TRAINS, STEAMERS, AND SLAVERS: THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN COMMERCIAL CONVENTIONS AND AMERICAN EMPIRE

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Brian Adam Hoefel

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TRAINS, STEAMERS, AND SLAVERS: THE ANTEBELLUM SOUTHERN COMMERCIAL CONVENTIONS AND AMERICAN EMPIRE

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Thesis

Approved:	Accepted:
Advisor Dr. Lesley Gordon	Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Dr. Chand K. Midha
Faculty Reader Dr. Walter Hixson	Dean of the Graduate School Dr. George Newkome
Department Chair Dr. Michael Sheng	Date

ABSTRACT

Between 1845 and 1859, southern merchants, planters, and politicians convened fourteen commercial conventions, with the hopes of finding solutions to the South's economic problems. These conventions became major social and political events for the southern elite and the attendance rolls listed hundreds of current and future representatives, senators, state legislators, and Confederate congressmen. In addition to arguments over expansion of industry in the South and greater protections for the cotton economy, the conventioneers spent a great deal of time debating Manifest Destiny. In the view of the conventions, the South had become inferior to the North in nearly every way. Men who met at the conventions feared that the South would become a junior partner in the empire the United States was destined to possess.

Whigs dominated the early conventions, as they advocated for expansion of nation-building programs, internal improvements, and commercial imperialism. As the conventions shifted to Democratic control after 1854, they began to advocate more forcefully for territorial expansion. Some conventions sought more land from Mexico, while others advocated for the conquest of Cuba and Nicaragua. A number of speakers also pushed for an "open-door" policy towards Brazil, not unlike the policy pursued by northern interests towards Japan. The final set of conventions would go so far as to advocate for the reopening of the African slave trade. The African slave trade was a form of European imperialism and southern calls to reopen the trade fit within expansionists'

imperial designs. The trade also became a powerful political tool that southern radicals used to further their section's secession from the Union. This paper examines the conventions as an outgrowth of political frustrations created by sectionalism and it uses the conventions to situate imperialism as a key part of the sectional crisis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In November 1845, nearly six hundred businessmen, planters, and politicians traveled hundreds of miles from across the southern and western United States to convene at the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Memphis, Tennessee, to discuss how they could make themselves richer. More specifically, they came to talk about internal improvements, direct trade with Europe, railroad construction, a reduction in the tariff, and other strategies meant to fortify the economy of every state in the Mississippi Valley. Railroads and the Mississippi River were to be the conduits that connected and strengthened the economies of the Deep South and Old Northwest. Thus began the Commercial Convention movement in the South, a movement that, by 1852, had established an annual convention, held in a variety of southern cities, and continued until the eve of the Civil War.

The conventions became major political events, often attracting an elite list of southern politicians. The convention rolls frequently included the names of U.S. senators, such as John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Clement C. Clay of Alabama, Henry S. Foote of Mississippi, and Robert Toombs of Georgia. Likewise, attendance by U.S. representatives was also common at the conventions, as was patronage of the conventions by former and sitting state governors, including Andrew Mouton of Louisiana, James C. Jones of Tennessee, and John A. Quitman of Mississippi. Many fire-eaters and

secessionists attended the conventions, notably William Yancey, Roger Pryor, Edmund Ruffin, and James D. B. De Bow, and the attendance rolls included the names of future Confederate leaders, such as Alexander Stephens and Judah P. Benjamin. Beyond these figures, prominent military officers, urban activists, railroad promoters, and leaders in the southern textile and shipping industries also attended. In all, over 5700 individual southerners attended at least one of the nineteen pan-southern conventions. Over 1300 of these men held a seat in Congress, and 267 would go on to serve in the Confederate Congress.[1]

These prominent southern men came together because they believed the South was in trouble. Northern capital had expended tremendously in the years following the American Revolution, while the southern economy seemed to have stagnated. Cities like New Orleans and Charleston, which had operated as major port cities in the early republican period, had declined in importance by 1845 as New York City, Boston, and Philadelphia commanded the American economy. Southern leaders feared domination of the southern economy by northern capital; they feared southern businessmen would place their investments in New York City, send their children to northern schools, buy literature published in the North, and sell their cotton in the ports of the Atlantic coast rather than at New Orleans and Mobile. The opening of canals and roads across the Appalachians meant the states of the Old Northwest no longer needed strong economic ties to the South. Conventioneers feared northern capital would finance the building of southern railroads and northern merchants would oversee and profit from the export of

[1] Vicki Vaughn Johnson, *The Men and the Vision of the Southern Commercial Conventions, 1845-1871* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1992), 23. These figures include attendees from the five Reconstruction era conventions in addition to the fourteen antebellum conventions after 1845.

southern crops. Most historians have interpreted the southern commercial convention movement in this way—southerners sought economic parity within the Union. Aware of their economic inferiority vis-à-vis the North, southern merchants and businessmen began holding pan-southern commercial conventions in order to craft new strategies for strengthening the southern economy. As Kenneth Greenberg has noted, the southern master class feared "enslavement," and many of the men who gathered at the commercial conventions suspected that southern bondage to the northern economic machine was imminent.[2]

This study argues that while parity with the northern economy was important to southern leaders, the men who met at the conventions desired something more than economic equality. The southern commercial conventions demanded equality in regards to America's imperial expansion. In the call for the 1857 convention at Knoxville, James D. B. De Bow wrote that the North had continued to assault southern rights, notably the "right of expansion and development," especially in reference to the "unsettled territories purchased by common blood and treasure."[3] A delegate to the 1849 Memphis convention declared, "The nations of the world are engaged in the great race for position and for empire. It becomes our country to aim as high and to realize as soon as may be that bright and glorious destiny for which God and nature seem to have reserved her."[4] Finally, Gen. Charles Clark of Mississippi, presiding over the 1859 Vicksburg convention, seems to

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[2] Kenneth Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen: The Political Culture of American Slavery*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985).

[3] James Dunwoody Brownson De Bow, "The Rights, Duties, and Remedies of the South," *De Bow's Review* 23 (September 1857), 228.

[4] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention, Assembled October 23, 1849*, (Memphis, 1850), 49.

have provided the perfect summation for the commercial expansion sentiments of the conventions, stating matter-of-factly, "The commerce of the South is bound to control the commercial interests of the world."[5] These are just three indications of the imperial aims of the commercial conventions. This study intends to elucidate dozens more and establish empire as a major motivating factor in the calling of the conventions and the subsequent secession crisis.

The period in which the southern commercial conventions took place was an era of great imperial expansion for the United States. Americans had begun settling the territory of the Louisiana Purchase and evicting that region's Native American inhabitants. In 1845, the United States annexed Texas, and in 1848 successfully completed a war of imperial aggression against Mexico, which resulted in the addition of millions of square miles of territory to the United States. The 1849 Gold Rush sent thousands of new English-speaking immigrants to settle and colonize California. At the same time, the United States successfully negotiated for the addition of the Oregon Territory, and in 1853, the American navy "opened-up" Japan to foreign capital. The period also saw numerous unsuccessful attempts by Americans, both officially and unofficially, to add parts of Canada, the Caribbean, and Latin America to U.S. territory.

The men attending the southern commercial conventions watched nervously as northerners had taken the lead in many of these imperial adventures. Northern men flocked to the California gold fields, especially after California declared itself a free state in 1850. Northern capital and shipping interests dominated commercial relations with Japan and China. Northern banks financed investments in Latin America, and as Amy

[5] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg, on the 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, and 13th days of May last," *De Bow's Review* 27 (July 1859): 94.

Greenberg has indicated, the majority of the men who took part in filibustering expeditions were northerners.[6] All of these trends weighed heavily on the convention delegates. The commercial conventions demonstrate that not only did southerners feel they were falling behind the North economically, they also feared that they would be junior partners in the empire they believed the United States was destined to possess.

As stated above, previous American historians have missed the imperial aspirations and ambitions of the southern commercial convention movement. This has been the product of two trends, one in American history generally, and another in antebellum southern history, specifically. The first trend is the inadequate of study of empire in American history. Perhaps most succinctly noted by Amy Kaplan, the absence of empire in American history is rooted in an erroneous belief that the United States has never been a real imperial power, and that the very nature of the American revolutionary experience eschewed the imperialism of archaic European nation states.[7] Kaplan and others have also lamented a parallel phenomenon that only acknowledges the United States as imperial for brief periods, most notably, the Polk Administration (1845-1849) and the "Dollar Diplomacy" period following the Spanish-American War (1898-1912).[8]

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[6] Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 40.

[7] Amy Kaplan, "Left Alone with America: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism,* ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 12.

[8] Ibid, 12-13. Also see, David Ryan, *US Foreign Policy in World History*, (New York: Routledge, 2000), Walter Hixson, *The Myth of American Diplomacy: National Identity and U.S. Foreign Policy*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), and Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism,* (New York: Holt, 2007). Both Ryan and Hixson emphasize that American imperialism is culturally rooted and therefore, not an aberration of a handful of presidential administrations, rather imperialism is the mission of the United States. Grandin suggests that the only aberration in US policy towards Latin America has been the Good Neighbor Policy, and that otherwise, the US has always treated Latin America as an imperial subject.

Emphasis on state actors by traditional historians has ignored the unofficial work done by American citizens to expand the influence of the United States in the world. Recently, American historians have been working to change this trend through studies of filibusters, missionaries, multinational corporations, and cultural imperialism.[9] This thesis attempts to fit the antebellum southern commercial conventions into this new framework.

Perhaps one reason that historians of American imperialism have ignored the southern commercial conventions is due to the fact that most of the meetings were gatherings of Whigs. Partisan Democrats did not begin to attend the meetings in large numbers until after 1855. Traditional scholarship has often painted the debate over imperial expansion in Jacksonian America in partisan terms, noting that Democrats enthusiastically supported filibusters, the annexation of Texas, and the acquisition of territory from Mexico and Great Britain, while the Whig Party often vehemently opposed these decisions. This study requires an expansion of the traditional definition of "empire" and "imperialism." Recent historians have shown that empire not only involves control of territory, but also control of markets, spheres of influence, and culture.[10]

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[9] Two groundbreaking studies on filibusters are Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire,* and Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For an excellent work on missionaries and American imperialism, see Noenoe K. Silva, *Aloha Betrayed: Native Hawaiian Resistance to American Colonization,* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004). For works that analyze the role of American multinational corporations in furthering U.S. imperialism, see Alfred Eckes and Thomas Zeiler, *Globalization and the American Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Victoria DeGrazia*, Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006).

[10] Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). Douglas Little, *Malevolent Neutrality: The United States, Great Britain, and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Bruce Cumings, *Dominion from Sea to Sea: Pacific Ascendancy and American Power*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Subsequently, this paper requires a reevaluation of the Whig Party agenda. While it is true that figures such as Daniel Webster, John Quincy Adams, a young Abraham Lincoln, and other leading Whigs did oppose the war with Mexico, this did not mean that the Whigs opposed imperialism more broadly. While the Whigs did not support wars of conquest and illegal expeditions of filibusters, they did support expanding the economic and cultural hegemony of the United States outside of its boundaries. This elision by historians also ignores Whig support for territorial expansion in Oregon and the authorization of Matthew Perry's expedition to Japan by a Whig administration. Daniel Howe has written that Whigs believed in Manifest Destiny just as enthusiastically as did Democrats, but, that Whig imperialism took economic and cultural forms, acted out through the actions of businessmen, missionaries, and educators, rather than through political and military actors.[11] Likewise, the conventioneers were not always advocating conquest—in some instances, they did—but they were advocating that the United States, and particularly the southern states, should be able to project power into the world arena. Through commercial and internal improvement projects, such as the transcontinental railroad, they saw a vision of the United States in control of the world's trade.

Previous American historians have also missed the imperial aspirations and ambitions of the southern commercial convention movement because they have failed to report on the conventions at all. If the first trend is an inadequate study of empire in American history, then the second trend is the absence of any in-depth study of the convention movement in southern history, except for a small handful of works. Vicki Vaughn Johnson has written one of the few books to address the convention movement

[11] Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 146.

specifically, in *The Men and the Vision of the Southern Commercial Conventions, 1845-1871*. Johnson's focus is not on the rhetoric of the conventions but on an analysis of the delegates themselves, as well as an evaluation of the conventions' public policy impact. Two older books, *The Ante-bellum Southern Commercial Conventions* by John G. Van Deusen and *Southern Commercial Conventions, 1837-1859* by Herbert Wender, published in 1926 and 1930, respectively, have been invaluable to this study, but both are traditional histories with little analysis, aside from the common pro-southern bias found in early twentieth century literature on the antebellum period.[12] Jere Roberson has provided some articles that have been very useful for this study, but most of his work concerns the relationship between the conventions and the expansion of railroads, not Manifest Destiny more broadly.[13] Eminent southern historian John McCardell, author of *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860*, devotes an entire chapter to the convention movement. While he suggests that the conventions were vital forums for voicing southern solidarity and helping foment southern nationalism, McCardell suggests that functionally, they did nothing for the southern economy, nor does he suggest that they were forums for debates over American imperialism.[14]

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[12]Herbert Wender, *Southern Commercial Conventions, 1837-1859* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1930). John G. Van Deusen, *The Antebellum Southern Commercial Conventions* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1926).

[13] Jere W. Roberson, "The South and the Pacific Railroad, 1845-1855," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (April 1974): 163-186. Roberson, "To Build a Pacific Railroad: Congress, Texas, and the Charleston Convention of 1854," *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 78, no. 2 (October 1974): 117-139. Roberson, "The Memphis Convention of 1853: Southern Dreams and 'Young America,'" *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1974): 279-296.

[14] John McCardell, *The Idea of a Southern Nation: Southern Nationalists and Southern Nationalism, 1830-1860* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 93-140.

Other leading scholars of southern history have not included an expansive discussion of the commercial conventions in their works. With the notable exception of works by William Freehling and Elizabeth Varon, few synthetic histories of the South include any discussion of the commercial conventions. However, even Freehling and Varon only mention the conventions briefly, emphasizing their relationship to the late 1850s agitation to reopen the African slave trade and the pro-secession sentiments that marked the 1858 and 1859 conventions. Their emphasis is on the radical element within the conventions, rather than the conventions' more mainstream origins.[15] Southern economic historians also devote little attention to the movement. John Majewski and Brian Schoen dismiss the conventions as economically and politically unsuccessful, and condense their importance down to their role in the secession crisis, again emphasizing the 1858 and 1859 conventions.[16] Despite being major political events for southern Whig partisans, the conventions fail to appear in Michael Holt's exhaustive history of the Whig Party.[17]

This lacuna in traditional southern scholarship has translated into a similar absence of the conventions in work by American historians who specialize in the history of empire. Two notable exceptions are works by Ronald T. Takaki and Robert E. May. Takaki provides the most comprehensive look at the conventions' role in the debate over

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[15] William Freehling, *The Road to Disunion: Secessionists Triumphant, 1854-1861,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 183. Elizabeth Varon, *Disunion! The Coming of the American Civil War, 1789-1859*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 314.

[16] John Majewski, *Modernizing a Slave Economy: The Economic Vision of the Confederate Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 105-6. Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 222.

[17] Michael Holt, *The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

reopening the African slave trade. Takaki demonstrates that these debates included not only economic discussions, but also discussions about race, empire, civilization, and the morality of slavery.[18] May identifies the importance of the commercial conventions in encouraging southern agitation for American imperial expansion into the Caribbean. May identifies the South as the section with the most vocal support for Manifest Destiny and identifies the role of the conventions in encouraging filibusters.[19] These studies, however, are not studies of the convention movement alone, and neither May nor Takaki examine any of the conventions prior to 1854. While this study agrees with the findings of Takaki and May that the latter conventions may have exacerbated the sectional crisis and certainly played an integral role in justifying secession through their support for the African slave trade and Caribbean expansion, this study avoids placing secession at the center of its narrative.

