coining down and*

*hundreds of millions of dollars of supposed property evaporating in thin air, when you came to a dead lock, and revolutions were threatened, what brought you up? Fortunately for you it was the commencement of the cotton season, and we have poured in upon you one million six hundred thousand bales of cotton just at the crisis to save you from destruction.*

But, according to Hammond, the South's greatest strength lies in the harmony of her political and social institutions.

*But sir, the greatest strength of the South arises from the harmony of her political and social institutions. This harmony gives her a frame of society, the best in the world, and an extent of political freedom, combined with entire security, such as no other people ever enjoyed upon the face of the earth. Society precedes government; creates it, and ought to control it; but...government is no sooner created than it becomes too strong for society and shapes...all the uneasiness and trouble and terror that we see abroad. It was this that brought on the American Revolution. We threw off a Government not adapted to our social system, and made one for ourselves. The question is how far have we succeeded? The South so far as that is concerned, is satisfied, harmonious, and prosperous.*

The basis for this harmony rests, according to Hammond, on slavery – a historically accepted practice that assigns the drudgery tasks in life to a class of inferior “mudsills” thereby freeing up their superiors to advance the causes of civilization.

*In all social systems there must be a class to do the menial duties, to perform the drudgery of life. That is, a class requiring but a low order of intellect and but little skill. Its requisites are vigor, docility, fidelity. Such a class you must have, or you would not have that other class which leads progress, civilization, and refinement. It constitutes the very mud-sill of society and of political government; and you might as well attempt to build a house in the air, as to build either the one or the other, except on this mud-sill. Fortunately for the South, she found a race adapted to that purpose to her hand. A race inferior to her own, but eminently qualified in temper, in vigor, in docility, in capacity to stand the climate, to answer all her purposes. We use them for our purpose, and call them slaves.*

The Southern system of slavery is also much more humane than what manual laborers in the North are forced to endure. The former are cared for from birth to death; the latter reduced to daily beggary and then discarded at will when their capacity to work expires.

*The Senator from New York said yesterday that the whole world had abolished slavery. Aye, the name, but not the thing; all the powers of the earth cannot abolish that. God only can do it when he repeals the fiat, "the poor ye always have with you;" for the man who lives by daily labor, and scarcely lives at that, and who has to put out his labor in the market, and take the best he can get for it; in short, your whole hireling class of manual laborers and "operatives," as you call them, are essentially slaves. The difference*

*between us is, that our slaves are hired for life and well compensated; there is no starvation, no begging, no want of employment among our people, and not too much employment either. Yours are hired by the day, not cared for, and scantily compensated, which may be proved in the most painful manner, at any hour in any street in any of your large towns. Why, you meet more beggars in one day, in any single street of the city of New York, than you would meet in a lifetime in the whole South.*

Unlike the North with its white slaves living in despair, all Southern slaves are properly black, and they are “happy and content.”

*We do not think that whites should be slave s either by law or necessity. Our slaves are black, of another and inferior race. The status in which we have placed them is an elevation. They are elevated from the condition in which God first created them, by being made our slaves. None of that race on the whole face of the globe can be compared with the slaves of the South. They are happy, content, uninspiring, and utterly incapable, from intellectual weakness, ever to give us any trouble by their aspirations. Yours are white, of your own race; you are brothers of one blood. They are your equals in natural endowment of intellect, and they feel galled by their degradation.*

By not allowing its slaves to vote, the South avoids the class rebellion that awaits the North once its white slaves figure out how to organize and achieve their ends through the ballot box.

*Our slaves do not vote. We give them no political power. Yours do vote, and being the majority, they are the depositaries of all your political power. If they knew the tremendous secret, that the ballot-box is stronger than "an army with banners," and could combine, were would you be? Your society would be reconstructed, your government overthrown, your property divided, not as they have mistakenly attempted to initiate such proceedings by meeting in parks, with arms in their hands, but by the quiet process of the ballot-box.*

Hammond sustains his arrogant and invincible tonality to the end. Even if the North achieves a lock on control of the federal government, that will never diminish the glory that the South has bestowed on the United States.

*The South have sustained you in a great measure. You are our factors. You bring and carry for us. One hundred and fifty million dollars of our money passes annually through your bands. Much of it sticks; all of it assists to keep your machinery together and in motion. Suppose we were to discharge you; suppose we were to take our business out of your hands; we should consign you to anarchy and poverty. You complain of the rule of the South: that has been another cause that has preserved you. We have kept the Government conservative to the great purposes of Government. We have placed her, and kept her, upon the Constitution; and that has been the cause of your peace and prosperity. The Senator from New York says that that is about to be at an end; that you intend to take the Government from us; that it will pass from our hands. Perhaps what he says is true; it may be; but do not forget—it can never be forgotten—it is written on the brightest page of human history— that we, the slaveholders of the South, took our*

*country in her infancy, and, after ruling her for sixty out of the seventy years of her existence, we shall surrender her to you without a stain upon her honor, boundless in prosperity, incalculable in her strength, the wonder and the admiration of the world. Time will show what you will make of her; but no time can ever diminish our glory or your responsibility.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Time: 1840-1850s

### Sidebar: Charles Dickens Dramatizes The Plight Of Factory Workers



Charles Dickens (1812-1870)

Attempts by Southerners like James Henry Hammond to label Northern factory workers as “wage slaves” becomes a familiar rhetorical ploy throughout the 1850’s.

The imagery associated with the label springs easily to mind among Americans familiar with the novels of the English author, Charles Dickens. In 1842, he completes a celebrity tour of the states, three years after publication of his popular novel, *Oliver Twist*, which captures the living conditions among London’s inner city poor. The imagery here is of men, women and children, living in rat-infested tenements and working twelve hour days to eke out enough wages to barely feed themselves.

Meanwhile the underlying determinants of such grinding poverty are being explored by heirs to economists like Adam Smith (1723-90), Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), Thomas Malthus (1766-1834), David Ricardo (1772-1823) and others, attempting to understand how the fate of common men was being impacted by the demands of wealth creation and industrialization. As Dickens is dramatizing life for those struggling to get by, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) are calling for a revolution among workers to throw off the chains of their capitalist masters.

Plantation masters of course have no interest in a Marxist overthrow, but they are fully prepared to paint the Northern business owners as immoral exploiters of their laborers.

What’s even worse, according to Hammond, is that their victims are white men, not blacks.

So, he says, better to be “cared for” from birth to death on a Southern plantation than to be cast aside when your capacity to work runs out as a Northern wage slave.

This entire argument is not only self-serving, but also based on a false equivalency between those actually enslaved in the South and those who are impoverished but free in the North.

Unlike the Africans, white laborers do not suffer the daily humiliations of being labeled a different and inferior species, of losing control over their own lives, of facing threats of physical punishment, of seeing wives abused and families sold off on the auction block.

For the vast majority of free white men in 1860 a path to upward mobility in America remains wide open. For those enslaved, the future is both immutable and filled with despair.