Few eminent scholars of southern history have discussed the commercial conventions precisely because they bear little relationship to the coming of the Civil War, outside of the relationship exposed by Takaki and May. Traditional southern history has been concerned with the teleology of the sectional crisis: answering the question of how the country descends into Civil War. Prior to 1856, few contemporary observers would have suggested that the convention movement was making sectional tensions worse. Scholars have missed the convention movement because the early conventions went out of their way to appeal to nationalism and avoid aggravating sectional feelings. Those

[18] Ronald T. Takaki, *A Pro-Slavery Crusade: The Agitation to Reopen the African Slave Trade,* (New York: The Free Press, 1971).

[19] Robert E. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire, 1854-1861,* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973).

delegates who gathered in Savannah in 1856 and in the three meetings afterwards, no longer wished for the conventions to remain neutral. This study argues that historians need to evaluate the entirety of the convention movement in order to understand its relationship to American empire.

The teleological orientation of antebellum southern history has implications on southern economic history, as well. Economic historians have also focused on the role of commerce in exacerbating the sectional crisis. They stress the importance of the conflict between the industrial economy of the North and the cotton plantation economy of the South and the inability, or unwillingness, of southerners to finance large-scale internal improvements. While not the central argument of this study, it attempts to show that a fervent demand for internal improvements, industrialization, and commercial expansion in the South did exist. It was a demand, however, that was in the minority. No better evidence of this minority is the very transition of the conventions from discussion of railroads in 1849 to discussion of the African slave trade and acquisition of Cuba in 1859. Economic historians have ignored the conventions largely because they were not successful. Neither commercial expansionist Whigs nor territorial expansionist Democrats could translate convention resolutions into public policy during those politically turbulent years. Teleological explanations force the historian to analyze any given historical event within the context of a grand historical narrative. The southern commercial conventions do not fit conveniently into the grand arc of southern history because they failed to translate most of their agenda into public policy decisions.

This study is an attempt to break the teleological understanding of southern history. The Civil War probably would have occurred with or without the southern

commercial convention movement. This study argues that the convention movement was more of an outcome of sectional discourse than a cause of it. Sectionalism kept the conventions alive after the southern transcontinental railroad movement fizzled in 1854. The conventions did little to make southerners angry at northern expansion, as southerners were already angry prior to their attending. The conventions provided a forum for concerned southerners, first Whigs, later Democrats and radicals, to voice their frustrations and aspirations about the economy, politics, education, and the very nature of the Union.[20]

Most important for this study are the opinions of delegates regarding the role the South was going to play in fulfilling America's Manifest Destiny. While domestic political issues were important, the commercial conventions demonstrate that empire was central to the sectional crisis. Southerners believed that northerners were moving to dominate territory, spheres of influence, and commercial exchanges that people from both sections had earned. When northerners wished to build a transcontinental railroad from Chicago, southerners moved to build one from Memphis. When northern settlers flocked to California and Kansas and blocked colonization of those areas by southerners, conventioneers advocated southern acquisition of Cuba and Nicaragua. When northern foreign policy sent the U.S. Navy to Japan, the conventions advocated for a similar "opening-up" of Brazil. Americans in both sections believed in Manifest Destiny and both northerners and southerners believed their access to imperial expansion was under attack.[21]

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[20] Johnson, 2.

[21] Generally, this study defines "North," "northern," and "northerners," as referring to the states where slavery was illegal (excluding California and Oregon). Likewise, "South," "southern," and "southerner,"

This study is more concerned with the rhetoric of the conventions than with their outcomes. As a result, the main primary sources for this study come from the published minutes of the conventions. Johnson writes that publishing the convention minutes for public consumption demonstrated how the conventions often went to great lengths to be taken seriously by the public.[22] A few of the conventions did not produce freestanding published minutes: for these, this study has consulted the published transcripts of the proceedings in *De Bow's Review*. The New Orleans-based magazine also included publication of the full calls for each convention and published many of the additional reports made by delegates that freestanding publications of the minutes might have summarized. As Johnson has noted, the stature of the individuals who attended the conventions lent a great deal more historical significance to the proceedings than did their outcomes.[23] Analyzing the rhetoric of the conventions allows historians to observe the pulse of the antebellum South, and enables this study to examine how southern leaders from all levels of government and business understood Manifest Destiny and American empire.

Discourses of gender, race, and "civilization" are very much a part of imperial language. Imperialism thrives on these discourses, situating Anglo-Saxon male patriarchy

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refers to those states were slavery was legal. While this study will periodically refer to regions such as "border states," "Upper South," and "Lower/Deep South," it does not attempt to argue for any distinction between these regions as some contemporary studies of southern history have done. While distinctions between these regions certainly did exist, the conventions consistently pulled representatives from all the slaveholding states in an attempt to present a united southern front. Convention rhetoric consistently defined "northern" and "southern" through the status of slavery in those regions.

[22] Johnson, 38.

[23] Johnson, 17.

as the paramount level of human civilization.[24] Historians, who had not embraced the cultural turn, or those looking for tangible political and economic outcomes, would not have been able to see the imperial rhetoric of the convention debates. Another discourse common in the rhetoric of the conventioneers is what Walter Hixson has termed, the "Myth of America." This mythology is a combination of the imperial rhetoric common in European countries with the revolutionary tradition of the United States, justifying American exceptionalism and demanding that the United States has a right to global dominion.[25] Slavery added an extra layer to racial imperial discourse, as Robert E. May and Kenneth Greenberg have noted. Southern expansionists believed that slavery must expand because it was the very basis of American civilization. In the minds of slaveholders, white freedom could not exist without black slavery.[26] Northern attempts to control the expansion of slavery threatened the southern conception of American civilization.

Southerners convened twenty-five commercial conventions of varying size between 1837 and 1872, however only eleven of them are included in this study. The five earliest conventions, held between 1837 and 1840, were largely gatherings of Georgia and South Carolina leaders whose chief aim was to revive direct trade between Europe and the cities of Savannah and Charleston. They are not included in this study because the delegations represented only a small region of the South and their rhetoric was not particularly expansionist. The final six conventions, held between 1869 and 1872, have

[24] Kaplan, 16. Hixson, 11-12.

[25] Hixson, 1-16.

[26] May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire,* 9-10. Kenneth Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen,* 85-88.

likewise been excluded. These conventions reflected not the optimism and frustration of the antebellum period, but rather the dour realities of Reconstruction and focused more on rebuilding the South than extending its economic hegemony to other parts of the world. There were no conventions held in the periods 1840-1844 and 1860-1868. The most active period for the southern commercial conventions, were the years following the Mexican War and before the secession crisis. Between 1845 and 1859, fourteen meetings convened. Three of these, the two 1851 gatherings at New Orleans and the 1856 gathering at Richmond have been excluded because of poor attendance. Like the early conventions, the two 1851 conventions at New Orleans received nearly all their delegates from Louisiana. An outbreak of typhoid forced the poor attendance and abbreviated nature of the 1856 Richmond convention. This process of elimination leaves eleven conventions for examination in this study: The 1845 and 1849 conventions at Memphis, the 1852 conventions at Baltimore and New Orleans, the 1853 convention at Memphis, the 1854 Charleston convention, the 1855 New Orleans convention, the reconvened 1856 convention at Savannah, the 1857 convention at Knoxville, and the openly secessionist conventions at Montgomery in 1858 and Vicksburg in 1859.[27]

The organization of this study is both chronological and thematic. The study begins with a discussion of the early conventions, often termed the "railroad conventions" by some historians. Whigs dominated these meetings and a desire to construct internal improvements, chief among these, the transcontinental railroad,

[27] The other conventions that were not included are the 1837 and 1838 conventions at Augusta, the 1838 convention at Norfolk, the 1839 conventions at Charleston and Macon, the 1869 conventions at Memphis, Louisville, and New Orleans, the 1870 convention at Cincinnati, the 1871 Baltimore convention, and the final convention at St. Louis in 1872. Chicago and St. Louis hosted conventions in 1847 and 1849, respectively, that attracted delegates from southern states, but these cannot be labeled "southern" commercial conventions because they reflected northern railroad interests.

dominated the agenda. Much of Chapter Two is the reevaluation of Whig policies mentioned above. Whig designs for internal improvements, railroads, expansion of telegraph and mail service were projects with the expressed interest of building a stronger, more unified nation-state, not unlike those projects pursued by European states during the same period. Previous historians have shown that in the case of European countries, domestic programs of nationalization and modernization within imperial states were nothing more than imperial projects themselves.[28] As Daniel Howe has argued, the imperialism of the Whigs did not reside in demands for conquest but rather, in their commitment to commerce, modernization, and assimilation.[29]

Chapter Three follows the transition of the conventions into meetings dominated by Democratic partisans more interested in direct conquest and influence over foreign lands. To be sure, there was a great deal of overlap between the "railroad" conventions and the expansion conventions. The transcontinental railroad remained a topic of discussion through the 1854 convention, while territorial expansionists began making pleas as early as the 1852 conventions. Chapter Three not only discusses southern aspirations for empire in Latin America, but also their aspirations for empire on the North American continent. This paper agrees with previous scholars of American empire who

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[28] James Lehning, *Peasant and French: Cultural Contact in Rural France during the Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*: *The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976). Pieter M. Judson, *Guardians of the Nation: Activists on the Language Frontiers of Imperial Austria*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006). Roman Szporluk, *Russia, Ukraine, and the Breakup of the Soviet Union*, (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 2000). Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. These authors have demonstrated that in the case of European states, the line between metropole and colony is indeterminate at best. European imperial elites sought to consolidate and strengthen their dominion at home before extending it abroad.

[29] Howe, 183.

argue that the settlement of the American West was no different from other forms of European colonization in other parts of the world.[30] Southerners demanded free access to the colonization of the West to counteract increasing northern migration. Chapter Three also examines the conventions' support for filibusters, particularly William Walker and convention interest in "opening-up" Brazil to American commerce.

Chapter Four discusses the radicalization of the convention movement after 1857 and the conventions' furious debates over the reopening of the African slave trade. This study argues that the African slave trade was a vehicle of European imperialism and that the demand by southern radicals to reopen the trade after 1857 reflected a radical understanding of American empire. Chapter Four also identifies the substantial southern opposition to reopening the trade and discusses how the fire-eaters used the slave trade issue not only to seize control of the commercial conventions, but to further their push for secession as well.

[30] Thomas Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America,* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). Ian R. Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

CHAPTER II

THE WHIGS: NATION-BUILDING AND EMPIRE

Perhaps nothing bothered Whig partisans more than the incompleteness of the Union. Whereas Democrats often seemed to relish the distinctiveness of states, localities, and regions, Whigs, both North and South, sought greater unity. Of course, the Whig Party began as an unlikely alliance of individuals with diverse interests—industrialists, middle-class urbanites, wealthy planters, former Federalists, states-rights champions, abolitionists, and pro-slavery advocates—all arrayed against the "mobocratic" forces of Andrew Jackson. Out of this alliance came vigorous disagreements over exactly what kind of state the Union was, but it did not mean that Whigs had stopped seeking unity.

The "big-tent" of the Whig Party became increasingly smaller as the United States transitioned away from the presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren. Over time, the official Whig Party alienated many southerners as greater numbers of politicians with antislavery views joined the party and the party was simultaneously reluctant to take an official stand on the expansion of slavery into the territories. This migration of southerners out of the Whig Party did not necessarily mean that this portion of the southern electorate stopped being "whigs." As Kenneth Greenberg and Eric Walther have explained, party allegiance in the South was quite different compared to that of the

North.[31] Greenberg suggests that while political parties nominally did exist in the South, real party organization and behavior did not.[32] As Walther has pointed out, many southerners were members of the Democratic Party because they believed it best defended slavery and the rights of southerners, but it is unlikely that southern elites, particularly in the old plantation areas of the Chesapeake, South Carolina, Georgia, and Louisiana, ever considered themselves "democrats." Walther's collection of biographies of the most notable secessionists suggests that many of them either began their political careers as Whigs or still considered themselves "whigs" in 1860.[33] Walther and Greenberg demonstrate that the principles that united members of the Whig Party remained important for these individuals long after the party had officially ceased to exist.

Given the mercurial nature of southern politics noted by Greenberg and Walther, this study has found it very difficult to determine the actual party identification for many of the convention speakers. While some individuals remained Whigs or Democrats throughout their political careers, other southern leaders changed parties frequently. The conventions also occurred during the height of the Know-Nothing Party, and a sizeable number of convention speakers were members, which further disrupts the Whig/Democrat party dichotomy. In the case of the antebellum South, this study finds referring to politicians' political orientation through general terms of "whigs" and "democrats" more helpful than placing them into an official political party.

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[31] Kenneth Greenberg, *Masters and Statesmen.* Eric Walther, *The Fire-Eaters*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992).

[32] Greenberg, 46.

[33]Walther, 298.

Historians can recognize southern "whigs" not so much through their official membership in the Whig Party, but through the policy measures, as well as the cultural values, they supported. Most notably, whigs feared abuse of government power—as they believed Jackson had done—but they also believed strongly in order, tradition, republicanism, Protestantism, "progress," and nationhood.[34] Practicing what Amy Greenberg has termed "restrained manhood," whigs eschewed the "martial manhood" of democrats.[35] Whig legislators objected to the Mexican War, filibustering, and other aggressive tactics supported by democrats. As the first half of the commercial convention movement suggests, whigs put more faith in commerce, described by a delegate to the 1854 Charleston Convention as, "the great colonizer, civilizer, and Christianizer of mankind."[36] Many southern whigs were merchants, entrepreneurs, large plantation owners, and military officers—the very sort of men attracted to the commercial convention movement. Beginning with the first Memphis Convention in 1845, the first half of the convention movement displays not only the thirst for commercial empire among southern whigs, but their search for national unity, as well. Through the construction of internal improvements, the transcontinental railroad, and education reform, these conventions wished to lay the foundations for the commercial empire they hoped would follow.

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[34] See Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*, for an excellent discussion of each of these themes.

[35] Amy Greenberg, 12.

[36] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States*, *Held in the City of Charleston, South-Carolina, During the Week Commencing on Monday, 10th April, 1854* (Charleston: Walker & Evans, 1854), 15.

Nationalism and the Discourse of "Progress"

The first half of the convention movement provides a unique demonstration of American nationalism from the pre-Civil War period. From the earliest days of the party, Whigs were intensely nationalistic. Whigs may have disagreed about the nature of the American Union, but they certainly agreed that whatever the Union was, it was at the very least a model to the world. The "Myth of America" figured heavily in convention discourse and invocations of the United States' providential destiny were frequent. However, the conventions' emphasis on American nationalism could never quite keep sectionalism from creeping in and eventually taking over the movement. In this sense, as John McCardell has demonstrated, the conventions were also very important demonstrations of southern nationalism—the idea that the South possessed a culture and society wholly distinct from that of the northern states.[37] The southern nationalists within the conventions feared that northern economic and cultural expansion would extinguish southern culture and society. As southern nationalists viewed southern culture as the only viable part of American civilization, southern nationalism, too, was rife with discourses of "progress" and providential destiny. Convention delegates, both Unionists and southern nationalists, alike, used the same discourses of civilizing mission and cultural supremacy that supported the "Myth of America" to describe the supremacy of their

[37] McCardell, 91-140. The present study differentiates "southern nationalism" from "sectionalism." "Southern nationalism" refers not only to the political efforts of southern radicals to build an independent southern republic, but also to an insistence on the part of radical southerners, referred to as "southern nationalists," that southern culture was not only wholly distinct from northern culture, but superior to it. In this view, the northern and southern states comprised two very different and incompatible civilizations. "Sectionalism," however, simply refers to the political, economic, and cultural rivalry between the northern and southern states. All southern nationalists were sectionalists, but not all sectionalists advocated for an independent southern republic. Most insisted that the Union could be preserved through protections to southern "rights" and "institutions."

slaveholding society. Delegates ascribed to that society a mission to spread civilization through expanding the white slaveholding republic.

The process of nation building was a central theme of the first convention at Memphis in 1845. In rhetoric that would become familiar to the conventions of the first half of the movement, Thomas Allen, a delegate from Missouri believed that the conventions regarded citizens of the North and the South, "as one people in sympathy and interest; and in government one country; and hold their countrymen of every state to the duties and responsibilities of closely connected and indissoluble union."[38] Fearing that disharmony, sectionalism, and political disputes would be detrimental to their plans for internal improvements, John C. Calhoun had petitioned the convention address not any "subject on which any portion of the body entertains constitutional scruples."[39] The 1845 convention did most of its work through nearly a dozen committees, which prepared reports on subjects ranging from free navigation of the Mississippi River to improvement of mail service, in nearly every one of these reports the undersigned appealed using pleas of "national importance" to justify support for improvement projects.[40]

Equally prevalent at the 1845 Memphis convention was a discourse of progress reaffirming Americans' faith in internal improvements, technological advances, and their westward migration. Thomas Hietala has written that Americans' faith in Manifest Destiny was not wholly marked by expansion of settlement, but also by a strong faith in communication and technological advancement that rendered temporal and spatial

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[38] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention: began and held at the city of Memphis, on the 12th November, 1845*, (Memphis: 1845), 22.

[39] Ibid., 11.

[40] Ibid., 30-127.

distances inconsequential.[41] In his presidential address, Calhoun prophesied about the future of the Mississippi Valley, declaring, "Under the active industry of its intelligent and enterprising inhabitants," the valley would become "the garden of the world."[42] James Gadsden, author of the report of the Committee on Railroads at the convention, marveled at the steam-engine's power to "penetrate the wilderness, civilize the savage, and humanize the cannibal."[43]

Later conventions demonstrated that the discourses of nationalism and progress would work to reinforce one another as conventioneers explored internal improvements, technological and scientific advances, and education reform as proper ways of building the American nation at home and empire abroad. In 1849, the "Address of the Memphis Convention to the People of the United States" argued that without the improvements, roads, railroads, and canals to tie the country together, sectionalism and localism would only grow and would make strong central government impossible, destroying the whole notion of the republic, itself.[44] Likewise, the report of the general committee to the 1852 Baltimore convention resolved that, "the prosperity and permanency of the Union will be greatly promoted by the multiplication of the means of commercial and social intercourse in the several states."[45] The Memorial of the 1853 Memphis Convention affirmed the common convention sentiment that internal improvements not only powered westward

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[41] Hietala, 177.

[42] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention…1845,* 8.

[43] Ibid., 40.

[44] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention…1849*, 34.

[45] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention, held in Baltimore, December 18th, 1852, under the Auspices of the Board of Trade. Full Report of Speeches and Other Proceedings,* (Baltimore, 1852), 6.

migration, but also sustained the American Union, stating that should the "tardy and expensive" modes of communication between parts of the Union continue, there would be no way for the central government to ensure that distant parts of the country would not wish "to set up for themselves" and form their own breakaway republics.[46] Beyond tangible internal improvement projects, conventioneers understood the power of the meetings, themselves, to encourage nationalism. In his presiding speech at the 1855 New Orleans convention, Mirabeau B. Lamar of Texas emphasized that one of the purposes of the convention was to extinguish local interests, "and to be united in the same common action for the common weal of all. And in order to achieve this, it will be necessary to discard all selfishness, prejudice, local interests, and conflicting opinions."[47] In this view, the conventions were places where men came to assemble as Americans, looking to solve national problems with national projects and assure the permanency of the Union.

The discourse of progress reaffirmed conventioneers' faith that America could attain global hegemony. Belief in America's providential destiny could not stop with improvements that would advance the average American's quality of life and purchasing power. The conventions viewed these improvements as building the foundation for a new civilization. In his report to the 1852 convention at New Orleans, John J. Abert, head of the Army Corps of Engineers, declared what while Europeans may have invented the steam engine and begun industrialization, they were "indebted to us for the great *moral*

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[46] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention at Memphis, Tennessee, in June, 1853, containing two letters from Lieutenant Maury, with Speeches, Reports, Etc,* (Memphis: Moseley & Finnie, 1854), 59.

[47] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention, held in the City of New Orleans, on the 8th, 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th, 13th, and 15th of January, 1855; embracing Resolutions, Speeches, General Transactions, Etc,* (New Orleans: New Orleans *Daily Crescent*, 1855), 3.

mechanics which best develop the energies and resources of a people, and which bring into profitable activity the industry and capacity of every member of the great body politic" (emphasis in original).[48] In a letter to the same convention, Roswell Beebe, the mayor of Little Rock, Arkansas, wrote "This is a period in the history of the world in which *advancement* is emphatically the order of the day" and that the United States should take its place as the leader in "The onward march of our race to the ultimatum of human destiny" (emphasis in original).[49] In a speech to the 1853 Memphis convention, the Reverend Charles K. Marshall of Mississippi looked a century into the future and declared that in the Mississippi Valley,

> Here nations will congregate. Here millions of human beings must be born. Here humanity will be developed. Here may be found the citadel and centre of the world's freedom, civilization, and moral and intellectual growth. Here commerce will spread its refining agencies and gather princely wealth.[50]

Journalist Edward Deering Mansfield of Cincinnati echoed Marshall's sentiments at the 1854 convention, stating that "A grand and beautiful country like ours, munificently endowed with all the gifts of the natural world, was evidently made by the Creator to be cultivated by the arts of highest civilization, and inhabited by a people capable of…feeling the bonds of a common kindred and common glory."[51] These sentiments are merely a few of the optimistic and beaming reports of very proud Americans. Their faith in American civilization buoyed their faith in internal improvements and technological

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[48] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention Held in New Orleans, January, 1852,* (New Orleans: 1852), 25.

[49] Ibid., 40.

[50] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention…1853,* 34.

[51] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention…1854*, 28.

advancement. As John J. Abert had said, any empire can possess railroads and industry, but only the United States had the civilization to utilize these new tools properly.

As stated before, despite this faith in American civilization, the conventions could never abandon the parallel and competing discourses of sectionalism, and later, southern nationalism. Radical conventioneers hoped that internal improvements, advancements in science and communication, and education reform would also build the southern nation. While the conventions worked hard to suppress sectionalism, such feelings were evident in the early gatherings. At the Baltimore convention, Senator Solomon Downs of Louisiana stated that while he resisted calling southerners a "sectional people," he did think "the best means of promoting the greatness of our whole country is to promote the greatness of our own homes and own institutions."[52] In concurring with Senator Downs, William Burwell of Virginia declared, "I came here with a love for the South and for my own State that is superior to any feeling I entertain for any other section." Burwell insisted that the principal question for the convention was, "how the rights of the South may be restored and respected."[53] The following year at Memphis, in his presiding speech to the convention, Senator William C. Dawson of Georgia made a plea for southern commercial independence based upon southern distinctiveness and calling upon southern leaders to build educational institutions, churches, and presses loyal to southern interests and constitutional rights.[54]

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[52] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention…1852,* 14.

[53] Ibid., 9.

[54] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 6.

Sectionalist rhetoric would escalate after the 1852 conventions, but delegates stopped short of advocating for secession from the Union until 1856. Despite the fiery nature of a number of speeches, delegates argued that the Union was the best place for the southern people. Most notable among these was a speech given by railroad promoter Albert Pike of Arkansas to the 1855 convention. Pike called for a union of the southern states within the greater Constitutional Union due to the "utter want of fraternal spirit exhibited by [the nonslaveholding states] in the legislation of twenty years" and he saw the Commercial Conventions as providing the framework for such a southern union. Pike stated, "It is the duty of the Southern States firmly to unite among themselves, forgetting all partisan differences and the insanities of all former contests by which they have been heretofore divided." Through this union, the South can encourage manufacturing, internal improvements, education reform, and development of natural resources on their own. He concluded by declaring that whatever was necessary to secure and maintain the rights and independence of the South, "and to give her at least her fair share of the commerce of the world," be discussed and endorsed by the convention."[55] At the 1857 Knoxville Convention, two resolutions by Richard S. Gladney of Mississippi illustrated the conventions' turn towards southern nationalism. Gladney declared that it was the duty of the "Christian and the patriot" to improve the "domestic institutions of the South" because slavery was "most conducive to the permanency of our republican institutions." He went on to assert that the South possessed "all the advantages in soil, climate, harbors, rivers, water-power, and commercial resources capable of making them the most independent people on the globe," and that it was the duty of all southerners our to

[55] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention…1855,* 9-11.

develop them by any means in their power.[56] Synthesizing all of the convention's themes of nationalization, unity, and progress, Alabama fire-eater William Yancey was able to advocate for secession in his opening address at the 1858 Montgomery Convention, predicting that before long, the industrial, social, and political relations of the South "shall be placed upon the basis of an independent sovereignty." Yancey insisted that such a sovereignty would rest upon a "unity of climate, a unity of soil, a unity of production, and a unity of social relations—that unity which alone can be the basis of a successful and permanent government."[57]

The convention movement succumbed to secessionists in part because of the discourses of nationhood, progress, and civilization that were so integral to the conventions' focus. Sectionalism forced southerners to understand each of these discourses in the context of their "peculiar institution." The men who created the convention movement were nationalists who believed in the providential destiny of the United States, but, they were also southerners who believed that slavery was the basis for the republican civilization they so cherished. The southern nationalism of the later conventions reflects the reconciliation of this dilemma. By rejecting northern culture as not really part of American civilization, southerners could declare the American nation and the southern nation as one in the same. Thus, making imperial and nationalistic claims in the name of the South did not strike southern nationalists as any different from making imperial and nationalistic claims in the name of the United States.

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[56] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," *De Bow's Review* 23 (September 1857): 310.

[57] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," *De Bow's Review* 24 (June 1858): 574.

Transportation Improvements

The earliest conventioneers believed that the cure to the South's economic inferiority was a better system of transportation. While they saw that the South's geography provided unique challenges to building a comprehensive transportation network, the delegates marveled at how northerners were able to overcome similar challenges and complete projects like the Erie Canal, the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, the National Road, and others. Principally, the commercial conventions sought improvement in transportation in three areas: improvement in river navigation, harbor improvements, and construction of railroads. With each of these, came a heavy emphasis on new transportation technologies, most notably the steam engine.

Notably missing from this list were road and canal improvements. Once an integral part of Henry Clay's "American System," discussion of road construction was remarkably absent from the conventions, for the exception of the 1845 and 1849 Memphis gatherings. An official resolution from the 1845 meeting advocated for the construction of a military road from Memphis westward to the Indian Territory, justified as being necessary to protect Arkansas from "Indian depredations."[58] The convention also proposed a continuation of the National Road from its terminus in Illinois to Texas for the dual purposes of facilitating emigration to the West and national defense.[59] At the 1849 convention, delegates proposed the construction of a military road from the Mississippi Valley all the way to the Pacific Coast. John C. Larue, a state representative from Louisiana sponsored the resolution, stating that the road was necessary to "fulfill the

[58] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 28.

[59] Ibid., 18, 19.

stipulations of the treaty with Mexico, to protect the southern frontier, and to facilitate the passage of emigrants to California and Oregon."[60] Likewise, canal construction elicited debate at only two conventions: 1845 and the 1855 meeting at New Orleans. John C. Calhoun advocated for the construction of more canals between the Mississippi River watershed and the Great Lakes in his presidential address to the 1845 convention, and lengthy committee reports encouraged the convention to adopt a resolution for the construction of a ship canal connecting the Illinois River to Lake Michigan.[61] In 1855, a delegate from Louisiana motioned for the construction of ship canal facilitating easier contact between New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico, this was followed by a proposal for construction of a ship canal across Florida, relieving ships from the burden of having to travel all the way around the peninsula and veer dangerously into waters patrolled by the British and Spanish.[62] While roads and canals played a crucial role in the industrialization and economic expansion of the North, as well as facilitating the settlement of the Old Northwest, southerners seemed generally uninterested in these old, slow forms of transportation. The conventions, instead, were in awe of steam power. The locomotive and the steamship, not the Conestoga wagon and the keelboat, were the machines that would accelerate America's advance towards its providential destiny.

The issue that drew the most attention at the 1845 Memphis Convention was free navigation of the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Presiding over the convention, John C. Calhoun went so far as to declare the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri Rivers to

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[60] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention…1849*, 15, 19, 25.

[61] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention…1845*, 10, 25.

[62] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention…1855,* 12.

be an "inland sea," no different than the Great Lakes or the Mediterranean because the boat traffic on the rivers was equal to, if not greater than, both.[63] Calhoun's use of the phrase, "inland sea" enabled him to justify federal expenditures for improvement of the Mississippi River watershed because it implied improvement of the river was in the national best interest. The final resolutions of the convention contained the language Calhoun had used in his opening speech, declaring that the "improvement and preservation of navigation of those great rivers are objects of national importance and federal responsibility."[64] The convention's Committee on the Improvement of the Ohio River declared, "These Rivers are military highways, post roads, and great national channels of a commerce more valuable than all the foreign commerce of the Union."[65] The convention also justified improvement of the rivers from a national defense perspective, suggesting that the government make the Mississippi River navigable for military vessels.[66] The Report from the Committee on Western Rivers invoked a westward migration argument, stating that the Mississippi Valley was "capable of supporting a greater amount of population than any other portion of the habitable globe," but that settlement was impossible until free navigation was assured.[67] Improvement in river navigation usually meant clearing obstructions and dredging of sandbars in order to allow the rivers to handle large amounts of steamboat traffic. Once these improvements

[63] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 11.

[64] Ibid., 25.

[65] Ibid., 82.

[66] Ibid., 25.

[67] Ibid., 56.

were completed, the conventions saw the range of steamboats on the Ohio, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Red Rivers as virtually limitless.

Calhoun's "inland sea" argument would influence later conventions as resolutions calling for Congress to appropriate more money for river improvements would be combined with calls for improvement to coastal seaports. In 1853, presiding officer Senator William C. Dawson of Georgia declared that the interests of southern trade demand that the federal government make appropriations for the removal of obstructions at the mouth of the Mississippi and the other important harbors of the South Atlantic and Gulf coast. The Report of the convention's General Committee echoed Dawson's feelings when it declared that it was Congress' duty to provide for the improvement of the Mississippi River as well as improvements to the harbors at Savannah, Mobile, Charleston, Baltimore, and Norfolk.[68] The convention's published memorial to the American public best illustrated this continuation of Calhoun's argument when it asked, if it is the duty of the government to appropriate funds for the protection of persons and property on the coast, "If so, is it not equally the duty of that government to aid in saving this property from destruction and lighten the burthen of commerce on such an "inland sea" as this?"[69]

Calls for river and harbor improvements continued through the entirety of the convention movement. While other issues, such as railroads and the African slave trade may have proven more exciting topics, delegates normally managed to insert a few resolutions regarding the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic coast, and the Mississippi

[68] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 5, 12.

[69] Ibid., 56.

watershed. Resolutions proposed by Hugh McLeod and Memucan Hunt of Texas at the 1855 New Orleans convention called for improvement to the harbor at Galveston Bay, Texas' principal Gulf port.[70] Two Louisiana delegates followed the representatives from Texas and asked that Congress should make annual appropriations for the improvement of the Mississippi and Red Rivers, and a delegate from Alabama proposed a resolution calling upon Congress to make appropriations for the harbor at Mobile.[71] An official resolution of the 1856 Savannah convention called upon Congress to do more to provide for the protection and improvement of southern seaports.[72] Finally, at the 1859 Vicksburg convention, former congressman Nicholas D. Coleman of Mississippi proposed a resolution urging Congress to pass appropriation for the improvement of the navigability of the Mississippi River. The convention's official resolutions reiterated Calhoun's fourteen year-old "inland sea" argument stating that it was within Congress' power to improve the river.[73]

Conventions justified river and harbor improvements in the name of national defense, westward migration, and commercial expansion. The published Memorial of the 1853 Memphis convention best demonstrated this defense of river improvements when it invoked the settlement and development of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin as inherently dependent on Mississippi River improvement. The Memorial went on to say that, the watershed demanded improving because "Our inland commerce, enlivening

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[70] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 5-6.

[71] Ibid., 6, 8.

[72] "Southern Convention at Savannah." *De Bow's Review* 22 (January 1857): 102.

[73] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 98, 100.

every lake and river between the Atlantic seaboard and the Rocky Mountains, is greater than that of the balance of the civilized world combined."[74] Demand for internal improvements reflected faith in the power of the American people to build such a massive economy. Whether the commerce of the Mississippi Valley was actually "greater than that of the balance of the civilized world combined" was unimportant to the conventioneers, but they believed that with internal improvements, that statement would come true.

Speaking at the 1852 Baltimore convention, R. I. Bowie of Maryland declared, "The Railway and the Steamship are but parts of one great system of intercommunication between the producer and consumer; neither is complete without the other: the one brings the produce to the shore, the other, transports it beyond the seas."[75] The railway captivated delegates unlike any other form of technology or improvement debated by the conventions. Urban historians Blaine Brownell and David Goldfield have written that for southern urban leaders, the railroad was endowed with magical powers, able to transport goods and expand an economy with unprecedented speed, writing that "ultimately the railroad assumed the status of a demigod."[76] Historian of technology Carroll Pursell has argued that in the mid-nineteenth century, "The railroad became a popular, sublime, and romantic symbol of the triumph of people over nature, especially of technology's ability

[74] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 58-59.

[75] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 8.

[76] Blaine Brownell and David R. Goldfield, eds, *The City In Southern History: The Grown of Urban Civilization in the South,* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1977), 53.

to annihilate space and time."[77] For these reasons and others, the conventions tirelessly advocated for expansion of railroads in the South and beyond.

Most of the regional railroad projects advocated by the conventions involved connecting the ports of the Atlantic Coast with the Mississippi River. The 1845 Memphis Convention adopted a resolution calling for the extension of the Georgia and South Carolina Railroad across the South to Memphis.[78] The 1849 convention asserted in its official resolutions that any railroad to the Pacific would also have to connect to a railroad between the Mississippi and the Great Lakes.[79] At the 1852 Baltimore Convention, future presidential candidate and senator from Kentucky, John C. Breckinridge proposed that the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad would not be able to achieve its full potential unless it connected with the Lexington and Louisville road in Kentucky.[80] At the 1853 Memphis Convention, a delegate from Missouri proposed the novel idea of constructing a north-south railroad along the length of the Mississippi River, from the Falls of St. Anthony in Minnesota to New Orleans.[81] The 1854 convention at Charleston resolved that any railroads radiating from the ports of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts "should be promoted by any means in our power." The convention went on to advocate that the federal government reduce or eliminate the tariff

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[77] Carroll Pursell, *The Machine in America: A Social History of Technology*, Second Edition, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 83.

[78] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 18.

[79] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 19.

[80] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 16.

[81] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 22.

in railroad iron.[82] Hugh McLeod of Texas proposed an expansive scheme to the 1855 New Orleans convention, calling for the completion of a railroad between Norfolk, Virginia and the mouth of the Ohio River that would then connect to another railroad from the mouth of the Ohio to the Red River in Arkansas.[83] Delegate A. W. Speight of Alabama proposed to the Savannah convention connecting existing railroads in Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana to the transcontinental railroad in Texas. Additionally, the convention would later adopt another motion calling for the completion of the Cumberland Gap Railroad between Kentucky and Virginia.[84]

Delegates often advocated railroad expansion in the name of nationalism, as John C. Calhoun argued in 1845, that a good system of railroads was needed to unite the South and West behind common interests.[85] The official resolutions of the 1845 convention stated that railroad connections between the Atlantic and the Mississippi were "strongly urged upon the consideration and patriotism of the people of the West," and James Gadsden of the committee on railroads stated that rail lines would bring "into closer communion the social, political, and commercial relations of communities of common origin, common institutions, and common sympathies."[86] At the 1852 New Orleans convention, city activist and railroad promoter James Robb insisted that railroads and

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[82] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* xvii-xviii.

[83] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 14.

[84] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 94, 101.

[85] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 9-10.

[86] Ibid., 26, 37.

other internal improvements would bind the Union together and pacify sectionalism.[87] A letter to the same convention from Senator Edward Bates of Missouri insisted, "Rail-roads and uninterrupted steam navigation work a kind of social miracle upon a great country," by bringing its distant regions and peoples in closer contact with one another for both commercial and social interaction.[88] In a reference to sectionalism normally uncharacteristic for the early conventions, U.S. Representative John D. Freeman of Mississippi, making reference at Baltimore to railroad bills before Congress, stated, "many of the friends of the railways are anxious that these bills should be passed, that the country should go to work, and no longer talk about the resolutions of '98 and '99."[89] An official resolution of the 1854 Charleston Convention echoed these sentiments declaring that railroads "will draw closer together the bonds of union amongst us, and will perpetuate our social and other institutions." The Convention asked all States to pay whatever cost to build the roads and see the "accomplishment of the great and patriotic ends for which they were designed."[90] The conventions perceived railroad construction as a patriotic project because not only would it pacify sectionalism by bringing people of the North, South, East, and West into greater cultural contact, but it would propel the United

[87] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 76.

[88] Ibid., 92.

[89] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 11.

[90] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* xvii.

States to status as a leading economic power in the world. Railroads could allow the United States to project power across an entire continent.[91]

In addition to nationalist discourses, the discourses of civilization and progress also guided conventioneers' support for railroad projects. Speaking at the 1852 New Orleans convention, Richard S. Gladney of Mississippi declared that the railroad was "the great labor-saving machinery in the world" and that it affects "the wealth, education, civilization and power, both political and military" of every nation fortunate enough to have one.[92] James Robb's speech to the convention referred to the railroad as a "civilizing and conquering power…the greatest of all missions."[93] The voices of Baltimore and Maryland leaders, lauding the modernization of the interior brought by the construction of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, occupied much of the proceedings at the Baltimore convention, claiming that the advancement of civilization in the entire Ohio Valley would be a result of the completion of the railroad. Baltimore civic leader Brantz Mayer declared that the B&O secured the city's "natural and geographical *right*" (emphasis added) to the produce of the Ohio Valley.[94]

While the growth of the nation and the progress of civilization were important to the convention's railroad activists, these motivations often were secondary to the commercial aims of the convention. At the 1849 meeting, James D. B. De Bow predicted that with construction of a thorough southern system of railroads, "the South and West

[91] For more on the relationship between imperialism and railroads, see Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

[92] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 7.

[93] Ibid., 76.

[94] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 2-6.

will naturally resort to manufactures, which is our second great remedy for the evils which the present now shows, and the future foreshadows."[95] Missouri Senator Edward Bates decreed that "All the rich districts of the interior must be penetrated, and their productions brought into usefulness…where a river is wanting, we must make a railroad." Bates predicted that if this comes to pass the United States will experience "a national growth and development which will astonish the world."[96] In his opening speech to the Baltimore convention, Brantz Mayer noted that the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad successfully brought uninterrupted commercial intercourse between the western farmer and the Atlantic merchant, making special note that the journey from the Ohio River to the Chesapeake would now only take 15 hours.[97] John D. Freeman put it bluntly, remarking at Baltimore that "No man, who casts his eye over the improvements now going on in the South, can fail to perceive that we must have railroads if we intend to compete with the commerce of the North."[98] John C. Breckinridge urged the Baltimore convention to back his proposal so that the city would be able to command and draw itself closer to "the vast productions of that most fertile portion of the Confederacy which is richer than the delta of the Nile," referring to his own native Kentucky.[99] An official resolution of the 1854 Charleston Convention remarked that railroads were "the most

[95] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 84.

[96] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 93.

[97] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 2.

[98] Ibid., 11.

[99] Ibid., 16.

safe, economical, and speedy means of developing the agricultural and mineral resources of the States, and supplying the certain basis of profitable export and import trade."[100]

Southern leaders realized that commercial expansion in the South would rely on technological innovations and transportation improvements. The emphasis on making rivers navigable to steamships and construction of railroads across the South, tying the cities of the Mississippi and Ohio Valleys to the Atlantic Coast, reflected the faith commercial conventions had in the relationship between improvement and prosperity. As the North continued to expand its construction of railroads at a seemingly unabated pace, southerners felt more and more like the South was slipping behind, even though, the very statistical figures referenced by conventions demonstrated that the South was not rapidly becoming poorer as a result of northern expansion. The dreams of the nineteenth century, however, revolved around railroads, technology, and commercial expansion, and many southerners felt their section would soon become hopelessly inferior. The South needed a trump card, something that could make up for the deficiencies at home and outdo the North abroad. They found this trump card in the Pacific Railroad.

The Pacific Railroad

Of all the improvements advocated by the conventions, by far the most important and most exciting was the transcontinental railroad. The project, which conventioneers referred to as the Pacific Railroad, warrants its own section in this study because the convention movement awarded so much time to discussing it. Every convention made reference to plans for a transcontinental railroad; however, most of the debate occurred in

[100] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* xvii.

the conventions between 1849 and 1856. Interest in the Pacific Railroad began to drop off at the conventions after 1856 and issues such as the African slave trade, education reform, and the sectional crisis began to occupy more of the conventions' time. Railroad historian Jere Roberson attributed the lack of interest in the Pacific Railroad after 1856 largely to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Led by Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, northern interests had succeeded in winning Congressional support for a transcontinental route from Chicago to San Francisco that would run through the new territories of Nebraska and Kansas. Southern clamoring for a route from Memphis to southern California had not been successful and southern radicals added the loss of Congressional support for a southern route to the Pacific to their list of wrongs the South had suffered. The only hope for southern railroad promoters after 1854 was that southern state governments and private investors would bind together to finance the railroad on their own. Roberson writes that this decentralization of the project proved to be its undoing because urban and regional rivalries discouraged agreement on a common route and the best method of financing construction.[101]

Southerners pushed for the construction of a southern railroad to the Pacific for the same reasons that they supported railroad construction within the South. Discourses of nationalism, progress and civilization, and the drive for commercial empire all encouraged southerners to advocate for completion of the Pacific Railroad. In addition, the transcontinental railroad facilitated the settlement and exploitation of the American

[101] Roberson, "The South and the Pacific Railroad, 1845-1855,"163-186. For more on antebellum rivalries between southern cities, particularly of interest for this study, Memphis and New Orleans, see Brownell and Goldfield, *The City in Southern History*.

West, allowing Americans to colonize and control disparate parts of territory they had seized in the name of Manifest Destiny.[102]

Convention resolutions appealed to lawmakers' nationalism when they insisted that private interests alone could not build the Pacific Railroad. James Robb of New Orleans emphasized, the magnitude of the project necessitated government involvement at both the state and federal level and that the entire nation stood to gain from the railroad.[103] In a letter to the 1852 New Orleans convention, Texas railroad promoter and newspaper editor Francis Baker insisted, the Pacific Railroad "would do more to maintain the relative importance of the South, to prevent encroachments on her rights, and to preserve the 'Union,' than all the compromises and 'Union' philanderings that ever were uttered."[104] Appeals to the perpetuation of the Union were common in debates over the railroad. Episcopal bishop James Otey declared at Memphis that the railroad was demanded not only by commercial interests but by "our national necessities," and the memorial of the 1853 convention to Congress insisted that the Pacific RR was necessary not only to secure western possessions taken from Mexico but to prevent them from engaging in sectional feelings and breaking away from the Union. The convention reported, "The importance of this road, in a military point of view, is therefore too apparent to be doubted."[105] At the 1854 convention, Senator Dawson predicted that the

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[102] William G. Robbins, *Colony and Empire: The Capitalist Transformation of the American West*, (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1994), 67.

[103] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 10.

[104] Ibid., 94.

[105] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 15, 59.

Pacific Railroad "will bind us as a people more firmly together,"[106] and Tennessee governor James C. Jones declared the railroad necessary for American defense. Jones noted the inability of the United States to project power into the Pacific Ocean and cited the Crimean War as a potential security threat to the country. Jones asked how the United States could defend itself against European powers when it could not even apprehend William Walker.[107] Albert Pike pointed out the effect of the Pacific Railroad on preserving the Union in his lengthy speech at the 1855 convention. Pike remarked, construction of the railroad "is not only important to those States [with termini], but indispensible to the welfare and prosperity, and even to their continued existence as equal and independent members of the confederacy." Pike insisted that without the railroad, the chances that the South would remain in the Union would have diminished significantly.[108] Speaking in favor of the railroad at the 1856 convention, John Moore, a former U.S. representative from Louisiana, insisted that construction of the Pacific Railroad was of "the greatest importance for the transportation of the mails, to repel invasion, and to cement the Union of the United States."[109] In its list of official resolutions, the General Committee would add to Moore's remarks, declaring the railroad necessary for the "permanency of the Union, and the defense, development, and independence of the South."[110] Independence within the Union was a common theme at

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[106] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* 11.

[107] Ibid., 74.

[108] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 8.

[109] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 90.

[110] Ibid., 100.

the conventions after 1854, illustrating not only that many of the conventions' attendees were still whigs with strong nationalist and Unionist sympathies, but that many of these delegates were torn between support for their country and support for their section. "Independence within the Union" was a way of resolving this dilemma.

In addition, common to the Pacific Railroad debates were remarks made about the "progress," "advancement," and "civilization," brought by the expansion of railroad networks in the United States. A letter to the 1849 Memphis convention from a smaller railroad convention held in Texas consumed a great deal of space exaggerating the capability of the railroad to support dense settlement and cultivation.[111] Often delegates seemed to forget that the proposed route for the Southern Pacific Railroad would have been through very arid regions of Texas, New Mexico Territory, and California. This elision reflected the optimism of the late Jacksonian period. Convinced that it was the United States' providential destiny to occupy the entire continent, issues with the climate of southwestern North America never seemed to bother expansionists. Their faith in mankind's ability to dominate and subdue nature reduced any doubts expansionists had about the ability of Europeans and European style agriculture to thrive in a very arid and inhospitable climate.

Other speakers described the completion of the railroad as the crowning achievement of American civilization to date. Albert Pike often insisted that the railroad was "the embodiment of the great idea of the age," implying that the railroad gave tangible proof to America's providential destiny.[112] Navy officer Matthew Fontaine

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[111] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 52.

[112] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 12.

Maury of Virginia, a frequent convention delegate, declared that he would have the Pacific Railroad "as a monument of the power and prosperity, of the glory and greatness of this nation." Maury went on to highlight its unifying abilities, writing, "Its real terminus would be here, there, and everywhere, wherever there is a city, town, village, or railway station."[113] A letter from Cincinnati civic leaders to the 1854 convention made similar remarks, declaring that the progress and prosperity of the United States hinged on completion of the railroad, language the conventions repeated in its official resolutions.[114]

However, more frequent than appeals to nationhood, Union, and settlement, was the conventions' insistence that the Pacific Railroad would be all that the South would need to situate itself at as the metropolis of the commercial empire of the United States. A letter from a Texas railroad convention to the 1849 Memphis meeting exclaimed that "the gorgeous East will be opened to our commerce without rival." The address compared future American commerce to that of the great imperial city-states of the ancient and early modern world, predicting that American commerce would be greater than that of Tyre, Sidon, Alexandria, Constantinople, Amsterdam, and Venice combined.[115] Albert Pike gleefully declared at Charleston that should the Pacific Railroad be completed, "the trade of India and China will come to New Orleans, and Charleston,

[113] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 39-40.

[114] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* 33, xvi.

[115] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention... 1849*, 53-54.

and Savannah, and Richmond" instead of going North.[116] Echoing Pike's remarks, Georgia state representative Nelson Tift predicted that one or more Pacific Railroads would "make the United States the receiver and distributor of the commerce of the world," and in perhaps one of the most grandiose phrases spoken at the conventions, Gen. Leslie Combs of Kentucky predicted that should the United States open the nearest route to China, the East Indies, and Japan, "the dream of Columbus would then be realized."[117] Finally, at long last, if the United States were able to complete the Pacific Railroad, it could complete the project begun by European empires over three centuries before, and if the route were a southern one, southern cities would reap the rewards. Indeed, at the following year's convention, Albert Pike insisted that a Pacific Railroad route through the southern states would be "the most direct line of communication between the ports of Europe and those of the Indies and of China."[118] Support for the Pacific Railroad as the South's only economic panacea continued all the way up to the secession crisis. Nicholas D. Coleman of Mississippi expressed all the capabilities of the railroad in 1859, predicting, "It will constitute a most powerful instrument to combine and strengthen the South, establish its commercial independence, develop its vast agricultural resources, and promote the general prosperity of the whole Union."[119]

Despite the flowery and triumphant rhetoric, southerners were unable to finance or build their Pacific Railroad until well after the Civil War. By that point, northern

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[116] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854* , 67.

[117] Ibid., 131, 63.

[118] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 8.

[119] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg", 101.

capital had financed the crossing of the continent with the meeting of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads in 1869. As Merl Reed has pointed out in his history of southern railroads, southerners could barely complete regional projects, let alone any of the proposed routes to the Pacific.[120] To be sure, the period from 1850 to 1860 experienced rapid railroad growth in the South and some regional routes, such as the Charleston and Cincinnati Railroad, and the Great Northern Railroad out of New Orleans, were completed, and railroad towns like Atlanta had emerged as growing population centers. However, for a variety of reasons, notably a lack of any significant capital, banking institutions, or pressure from industrialists, in addition to Democratic Party opposition to government aid for internal improvements, southerners could not complete their railroad projects at the rate and expanse that the conventions had hoped. Yet, despite these limitations, what little growth that did occur was clearly enough to keep conventioneers optimistic about the future of southern railroads.

Improvements in Communication, Science and Education

As the topics discussed at individual conventions demonstrate, the definition of "internal improvements" did not include improvement to transportation networks, alone. Conventioneers knew that nation-building and imperial expansion required more than an adequate network of steamships, canals, surface roads, and railroads. At the conventions, "improvement" also meant advancement of the South's communication systems, advancement in scientific discoveries and research, and reform of an education system

[120] Merl E. Reed, *New Orleans and the Railroads: The Struggle for Commercial Empire, 1830-1860*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), 89.

that delegates acknowledged only catered to the very wealthy. Also like transportation improvements, all of these issues were debated at one convention or another, however, only education reform generated debate at a majority of the conventions. Much like railroad construction and steamship lines, education reform proved to be the most exciting kind of social improvements discussed by the convention, and therefore stole much of the attention from other issues.

An integral part of Henry Clay's "American System," along with transportation improvements, was an improvement in the way Americans received and disseminated information. Historians have noted that nation building requires both a strong network of communication and media industry to convey ideas across both space and time.[121] The early conventions demonstrate that whig nationalists recognized that an excellent way to pacify sectionalism and bind the American nation more firmly together was through communication improvements. An official resolution of the 1845 Memphis convention called for the extension of telegraph service into the Mississippi Valley and that it was the duty of the federal government to facilitate this expansion.[122] The 1845 convention also convened a special Committee on Western Mails who reported that the mail service west of the Appalachians required a total reorganization, noting that the demand for good mail service alone justified road construction and improvement in river navigation. The committee expressed its desire that the mail service penetrate every part of the United

[121] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso Press, 1991). Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

[122] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 26, 122.

States, leaving no region without service.[123] The Committee on Western Mails also urged the convention to press Congress to legalize transmission of newspapers through the mail in order to better inform the general public and assist in their ability to create a republican government. The Committee warned their fellow delegates that many people in the United States were "not sufficiently informed of their rights, privileges, and obligations as a community."[124] The Report of the Committee on Western Mails demonstrates that the delegates at the 1845 convention understood the relationship between communication, media, and building a national community.

Other conventions expressed similar concern over the state of the mail system of the South and West, although these sentiments became less frequent over time, probably suggesting that over the course of the fourteen years covered by this study, the mail and telegraph service of the South greatly improved. In his presidential address to the 1853 Memphis Convention, Senator Dawson called for the improvement of southern mail service and an official resolution of the 1854 convention called for the creation of a committee to report to the next convention about the proper remedies for fixing the deficient condition of southern mail service.[125] Other conventions noted in their official resolutions the importance of creating a southern media industry, where southerners could get their news and information from journals, periodicals, and newspapers published in the South and not have to patronize the northern press. The Charleston convention resolved that southern men should only patronize pro-southern periodicals,

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[123] Ibid., 120.

[124] Ibid., 127.

[125] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 5. *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* 33, xviii.

making special note of the *Southern Quarterly Review,* the *Self-Instructor*, *De Bow's Review*, and the *Southern Eclectic.*[126] In the published official resolutions of the Savannah convention, the subsection "Periodicals and Literature," making a similar call for the patronage of southern periodicals and a boycott of all northern journals that were not "conservative," was listed under the heading "Education."[127] Placing their remarks on print media in the same section as education reform suggests that the delegates at the convention understood the relationship between print culture and political culture. Official sanction of a handful of journals by the conventions reflected the desire of the conventions to make the average southern citizen as concerned about the condition of their section as the delegates were.

One of the publications officially endorsed by the conventions was *De Bow's Review*, a New Orleans-based magazine devoted to the cause of improving the economic condition of the South. While editor James D. B. De Bow printed articles about territorial expansion and sectional politics, the focus on the magazine, and De Bow's passion, was science and statistics. Collection of statistical information of all kinds was one of the hallmarks of nineteenth century science, and as historians have noted, scientific study in the nineteenth century often was a willing companion to imperialism.[128] Carroll Pursell has emphasized the importance of surveys and land studies, noting that they were crucial

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[126] Ibid., 33, xix-xx.

[127] Southern Convention at Savannah," 101. For more on the relationship between print culture and political culture, see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities.*

[128] Daniel Headrick, *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004). J. B. Harley, *The New Nature of Maps: Essays in the History of Cartography*, Paul Laxton, ed., (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

in the conquest of land, "rooting out its wildness and allowing it to be bought and sold like any other commodity into which, indeed, it could now be converted."[129] The desire of nineteenth century Europeans and Americans to learn about the natural world was the first step towards controlling and conquering that world, and a handful of resolutions from various conventions illustrate this desire.

The 1845 Memphis Convention formed a committee with the task of finding a new and more accurate system of collecting statistics of the Union, but, unfortunately, like over half of the convention's committees, their report did not appear with the published minutes.[130] The Rev. Charles K. Marshall of Mississippi proposed to the 1853 convention that Congress finance engineering studies of the Mississippi River, as well as other major world rivers, for better understanding the behavior of the river and its tributaries.[131] Another delegate to the 1853 convention called for the establishment of state bureaus of statistics in all the southern states, "in which shall be collected all facts touching the capability, productions, industry, arts, wealth, and population of the States."[132] The following year at Charleston, an official resolution of the convention called for the creation of two statistical committees, one to investigate all aspects of manufacturing, mining, internal improvements, and economics, and the second to investigate milling, lumbering, and agriculture.[133] Another resolution passed at

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[129] Pursell, 156.

[130] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 19.

[131] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 14.

[132] Ibid., 15.

[133] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* 33, xv.

Charleston called on state legislators to finance complete geological surveys of each of the southern states. The convention then recommended that each state convene a state fair "for the exhibition of their numerous productions of industry, specimens of every description, in mechanical skill and art; thereby inviting a cordial and generous spirit of emulation."[134] At the 1855 convention, Albert Pike issued a general call to all the learned men of the South, asking them to prepare for the next convention anything and everything scientific and statistical in their possession that might be relevant to the purposes of the movement.[135] The 1856 convention repeated the calls above with nearly identical resolutions, calling for statistical reports on manufacturing and mining, geological surveys, the establishment of state fairs, and a final resolution that amounted to the equivalent of determining the South's gross domestic product.[136]

Expanding delegates' scientific knowledge about their section fit neatly within their drive to reform the southern education system. Their complaints about deficiencies in mail service, communication, print media, science, statistical information, and education all suggest that delegates were concerned that far too many southerners, themselves included, knew far too little about their own section. Convention delegates feared that the South suffered from what the Memorial of the 1853 convention termed "mental vassalage" to northern institutions of culture and learning.[137] Kenneth Greenberg and Lacy Ford have noted that the ideal lifestyle for southern men was independence: not

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[134] Ibid., xix.

[135] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 22.

[136] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 90, 91, 93, 100.

[137] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 63.

only economic and political independence, but also independence of conscience and thought.[138] Southern men feared enslavement and, as the conventions demonstrate, they especially feared that their children would become slaves of northern educational institutions and propaganda.

Educational institutions are places where nation building occurs, as historians have noted.[139] Children learn the customs and traditions of their culture in schools, while schools work to reinforce national myths and propaganda. Therefore, southern nationalists not only wanted to break the "mental vassalage" of their citizens to northern schools, but to build a national identity of their own. Convention delegates also wanted to build a commercial empire and expand American (and southern) hegemony beyond the nation's borders. They recognized that this would require a well-educated citizenry, thus it is no surprise that the commercial conventions devoted so much energy to advocating for education reform.

In a speech scolding southerners for their indifference toward the inability of the South to attract new immigrants, William Burwell of Virginia declared to the Baltimore convention, "If you want to retain people you must educate them. The American requires that his children shall be educated."[140] Education reform never made it into the official resolutions at Baltimore, but it did make the list the following year at Memphis. Ayres P.

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[138] Kenneth Greenberg, viii. Lacy Ford, *The Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 50, 56.

[139] Stephen L. Harp, *Learning to be Loyal: Primary Schooling as Nation-building in Alsace and Lorraine, 1850-1940,* (De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1998). Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France, and the USA*, (Basingstroke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). Nancy Beadie, *Education and the Creation of Capital in the Early American Republic*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[140] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 10.

Merrill of Memphis insisted to the convention that southern states should adopt free public education systems that would secure, "for all future time, the advantage of sound literary and moral instruction, to the growth of their whole population." Merrill asserted that free public education would serve as "the foundation of Republican institutions, and as the basis of higher seminaries of learning."[141] In the convention's official published memorial, it states, "Upon no subject was the convention more unanimous and decided in its views than upon the importance of establishing in our midst literary and scientific institutions, of the highest grades, and educating our children at home."[142] The official resolutions of the 1854 convention echoed the arguments made in Memphis, warning southern parents that neglecting local colleges and universities and sending their children to northern schools, "is fraught with peril to our sacred interests, perpetuating our dependence on those who do not understand and cannot appreciate our necessities."[143] The Charleston convention also called for the establishment of southern publishing houses for printing school textbooks. The convention insisted that it was the duty of "the learned men of the South" to devote energy to writing textbooks.[144] Not only did the 1854 meeting echo calls from the previous convention for the establishment of public schools, but it also called for establishment of southern public universities, free admission

[141] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 15.

[142] Ibid., 63.

[143] *Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854,* xx.

[144] Ibid., xxi.

normal schools to train teachers, and encouraged southern schools to emphasize "commercial education" as part of the curriculum.[145]

One of the convention's leading education reform supporters was the Rev. Charles K. Marshall, a minister from Vicksburg, Mississippi. Marshall gave a long and passionate speech about the need for education reform in the South to the 1855 convention at New Orleans. He especially emphasized the need for southern parents to rescue their children from the propaganda and lies of northern teachers, all of which he believed were educated at abolitionist colleges. Marshall feared that because of northern tutelage, southern children would grow to resent and oppose their native land and the proslavery views of their parents, and that this new generation would undermine the southern way of life long before it would occur at the hands of an abolitionist government. Marshall proposed resolutions urging the parents of the South to consider "the claims of the South in the education of their children, and recommend the Legislatures of the Southern States to encourage home authorship and schoolbook making." Marshall aligned educational improvements with internal improvements and declared, "We cannot compete successfully with the Northern States in any commercial enterprise unless we have educated merchants."[146] A delegate from Kentucky followed Marshall's speech and requested the convention instruct Congress that in the American public education system, "the works of the poets, orators, and philosophers of Republican America should obtain a decided preference over the literature of Greece, Rome, or the modern nations of Europe" in order that "our youths may enjoy the advantage of the

[145] Ibid., xx.

[146] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 18-19.

stirring, patriotic, and practical literature of our own progressive age and country" and not be bothered by absurd philosophies from overseas.[147] Resolutions for education reform would continue along the same lines at the latter conventions, with various speakers advocating for southern freedom from intellectual dependence on northern "fanatics" and "abolitionists." The 1856, 1857, and 1859 conventions each drafted resolutions supporting the establishment of southern public schools, and southern publishing houses for textbooks, and insisting that southern schools only hire teachers sympathetic to slavery.[148]

Demand for education reform in the South stemmed from a variety of motivations. First, many delegates, particularly those from the Whig Party, saw no distinction between internal improvements for transportation, communication, science, and improvements for society. "Improvement" was the order of the age. Second, delegates were embarking on a process of building the American nation and they recognized that part of that process would involve the creation of public school systems to educate every child, not simply children of the wealthy. Third, the emphasis on American nationalism was both related, and opposed to, the process of building the southern nation, thus southern schools needed to be the most vocal proponents of the southern way of life and its "institutions," in order to foster any growth of southern pride among the region's youth. Finally, with the conventions' heavy emphasis on building an American commercial empire, delegates recognized that imperialism required a large educated class that could work as agents of American power, fostering the demand for

[147] Ibid., 21.

[148] De Bow, 239. "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 310-311, 316. "Southern Convention at Savannah," 90, 91, 101. "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 103-104.

"commercial education." Convention delegates feared that if the Pacific Railroad, steamships, and other ventures brought untold wealth to southern cities, the South might lack the intellectual capital to manage its new metropolitan status, resulting in further "mental vassalage" to the North.

Commercial Imperialism

Spreading the economic hegemony of the United States was a central theme of the commercial conventions. Building up the commerce of South, to place it on par with the economic growth experienced by northern states, meant building an overseas commercial empire. Thomas Hietala has asserted that commercial imperialism was just as important to Jacksonian expansionists as was conquest of territory and that the ambitions of expansionists were global, not simply continental.[149] David Ryan has demonstrated that economic expansion has played a much larger role in American imperial discourse than has territorial acquisition, and the United States has exhibited a long history of making foreign policy decisions based upon its economic desires.[150] Daniel Howe adds that expanding American overseas trade to East Asia was an integral, if not distinctive, part of official Whig foreign policy.[151] Through various projects, notably the transcontinental railroad, improvement in steamship navigation, and direct steam lines to other parts of the world, the commercial conventions advocated resituating the cities of the South as the chief markets of the new American commercial empire.

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[149] Hietala, 55-57, 94.

[150] Ryan, 56.

[151] Howe, 206.

In his presiding address to the Memphis Convention in 1845, John C. Calhoun reaffirmed his faith that capitalism would drive American hegemony when he asserted, "On a free exchange of our products with the rest of the world depends our capacity for commanding its market."[152] In the raw optimism of the Jacksonian period, Calhoun asserted that free exchange—simple capitalism—was all the United States needed to dominate and control the economy of the world. In his report of the Committee on Railroads, James Gadsden declared that the staple crops of the South—cotton, rice, sugar, hemp, and tobacco—"give animation to the commerce of the whole world," as if no other crops in the world existed to provide a the same kind of economic stimulation.[153] In the official resolutions of the 1853 convention, delegates called upon the Pierce Administration to make cotton a subject of official instruction to foreign commercial and diplomatic agents.[154] The 1857 convention passed a resolution calling for the repeal of all tariffs and import duties to encourage the free trade of southern goods.[155] This belief in the inevitable consumption and exaggerated value of southern goods by the world's people voiced by Calhoun, Gadsden, and others brings the impetus for the conventions into very sharp relief. James D. B. De Bow asked, in his speech to the 1849 convention, if southern products were so valuable, how was it that "the whole business of exchanging the products of the South for those which are required from other countries for our

[152] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845,* 13.

[153] Ibid., 30.

[154] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention..1853,* 16.

[155] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 310.

consumption is left to other hands?"[156] Nascent discussion of southern nationalism, and the belief that the real American civilization depended on slavery and agriculture, informed these men that southern exports were an essential part of the global economy and they chafed under the idea the northern interests had come to control them.

Convention speakers often expended a great deal of energy educating their fellow southerners about the almost magical powers exhibited by American commerce in other parts of the world. The conventions were often the sites of the collisions of the discourse of progress, civilization, and capitalism, as evidenced from a series of excerpts from the 1852 assembly at Baltimore. Brantz Mayer proudly declared to the convention that through their involvement in foreign and domestic trade, funneling the produce of America into the world market, Baltimoreans have been "important agents in promoting the welfare of mankind in both hemispheres."[157] Later, Navy officer, oceanographer, and frequent adventurer Matthew Fontaine Maury of Virginia announced to the convention, "Commerce is the great civilizer and Christianizer of the world. Commerce is the agent by which that wilderness country has to be subdued." Maury argued for the important role of the merchant in spreading civilization, asserting, "He must go in the van with the mail steamer; then trade, emigration, settlement, cultivation and the spread of knowledge will follow."[158] In a toast given at the banquet following the Baltimore sessions, president of the city's board of trade, John C. Brune, affirmed, "Commerce—the civilization of the

[156] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849,* 85.

[157] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 3.

[158] Ibid., 8.

world—the pacificator of nations—let us not rest until every air of our country shall rustle with the beatings of its wings."[159]

As revealing as the above sentiments from Baltimore are, delegates devoted most discussions of commercial empire to dreams and aspirations of foreign markets and the result on the cities of the South. Brantz Mayer revealed to the delegates assembled at Baltimore that his city had already begun an "extensive colonial commerce" with the west coast of Africa, Brazil, and Argentina, and the city had agents exploring possibilities in India and Japan. Full of pride, Mayer fully expected Baltimore to be the new imperial metropolis of America's global trade.[160] Not to be outdone, civic leader James Robb of New Orleans predicted at his city's 1852 convention that the southwestern states will "enter upon a career which will shame the greatness of the richest empires of the world." New Orleans will become the "Empire City, the center of prosperity, wealth, of enlightenment, of the arts and sciences."[161] Three years later at the next New Orleans convention, Nicholas D. Coleman argued, "the South has it in her power to control and turn into her ports and harbors the trade and travel of the whole Eastern world." Coleman's remarks, however, did not simply stop with the trade brought in by the Pacific Railroad, as he invoked natural geography to demonstrate the Mississippi and Amazon seemed to open together at a common longitude. Therefore, Coleman declares, "Nature points out [New Orleans] as the great point for the concentration of the commerce of the

[159] Ibid., 17.

[160] Ibid., 4.

[161] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 76.

world."[162] Looking at routes other than the Pacific Railroad, an official resolution of the Savannah convention advocated that connection between the South and transportation across the Isthmus of Central America "will affect an entire revolution in the traffic of the world, in which the slaveholding states will be the principal beneficiaries." The resolution stated that southern cities would become the intermediaries between Europeans and all the trade of East Asia, Australia, Central, and South America.[163] In a fiery opening speech to the 1857 convention, James D. B. De Bow predicted that if the South "assumed her stand among nations," the palaces, fleets, and navies formerly belonging to foreign empires would "be found to have transferred themselves a thousand miles away" and taken up residence in the cities and ports of the southern states.[164] Finally, in a letter addressed to the 1856 Savannah Commercial Convention, Senator Robert Toombs of Georgia wrote, "The thought which gave birth to these conventions, was to devise some plan by which the South could secure her just share of foreign commerce."[165]

Discourses of providential destiny, pro-slavery arguments, and the supremacy of American civilization convinced many of the men who attended the commercial conventions that the South, indeed, could command the world's commerce. After all, they recognized that their staple crops had been the chief exports of the United States during the early republican and antebellum periods. They recognized that the chief industry of the North, textiles, thrived on southern cotton. The North, however, was developing new

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[162] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 19.

[163] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 97.

[164] De Bow, 235.

[165] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 103.

industries that threatened to overshadow the products of the South as America's chief exports. While the conventions often exhorted southern businessmen to invest in manufacturing, they seemed to encourage manufacturing in rhetoric only, and recognized textiles as the only viable industry for the South. Ultimately, the commercial conventions sought economic imperium not through manufactured goods but through agriculture: the crops, the slave regime, and the way of life that they felt made their civilization superior. The conventions demonstrate that delegates believed these elements could make other civilizations better, as well.

The conventions also demonstrate the commercial hopes and aspirations held by southern merchants, as well as the biting resentment that they felt towards their northern counterparts. Their neo-Jeffersonian belief in southern staple agriculture as the root of American civilization revealed a recognition on the part of southerners, that they, not the cold, urbane, and mechanized North, really powered the providential destiny of the United States. Yet, the conventions also reveal their frustrations, as James Lyons of Virginia lamented in 1856, "At one time possessing the almost entire trade and commerce of the country, we have seen by degrees, and year after year, this trade and commerce transferred to other portions of the country, our cities dwindling, our commerce gone."[166] Conventioneers wanted to restructure America's commercial empire with the South seated at its head. Feeling as if their empire had been stolen, southerners were issuing a warning to the northern states that soon America's commercial empire would belong to the South, and there was nothing the North could do about it.

[166] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 87.

For much of its history, the southern commercial convention movement provided a forum for southern whigs to come together and voice their concerns about the economic future of the southern states. While these men included individuals from both the Whig and Democratic parties, the issues they discussed were all part of a "whiggish" concern for progress, commerce, and civilization. Discussions of how to increase the wealth and economic hegemony of the southern states were rife with the discourses of progress, empire, and nationhood. "Whigs" sought not territorial conquest or the direct military subjugation of foreign peoples, but they did seek the conquest and subjugation of foreign markets. They also sought to use the conventions as a platform to announce plans for building a more perfect Union. Nationalism and belief in the providential destiny of the United States encouraged the conventions to advocate for internal improvements, advancement in science, and education reform. However, concerns over slavery, and the belief that the true republic rested on the slave regime, disabled the conventions from keeping out sectionalism and southern nationalist rhetoric, ultimately transferring control of the conventions from whigs to democrats, and finally, to the secessionists.

CHAPTER III

THE DEMOCRATS: TERRITORIAL EXPANSION AND LATIN AMERICA

While Whigs clamored for economic expansion, Democrats followed with demands for territorial expansion. Jacksonians saw territorial expansion as tangible proof of America's providential destiny. Expansionists looked to American acquisition of land west of the Appalachians after the American Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase as providing the precedent for further expansion. Anglo-Saxon whites had obtained these "vacant" swaths of land, settled, and "improved" them. Expansionists believed acquisition of the Mexican Cession, Oregon, and beyond, would bring the same result. Guided by Manifest Destiny and a civilizing mission, the United States would eventually seek territory beyond the North American continent.

While a belief in Manifest Destiny was an important impetus behind U.S. expansion, Thomas Hietala has written that in the wake of routine economic panics and racial tensions, Democrats also saw expansion as a panacea for the nation's problems. Democrats believed that stasis was the root of all evils in the United States. New territories, however, would encourage migration, land sales, job and industry creation, investment opportunities, and a diffusion of the country's black and immigrant populations.[167] Southerners especially feared stasis, believing that slavery had to expand

[167] Hietala, xi.

in order to survive. Traditional historians have noted the politics of southern expansion, emphasizing the need for more slave states to restore a balance of power in the Senate.

James Oakes' findings, however, suggest something more than mere politics behind southern support for expansion. He has shown that the average slaveholder was remarkably mobile and moved frequently during his lifetime. When facing financial hardship, rather than sell their slaves, most disadvantaged slaveholders would simply relocate to regions thought to have better economic opportunity.[168] Southern democrats objected so fiercely to limitations on slavery's expansion because mobility was such a large part of slaveholder identity. The inability to move west might mean that the average slaveholder would have to sell his slaves and fall back to the dreaded status of non-slaveholder.

Southern expansionists also feared stasis because they believed it incubated a dense population of hostile slaves. Southern expansionists believed that slavery must expand westward in order to ensure the safety of southern whites, particularly southern white women. Hietala terms this fear "the Black Peril," and notes that it was a strong motivating factor in convincing lawmakers from both sections to support the annexation of Texas.[169] Whites, especially those who lived in Mississippi and South Carolina, the two states where blacks outnumbered whites, feared that the South would fall victim to a slave revolt not unlike the Haitian Revolution. Expansionists saw a dispersed slave population as the only way to avoid large-scale uprisings. Indeed, the very presence of blacks worried some southerners, who feared that their presence degraded white society.

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[168] James Oakes, *The Ruling Race: A History of American Slaveholders*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1982), 75-76.

[169] Hietala, 10-11.

Lacy Ford has written that some whites in the Upper South states of Kentucky, Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, and Missouri had never truly accepted slavery as a positive good and saw westward expansion (often in conjunction with laws expelling free blacks from the state) as a way to facilitate slavery's gradual disappearance from the white republic.[170]

Southern democrats supported territorial expansion with political, economic, and racial justifications. Southerners saw northern attempts to block slavery's expansion into the West as a declaration of war on the South's political and economic viability, and the very nature of their "peculiar" society. The southern commercial conventions demonstrate that all three of these justifications fueled southern frustrations. The United States was growing; yet, to southerners it seemed that the North had a stranglehold on that growth. Proslavery advocates viewed the institution as the very basis for the American republic. As much as southern whigs saw slavery supporting republicanism, southern democrats believed slavery for blacks meant democracy for whites.[171] White egalitarianism was the center of the Jacksonian conception of American civilization.[172] Northern attempts to block slavery's expansion west, not only insulted southerners but

[170] Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 8-9, 17, 76.

[171] Oakes, 9, 37, 226. A crucial distinction existed between the terms "republicanism" and "democracy." Southern whigs believed that slavery provided the bedrock for the republic by reinforcing social difference, not only between whites and blacks, but also between wealthy and poor, upper class and lower class. The plantation also provided a model for the proper, hierarchical society. Whigs viewed democracy as dangerous because it disrupted a proper, ordered society. Southern democrats on the other hand, saw slavery as reinforcing only racial difference. Racism dictated that skin color determined citizenship, thus southern democrats felt they had to preserve slavery in order to preserve white equality and eliminate class distinctions. "Republicanism" implied that only elites could hold power, whereas democrats insisted that all whites should have access to power because of white supremacy. Both groups relied on slavery for their justifications.

[172] Ford, 9-10, 444.

also violated their understanding of America. These expansionists wondered how it was possible for American civilization to expand westward if slavery could not.

American expansion to the west, whether from the earliest days of settlement in the Ohio Valley after the Revolution, all the way to the landing of American missionaries in Hawaii, has been imperialistic. The delegates who met at the southern commercial conventions wanted the South to have control over the settlement and direction of this empire. While delegates often debated American expansion on the Continent, particularly Kansas and California, they also looked to islands in the Caribbean, Central America, and possible settlement in South America as solutions to their frustrations. Ultimately, they feared that if the South did not act, it too, would become a colony of the northern states.

Southern Expansionism on the Continent

The theme of westward expansion was important even at the earliest conventions. From 1845 to the final convention in 1859, concern over the movement of Americans into the West, either to fill out territory already acquired or to initiate the acquisition of future territory, frequently appeared in convention speeches, reports, and correspondence. At the 1845 Memphis convention, much of the conventions' resolutions and policy suggestions emerged from committee meetings and their reports. These reports often invoked westward migration to justify their recommendations for internal improvements. South Carolina railroad magnate James Gadsden, author of the Report of Committee on Railroads, insisted upon railroad construction in the Mississippi Valley because it was a "vast domain, so highly favored with the abundant gifts of Providence, and with a population whose enterprise and energies are daily stimulated by new and alluring

prospects on yet unexplored horizons."[173] Gadsden said that in order to develop the resources of the Valley and enable for the settlement and development of "unexplored horizons," western citizens must construct railroad networks. He went on to say that the people of the western states would not be satisfied until the railroads were extended, "and like its onward population, find no termini short of the Pacific."[174] Gadsden's report declared that the United States' would maintain their claim to North America by "the silent, slow, but certain influences of our liberal institutions," and that "The Mississippi Valley is no longer a frontier; it is the centre of the Union."[175]

Conventions after conclusion of the Mexican War became very concerned with settlement of the Mexican Cession and their recommendations for internal improvements extended to this new territory. The 1849 Memphis convention adopted a resolution for the construction of naval posts on the Pacific coast.[176] This resolution was probably a response to a letter from James Gadsden that insisted that the war with Mexico was neither about acquiring the Utah and New Mexico Territories, nor about legitimizing the annexation of Texas, but rather the war was about acquisition of California and a Pacific frontier.[177] An Alabama delegate proposed that the convention press Congress to establish military posts in the West to protect new settlers and encourage construction of "civilized and productive settlements."[178] The published Memorial of the 1849

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[173] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 31.

[174] Ibid., 33.

[175] Ibid., 39.

[176] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 17.

[177] Ibid., 64.

[178] Ibid., 20.

convention was also very concerned with settlement of the West's sparsely populated lands. The Memorial lamented, "This immense empire…although sparsely populated in parts, is yet an unreclaimed wilderness, unexplored in its greater extent," but found solace in the future, predicting, "This western empire is destined eventually…to give habitation to millions of freemen and to exhibit all the highest evidences of civilization and progress in arts and in industry."[179]

Concern about the vastness of the United States and the sparse dispersion of population over its territory would continue into the conventions of the next decade. In his presiding speech at the Baltimore convention, Senator William C. Dawson asserted that he was interested in "the great question of the dispersion of the population of this country as much as possible over every part and portion of it," and hoped that the convention would be as well.[180] Delegate E. B. Bishop of Arkansas proposed a resolution to the 1853 convention stating, that given the large numbers of foreign immigrants arriving in the United States, he suggested, "obtaining all territory adjoining or contiguous to the United States, by treaty, negotiation or purchase, at not too great cost, as early as possible."[181] Bishop's resolution is evidence of what Hietala terms expansionists' "neo-Malthusian" fears that European immigrants were overcrowding and overwhelming American cities. The urban mob threatened to undermine a Jeffersonian understanding of the republic, thus the republic demanded additional land to reinforce the

[179] Ibid., 30.

[180] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 5.

[181] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 22.

agrarian ideal.[182] The Memorial of the 1853 convention marveled that settlers were moving into the western United States at a pace so rapid, it was an "anomaly in the history of nations," suggesting that rapid population growth reinforced notions of America's providential destiny to expansionists.[183]

Early conventions also justified internal improvements in the West by exposing the ever-present threat of "Indian depredations." The report on the Arkansas military road to the 1845 convention referred to the resettled Indians west of Arkansas as "but one remove from a state of barbarism," and reported that the road was necessary for the rapid deployment of soldiers and materiel should these vengeful Native Americans attack their white neighbors.[184] Both the majority and minority reports of the Committee on Forts and Defenses of the Western Indian Frontier resorted to common white stereotypes about Native Americans to both support defense improvements and speak against them. The majority report advocated that the army establish military posts to separate Indian from white territory, claiming that the forts would be "the only security for our women and children against the scalping knife of hostile and discontented savages."[185] The minority report disagreed, stating that there was no need for such defenses, invoking the myth of the "vanishing" Indian, "Indians on the frontier have been rapidly diminishing," and that "there remains only a few degenerate relics of the once powerful tribes that swarmed in the forests and prairies of North America." The report advocated a different kind of

[182] Hietala, 108-112.

[183] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853*, 59.

[184] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 112.

[185] Ibid., 117.

imperialism, stating that if the government were to expend any funds in Indian Territory, they should go towards improving the condition of Indian society, with "the establishment of schools, religious institutions, and farms, where can be taught the practical knowledge of agriculture."[186]

Concern with the presence of Native Americans on the frontier appeared again at the 1849, 1852 New Orleans, and 1853 conventions. The 1849 Memphis convention justified the construction of a southern Pacific Railroad in part to help the United States "fulfill its treaty stipulations with Mexico."[187] The treaty stipulations referred to by the convention memorial regarded the obligation of the United States to protect Mexico from Comanche raids, which had devastated the country prior to the 1846 war.[188] The railroad could facilitate the construction of military forts and highways that would allow the U.S. military to have strong presence in the West. This argument reappeared in a letter to the 1852 New Orleans convention from Texas journalist and railroad promoter Francis C. Baker who stated that the only way for the United States to fulfill its obligation to Mexico was to build the railroad.[189] The Memorial of the 1853 convention urged further military occupation of the West, stating, "Our frontier settlements, which are annually pushing farther and farther westward, demand the protection of the strong arm of the government from Indian depredation."[190] This official motion may have been a response to two

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[186] Ibid., 118.

[187] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention... 1849*, 27.

[188] For more on this lesser-known part of the Treaty of Guadeloupe-Hidalgo and the role of the Comanche raids in bringing about the Mexican War, see Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

[189] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 94.

[190] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 60.

seemingly contradictory motions made by E. B. Bishop of Arkansas to the 1853 convention. He first suggested that the solution to the country's problems with Native Americans was to take *more* land from them, upwards of 800,000 additional acres from resettled Cherokees in present-day Oklahoma. However, the delegate also insisted that Congress invite the Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw nations to enter the Union as states.[191] The motivation behind the first resolution was to clear more land for white settlement, but the motivation for the second probably rested on a handful of reasons. Bishop may have been sincerely concerned about U.S. policy towards Native Americans and felt that statehood would improve their condition. Conversely, he may also have seen state government as more conducive to white settlement than territorial government, which the federal government oversaw and, in the past, had passed laws restricting whites and Native Americans from settling near one another. Alternatively, Bishop may have seen Native American statehood as advantageous to the South, remembering that the Cherokee, Creek, and Choctaw nations all practiced slavery. This logic would be along the same lines as Arkansas railroad promoter Albert Pike's appeal to the 1854 convention that Native American tribes should be able to purchase shares in the Pacific Railroad on the same level as state governments. Pike felt that not only was it fair policy to let Indian nations in on the enterprise but that it would also further bind the interests of slaveholding Native Americans to the interests of slaveholding whites.[192]

Beyond the opinions discussed above, the conventions did not devote much attention to Native Americans living in the West. This silence is perhaps the most

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[191] Ibid., 22.

[192] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854*, 69.

revealing evidence of how convention delegates viewed and understood native peoples. For all of their concern about westward migration, the conventions rarely made notice of the people already living in that territory. No mention at all exists of the thousands of former Mexican citizens who suddenly found themselves living on U.S. soil. This omission reflected delegates' belief in the white discourse of the "vacant" west, which may have tacitly acknowledged that people lived in the West, but insisted that Americans were really the first people to *live* there. This discourse taught that Americans were the first people to "civilize," "conquer," and "subdue" the western wildness and make it "useful." As the minority report from the 1845 convention indicated, Native Americans should not be an issue to migrating whites because soon Native Americans would either disappear or assimilate.

While the conventions of the early 1850s voiced their concerns over western settlement in rhetoric relatively devoid of sectionalism, the conventions of the later 1850s, especially after Bleeding Kansas, could no longer keep sectional discourse out of the push for westward migration. At New Orleans in 1855, Albert Pike fiercely declared that the southern states had a right to demand, "That the territory won by the common blood, or purchased by the common treasure of the North and the South, shall hereafter be the common property of both."[193] The Rev. Charles K. Marshall followed Pike a few days later, defiantly and proudly declaring, "I believe the institution of slavery to be right—that God has established it and has civilized man through this institution. I believe that in fifty years' time slavery will occupy twice as much territory as it now does."[194] In

[193] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 9.

[194] Ibid., 18.

those two short sentences, Marshall hadaligned the proslavery argument, Manifest Destiny, westward expansion, and the belief that slavery was the basis of American civilization. Marshall's declaration said that if slavery were indeed right, it would follow Americans into the West, by the grace of God, and regardless of any northern attempts to stop it.

The 1856 Savannah convention adopted an official resolution supporting slavery in Kansas, stating, "That the security and honor of the South demands that she should maintain her equal rights in the Territories of the United States, and that she ought to resist at every cost any attempt to exclude her from those territories."[195] A. L. Scott of Virginia insisted that the South could solve its westward expansion problem by reopening the African slave trade, arguing that "The slave population, after supplying the States, would overflow into the Territories, and nothing could control its natural expansion."[196] In the call for the 1858 Montgomery convention, James D. B. De Bow lamented the exclusion of slavery from Kansas and the West and emphatically asserted the right of the South to colonize western lands with slaveholders.[197] Demands for expansion of slavery into the West dominated the convention with secessionist William Yancey railing against the inability of southerners to "colonize our common territory" at the same rate as northerners. The Alabamian predicted, "It will not be long before…the whole American continent would soon be under the flag of this Union, and there would not be upon it the foot of a slave." Yancey's speech suggested that the solution to the South's inability to stimulate westward migration not only lay with popular sovereignty in Kansas but with

[195] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 102.

[196] Ibid., 219.

[197] "Southern Convention at Montgomery, Alabama," *De Bow's Review* 24 (May 1858): 427.

laws prohibiting the African slave trade.[198] At the following year's convention at Vicksburg, another secessionist, Leonidas Spratt of South Carolina, criticized the government for passing laws excluding slavery from "certain latitudes" and "vacant land."[199] A reference to the Missouri Compromise, Spratt's comment suggested that the U.S. government had exhibited a long history of preventing slavery from expanding alongside the American empire. No convention resolution better summarizes the impact of the collision between sectionalism and imperialism than one made by Vicksburg native H. J. Harris in 1859. Harris urged the convention to "repudiate the doctrine that the legislature of a territory can legally abolish slavery when introduced therein; and under no circumstances can we support any man for the Presidency who holds such a position."[200] Harris' resolution said expansion of slavery westward was a necessary part of any plans to keep the South in the Union.

A final piece of the convention movement's relationship with westward migration is a handful of odd references to the territory of "Arizona." Officially, the Arizona Territory did not exist until 1863. However, the use of the name, "Arizona Territory" dated to the antebellum period and became the name of the southwestern portion of the New Mexico Territory, whose settlers decided to secede and join the Confederacy in 1861. Previously "Arizona" had referred to the area of the Gadsden Purchase, a territory purchased from Mexico for building the Pacific Railroad. On more than one occasion, the southern commercial conventions accepted a delegate from the "Arizona Territory." On

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[198] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 586-588.

[199] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg: Debate on the Slave Trade—Speeches of Mr. Spratt of South Carolina, and Gov. H. S. Foote of Mississippi," *De Bow's Review* 27 (August 1859): 206.

[200] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 100.

each of these occasions, the delegate was either mining speculator Sylvester Mowry or filibuster and future Confederate congressman from Arizona Territory, Granville Oury. At the 1857 Knoxville Convention, Mowry successfully petitioned the convention to demand Congress create an Arizona territorial government.[201] At the Vicksburg Convention, Mississippi Senator Henry Stuart Foote predicted the founding of slave states in southern California, Oregon, Washington Territory, and "Arizonia."[202] Given the region's willingness to secede from the Union during the Civil War, it is safe to assume that most of the settlers living in southwestern New Mexico Territory held strong southern sympathies. Remembering that slavery was legal in New Mexico, an attempt to create the Territory of Arizona was an attempt to add a third territorial government with loyalties to the South (Utah being the other). Territorial government assured that more settlers would move to the region and hasten the possibility of statehood. Both New Mexico and Utah could have applied for statehood long before 1857, but the federal government had refused to grant those territories that status. Acceptance of delegates from a territory that did not exist, as well as Knoxville's call that the territory should exist, demonstrated another attempt by the South to expand its dominions in the West.

In the above passage from Senator Foote, not only did the Mississippi politician predict new slave states in territory already acquired by the United States, but he also predicted slave states would emerge from "yet to be acquired territories of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Sinaloa."[203] This call for acquisition of more territory from Mexico in 1859

[201] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 306.

[202] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg: Debate on the Slave Trade," 220.

[203] Ibid., 220.

seems ages away from the official sentiment of the 1849 convention, which read, "The settlement of the Oregon question and the treaty of peace with the Republic of Mexico, fix and quiet us in the possession of territories."[204] Over the brief history of the convention movement, expansionist democrats were able to use the sectional crisis to wrest power away from internal improvement whigs and take control of the movement. Mexico, along with Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Amazon, would be some of their targets for expansion.

Mexico: The Gadsden Purchase and the Tehuantepec Railroad

The U.S.-Mexico War forever changed the American political landscape through its changes to the United States' geographical landscape. The 1848 Treaty of Guadeloupe-Hidalgo awarded the young nation an immense new section of territory, upon which newly arriving white settlers would discover gold and silver and would make use of California's already existing port cities of San Francisco and San Diego. Southerners, no doubt, wanted a piece of this new empire, and the demand for a southern Pacific railroad and settlement of the West with slaveholders illustrates this desire. The war left Mexico humiliated and vulnerable, unable to resist further demands from American expansionists and commercial imperialists.

In the discussion over the proposed route of the southern Pacific Railroad, the need to acquire more land from Mexico became apparent to the convention delegates. In order to navigate successfully the mountain passes connecting New Mexico Territory and California, the railroad would have to jog into Mexico. In the earliest convention report

[204] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 30.

regarding the most practical southern Pacific Railroad route, Colonel C. C. Mills of Texas proposed that the 1849 convention pressure the U.S. government to acquire additional land from Mexico.[205] Despite a statement recited in the previous section indicating the 1849 convention's desire to stop territorial expansion, the convention's memorial was confident that the Pacific Railroad would "bring us into immediate commercial intercourse with the northern provinces of Mexico, among the most thriving in that Republic."[206] The assumption that the northern provinces of Mexico (that is, those provinces that would be closest to the proposed Pacific Railroad route) were that country's richest became a recurring theme at the conventions, while no delegate ever presented any evidence to suggest that this assumption was true.

Other delegates perhaps uncomfortable with another American land-grab in Mexico instead pushed for a simple American assertion of a right of way through the northern part of the country. A letter from Cincinnati officials to the Charleston convention requested that the convention petition President Franklin Pierce to negotiate with Mexico for the use of land necessary to complete the railroad.[207] The convention's official resolutions demanded that the federal government award the corporation created to construct the railroad the right to negotiate with Mexico over the right of way of the railroad through Mexican territory. The resolution included an addendum stating that although the railroad would keep military bases along the road, it "will in all times submit to the jurisdiction of Mexico, and claim no political rights, nor attempt to colonize the

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[205] Ibid., 14.

[206] Ibid., 27.

[207] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854*, 33.

country."[208] How the convention convinced itself that the presence of military bases in a foreign country did not equate with attempts to colonize said country reflected an expansionist assumption that the United States did not possess colonies in the European sense and that America's intrusion into foreign countries was usually benign and perhaps even beneficial. At the same time, the resolution may also have been an attempt to temper rhetoric used by Albert Pike, the proposer of the multi-state corporation idea, who vowed that the United States would go to war with Mexico should its government refuse to cooperate with a railroad project or interfere after the two parties had made an agreement.[209]

The most striking element of the demands placed by the conventions on Mexico, in regards to both acquiring land for the Pacific Railroad and acquiring a right of way across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, was the relative ease with which the conventions believed the United States could achieve such ends. Francis C. Baker summed up this sentiment when he told the 1852 New Orleans convention "the United States could *doubtless* secure the right of way, or buy the territory down to a certain degree of latitude, say the thirty-first" (emphasis added).[210] Baker was sure that the vulnerable position of Mexico and its reliance on the United States for protection would make further acquisition of Mexican territory possible for a long time to come. Indeed, the very discussion over the Pacific Railroad itself was impractical without this assumption. If a particularly strong regime ruled Mexico during this period, delegates would have been

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[208] Ibid., xvii.

[209] Ibid., 137.

[210] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 94.

less willing to spend so much time talking about a proposal that would have been impossible to build without Mexican cooperation. Had the United States not gone to war with Mexico in 1846, a southern route to the Pacific would probably have been completely out of the question. This is why the 1845 Memphis convention did not entertain any proposals for a transcontinental railroad. Certainly, without the war, conventions after 1845 would have resembled the original gathering and probably only discussed regional internal improvement projects and issues of Atlantic and Caribbean commerce. The conventions' preoccupation with the Pacific coast and East Asia was a direct result of American imperial expansion.

One of the few successes of the convention movement was its influence on the U.S. acquisition of the very land delegates had dreamed about at the 1849, 1852, 1853, and 1854 conventions. James Gadsden was the perfect candidate for the task of securing the land. Gadsden was one of the convention movement's founding fathers, a principle figure at not only the 1845 convention, but also the direct trade conventions of the late 1830s. Gadsden also served as president of the South Carolina and Georgia Railroad and was one of the nation's leading railroad promoters. Historian Jere Roberson has written about the relationship between the convention movement and securing the Gadsden Purchase. He writes that both President Franklin Pierce and Secretary of War Jefferson Davis were in favor of acquiring additional Mexican land and that the support of the convention movement, particularly the 1853 Memphis gathering, convinced the Administration that the time was right. The Administration's support for the conventions' resolutions reflected the strong pro-southern and pro-slavery tilt of the Pierce White

House.[211] Roberson writes that Gadsden used fear of war and took advantage of Mexican political disputes to secure the land purchase. Because of Gadsden's skills of "persuasion" and bribery, the Mexican government surrendered more land than Secretary of State William Marcy had requested.[212] Congress approved the Gadsden Purchase on April 25, 1854, not long after the Charleston Convention had adjourned. Prior to the treaty's passage, Senator John Bell of Tennessee, a frequent convention attendee, had it reworked to include protection for American interests on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.[213]

For as long as convention delegates had supported construction of a southern railroad route to the Pacific, they also called for American control of all transportation across the isthmus. Half a century before the United States would orchestrate a war between Panamanian rebels and Colombia and finance construction of the Panama Canal, antebellum southerners had their eyes on transportation across the Mexican isthmus. Conventioneers endowed completion of the Tehuantepec route, by canal, road, or railroad (preferably the latter) with the same magical powers they gave to the Pacific Railroad. The first resolutions calling for a route across the isthmus appeared at the 1849 convention. The report on Tehuantepec by John C. Larue of Louisiana predicted that construction of a railroad or canal across the isthmus would complement the Pacific Railroad project and further connect the cities of the South to the commerce of California and East Asia.[214] An Alabama delegate noted that a route across Tehuantepec "would be

[211] Roberson, "The South and the Pacific Railroad, 1845-1855," 170-173.

[212] Ibid., 174.

[213] Ibid., 179.

[214] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849,* 15.

highly advantageous to the commerce of this country, and add greatly to its political power and influence."[215] The Memphis convention's Memorial assured the public that the Tehuantepec route would encourage colonization of the Pacific Coast by American settlers.[216]

The journey from the eastern United States to the gold mines of California would have been exceptionally long and dangerous by land. Overland routes would have taken travelers through rough, arid country, possibly populated by Native American groups hostile to white settlers. However, the Tehuantepec route would allow easterners to travel to California largely by sea. The major point for embarkation for those both entering and leaving the United States for Mexico would have been New Orleans. Thus, it is not surprising that activists from New Orleans became the major supporters for both a railroad and ship canal across Tehuantepec.[217] At the 1852 New Orleans convention, Matthew Fontaine Maury advocated constructing the projects in the name of national defense and that the installation of naval stations throughout the Gulf of Mexico should accompany any isthmian project.[218] A report made by Virginian William Burwell resolved that constructing a railroad across Tehuantepec be "of national importance."[219] At the 1855 New Orleans convention, Louisiana delegate John M. Sandidge considered the Tehuantepec route as "a work necessary to the commerce of the two oceans, of great national interest, and of the highest importance to the prosperity of the Southern and

[215] Ibid., 20.

[216] Ibid., 28.

[217]Reed, 68-80.

[218] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 3.

[219] Ibid., 12.

Southwestern states." The convention agreed and asked the southern states to extend all possible aid and encouragement to the opening of the route across Tehuantepec.[220] Other conventions passed resolutions supporting the Tehuantepec route, but the support was not as vocal or elaborative as it was at the two New Orleans conventions.[221] The support by conventions outside New Orleans for the Tehuantepec route often seemed obligatory more than enthusiastic, and at the 1853 Memphis gathering, actually generated some dissent, as some delegates opposed the Tehuantepec railroad because they believed it would inevitably fall into the hands of northeastern shipping interests and would injure the prospects of the southern Pacific Railroad.[222]

Similar to the convention's support for further American expansion into northern Mexico, the conventioneers seemed convinced that sooner or later, someone would build the Tehuantepec route. If not the United States, foreign investors from Britain and France might finance the venture. Whoever built the railroad or ship canal, delegates were sure it would not be the Mexicans. William Burwell had asserted in 1852 that the Tehuantepec route was of "national importance," but no one at the conventions ever asked whether the route was of any "national importance" to Mexico. Delegates either assumed that it was (similar to Albert Pike's assumption that Native American tribes of the Indian Territory would want to invest in the Pacific Railroad), or they did not care whether or not Mexico actually needed the route. Merl C. Reed has written that the New Orleans promoters pushed forward the project with little regard to Mexican sensibilities and that the New

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[220] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 7, 22.

[221] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 16, 61. "Southern Convention at Savannah," 101. "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 320.

[222] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention…1853,* 19.

Orleans press referred to the route as an "acquisition" rather than as an "enterprise."[223] Reed also writes that southerners sought the Tehuantepec route precisely because northern interests had focused so heavily on the Panama route.[224] Certainly, sectionalism had a hand in much of the conventions' deliberations and may have motivated selection of the Tehuantepec route to spite and outdo the northerners operating in Panama. However, this study suggests that southerners may also have targeted this location because they perceived the weakened condition of the Mexican state. Humiliated, bankrupt, and without much ability to defend itself, utilizing Mexican land to further an American expansionist opportunity seemed the logical choice. Indeed, the conventions hardly ever debated any alternate route—everyone assumed the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was the best place for business. Expansionist delegates were more willing to deal with a country they had already subdued than deal with Colombia, a country about which they probably knew very little.

The conventions' desire to obtain more land in Mexico for the Pacific Railroad project and the desire to build the isthmian canal/railroad on Mexican soil demonstrated a continued desire on the part of the United States to force Mexico to do its bidding. American hostility towards Mexico did not end in 1848 but continued through the remainder of the antebellum period, and perhaps has not ended. Admittedly, the land tracts desired by the conventions were not very large in comparison to the Mexican Cession or land stolen from independent countries by other imperial powers. However, the demands made by convention resolutions reflected a general American attitude that

[223] Reed, 69, 71.

[224] Ibid.

saw Mexico as weak, vulnerable, and inferior—their sentiments not worth serious consideration in the face of U.S. expansion. While the conventions did not advocate completing the conquest of all Mexico, they did advocate extending control over its economy and continuing to force the country to act as a satellite of the United States.

Cuba, Nicaragua, and the Filibusters

For most of its brief history, the convention movement had opposed filibuster expeditions and annexation of foreign countries.[225] However, after 1855, that sentiment began to change as the convention delegates, and eventually official convention resolutions, began lending their support to individuals like William Walker and other Americans attempting to conquer Cuba and Nicaragua. This shift within the conventions coincided with a movement within southern politics that called for expansion of the United States into the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean. This movement is a reminder that Manifest Destiny demanded that the United States not only expand to the west, but to the south as well.

While David Ryan has written that various parties in the United States had wanted to annex Cuba since the Jefferson Administration,[226] Robert May identifies the rise in "Cuba fever" in the late 1850s among southerners stemming from two distinct southern perceptions. First, southerners feared that the establishment of Kansas and California as

[225] For an examination of the Whig disdain for filibusters and prevalence of Whig officers in the U.S. Army, see Samuel J. Watson, "The Uncertain Road to Manifest Destiny: Army Officers and the Course of American Territorial Expansionism, 1815-1846," in *Manifest Destiny and Empire: Antebellum American Expansionism*, Sam Haynes and Christopher Morris, eds., (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997).

[226] Ryan, 48.

free states had all but ended slavery's expansion to the west, thus southerners began wondering if slavery could expand into the Caribbean. Second, May argues that southern expansionists feared that the Spanish (or some other European power, notably Britain) would abolish slavery in Cuba. Fears of race war and slave rebellion reminiscent of the Haitian Revolution convinced many southern radicals that they must interfere to protect slavery in Cuba, which would in turn, protect slavery in the South. In the case of Nicaragua, May demonstrates that southern expansionists viewed reinstituting slavery in that country as a civilizing mission.[227] The commercial conventions' desire to see Cuba and Nicaragua annexed reflect these two assumptions, as well as discourses of civilizing mission inherent to the belief in the providential destiny of the United States.

Early conventions often expressed the sentiment that the United States should have a greater military presence in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. The 1845 convention passed an official resolution calling for the construction of naval defense installations in the Gulf of Mexico and James D. B. De Bow insisted to the 1852 New Orleans convention that the Gulf was a great "Southern sea," that the South should guard it in the same way the British guarded the English Channel.[228] The earliest demand to annex Cuba came from Matthew Fontaine Maury at the 1849 convention, emphasizing that acquisition of Cuba would allow the United States to control the Caribbean so that the British and French could not.[229] While not indentifying a location by name, De Bow

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[227] May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire,* 4-6, 10, 21. Also see, Robert E. May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America,* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) for an excellent examination of filibusters in American history.

[228] *Journal of the proceedings of the South-Western Convention...1845*, 26. *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 84.

[229] *Minutes and Proceedings of the Memphis Convention...1849*, 55.

insisted at New Orleans that the "fertile and abundant islands" of the Caribbean were capable of "supplying the tropical products of the world, if in hands adequate to their development."[230] Obviously, to De Bow, the hands that the islands were currently in were not "adequate," implying that the Anglo-Saxon hand of the American was.

However, statements like those above in favor of Caribbean expansion from early conventions were either vague, like De Bow's comments, or insisted on expansion only in the name of national defense. When delegates at the early conventions proposed specific resolutions, or strong sectionalist resolutions, the other delegates often objected or voted them down. At the 1853 convention, James S. Thrasher, a known filibuster from Louisiana, proposed a resolution calling upon Congress to authorize U.S. acquisition of Cuba for the purposes of securing and protecting American commerce in the Caribbean. While the convention voted to reject the motion, many delegations stated that they voted the resolution down, not because they necessarily disagreed with Thrasher, but because they thought the question was too political and outside the scope of the convention. Others added that they would enjoy hearing Thrasher's thoughts about Cuba after the convention had adjourned.[231] Likewise, the 1854 convention also voted down a proposal for Cuban acquisition. However, the motion by delegate John F. Steele of Alabama is important in another respect. Rather than simply invoke the demands of commerce and national defense, Steele argued that acquisition of Cuba was necessary for the protection of the "institutions" of the southern states.[232] Perpetuation of slavery in Cuba would mean

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[230] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention…1852,* 84.

[231] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 22-23.

[232] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854*, 58.

protection for slavery in the South. The early conventions, however, wanted their meetings taken seriously by the public, thus they refused any issue deemed too sectional. However, this refusal was only political lip service and did not indicate that conventioneers were necessarily opposed to acquiring the island.

Later conventions would lose the fear of sectionalism that characterized earlier gatherings. The 1856 convention accepted a resolution from Georgia delegate Young J. Anderson demanding that the federal government, through military force or otherwise, monitor and oppose any European attempts to end slavery in Cuba.[233] The 1859 convention passed a handful of expansionist motions presented in a letter from Mississippi Governor John J. McRae. The governor insisted that the "interests and necessities of the South" "requires the permanent ascendance of the United States in the Gulf of Mexico." McRae argued that the Gulf must become an "American sea," and that the United States should support Cuban independence in order to preserve slavery there.[234] Like nearly all of its sectionalist rhetoric, the convention movement's demands for Caribbean expansion reached their apogee at Vicksburg. The convention demanded that the United States either win Cuba its independence, or annex the island as a territory. Regardless, the South could no longer risk the island's continued existence under Spanish control.

McRae's 1859 resolutions also outlined a plan for slavery's expansion into Central America. No less a plea to support filibuster expeditions, the convention passed

[233] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 95.

[234] The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 95.

the resolution calling on the U.S. government to aid the "Americanization" of the Central American states. McRae wrote,

> The Government shall bring the force of its moral and physical influence to the aid of its successful example, in encouraging the development of republican principles and free institutions in the island of Cuba, the Isthmian states, and among all the peoples and states of this continent.[235]

McRae's resolutions not only appear to be a reiteration of the Monroe Doctrine, but a reciting of the Roosevelt Corollary half a century before its drafting. They also represent the conclusion of a series of convention resolutions demanding either the annexation of Nicaragua to the United States, the spread of slavery to the country via filibusters, or both.

Like Cuban acquisition, early conventions had openly disdained filibusters and their expeditions. However, that mood began to change as the political landscape changed, and southerners became aware that the only way that they were going to add new territory for slavery was through expansion to the south. Former governor James C. Jones of Tennessee, in the same passage that he criticized the inability of the U.S. military to apprehend William Walker, he said about the filibusters, "their heads may be wrong, but their hearts always right."[236] The Savannah Convention passed a resolution stating, "The sympathies of this convention are with the efforts being made to introduce civilization in the States of Central America, and to develop these rich and productive regions by the introduction of slave labor."[237] A resolution of the following year's

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[235] Ibid.

[236] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854*, 75.

[237] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 102.

convention at Knoxville encouraged Congress to secure exclusive control over other routes (in addition to Tehuantepec) across the Central American isthmus, which would have included a route across Nicaragua.[238] Those resolutions succeeded in part because they did not identify any country by name, nor did they identify what the "efforts being made to introduce civilization" exactly were. A resolution to the 1857 convention by Walker sympathizers P. D. Page of Alabama and future governor McRae failed because the convention feared the backlash associated with making support for Walker public. Page and McRae called Walker's actions in Nicaragua "highly meritorious," and that U.S. interference in his schemes was wrong and illegal. Speaking in favor of the resolution, Page said that the convention should "sympathize" with Walker in his attempts to bring order to that "unhappy and distracted country." Page was especially approving of "The policy of Gen. Walker to introduce the system of foreign slavery in Nicaragua" and that the southern states should perhaps consider this enterprise in other locations.[239]

Despite this initial unease at the conventions for publicly condoning filibusters, the 1858 Montgomery convention approved a resolution openly supporting Walker. The resolution passed after the convention had invited Walker to have a seat as an honorary delegate.[240] The resolution proposed by former Alabama congressman Percy Walker and approved by the convention honored William Walker's colony in Nicaragua and drew no distinctions between southern intrigues in Central America and northern settlement of the

[238] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 320.

[239] Ibid., 313.

[240] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 560.

West. The convention called upon the federal government to lift its laws against filibusters. The resolution stated that the U.S. government's attack on Walker's regime was an insult to all the southern people and that these were the types of actions that led to disunion. Percy Walker declared, "The only way in which the South could extend her territory and institutions, was by way of Central America, and from there northwards towards the United States." The convention adopted his resolutions by a unanimous vote.[241]

Expansion into Cuba and Nicaragua was an attempt by southern expansionists to save slavery by ensuring that it existed in other countries near the United States and by acquiring new territories to which it could expand. Caribbean expansion also fit with delegates' understandings of America's providential destiny to dominate the world with its civilization. Southerners believed slavery was the bedrock of that civilization and annexing territory with a history of plantation agriculture seemed a logical way of improving the South's political and economic condition. This study recalls, however, that most filibusters were northerners, even if William Walker was not. The latter conventions neither were mass gatherings of filibusters nor were they made up of men eager to set sail for Central America. Rather, the conventions reflected an attempt by southern elites to support, and through the slavery issue, take control of the filibuster movement. When William Walker decided to institute slavery in Nicaragua, he instantly gained a large population of devoted followers. Former whigs, who once disdained filibusters as criminals, now looked to them as one of the South's last best hopes. Some notable convention figures had actually served in filibuster missions, this list included the

[241] Ibid., 604-605.

aforementioned James S. Thrasher, Granville Oury, and Matthew Fontaine Maury, as well as Governor John Quitman of Mississippi. Other notable convention figures lent either public support or funding to filibuster campaigns, including Alexander Stephens, Judah P. Benjamin, Stephen Mallory, Robert Toombs, Hugh McLeod, William Yancey, and Thomas Clingman. Supporting filibusters was politically controversial and explosive during most of the 1850s, but when the political climate changed after 1854, southerners became more willing to extend support for individuals they had previously denigrated.

U.S. Hegemony in South America

Another destination that southern expansionists, both those seeking territorial and commercial expansion, looked towards was South America. Specifically, conventioneers directed much of their focus towards the Amazon, La Plata, and Oronoco River systems. These expansionists sought Brazil as their target, often painting the country as despotic, backward, and in need of being "opened-up." Stereotypes Americans often applied to East Asian countries, convention speakers frequently applied to Brazil. Like Cuban planters, Brazilians still practiced slavery and calls to incorporate Latin American slave regimes into the South's sphere of influence were attempts by southerners to strengthen their political position. No longer would the South feel marginalized if it could either expand southward and install slave colonies in the tropics, or secure (or force) the alliance of the New World's other independent slave regime.

Demands for extending an American sphere of influence over parts of South America began, not surprisingly, at the 1852 New Orleans convention. Through its advocacy of the Tehuantepec Route and providing support for filibusters, New Orleans interests were clearly attempting to situate the city as the center of Caribbean commerce.

Already the fifth largest city in the United States, New Orleans activists sought not only to become the de facto capital of the South, but the capital of the Caribbean basin, as well. James D. B. De Bow declared at the 1852 meeting that South America was "a region which, with Anglo-Saxon amalgamation, may, in the progress of history, be as important as the present importance of our own country."[242] Similar to views advanced by other convention speakers, De Bow's comments insisted that only through contact with Anglo-Saxons did non-white peoples achieve progress and civilization.

At the Memphis convention the following year, speaking in support of an official resolution calling for Brazil to allow free navigation of the Amazon, Oronoco, and La Plata rivers, Episcopal Bishop James Otey remarked, "Free navigation of the Amazon is one of the most important questions of the age." He went on to say, "The interests of commerce, the cause of civilization, and the mandates of high heaven, require the Atlantic slopes of South America be *subdued and replenished*" (emphasis in original), and that "free navigation of the Amazon" would raise up that region "to the abode of a great, prosperous, and happy people."[243] In the view of Bishop Otey and the delegates who supported his resolutions, subduing and replenishing the Atlantic slopes of South America was something that Brazil was not doing. Further, the Empire of Brazil had shown its despotic nature in two ways: first, by not allowing other nations the right to navigate the Amazon and its tributaries, and second, by failing to implement proper agriculture in such a fertile portion of the world. Otey clarified his words later, saying, "We wish to subdue forests, not men—we wish to open channels for commerce, not

[242] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 84.

[243] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 11.

roads to kingdoms—to confer blessings, not to wrest privileges from our fellow-men—to elevate man, in his social, political, and moral state, not to degrade him." He reported that individuals who lived in the tropics were the most "debased" and that industry brought civilization. He hoped that free navigation of the Amazon by Americans would bring civilization to Brazilians through commerce.[244]

While the conventions frequently passed resolutions regarding Brazil, few delegates took to the dais in support of the resolutions. During the period of highest interest in Brazil, between 1852 and 1855, the conventions all deferred speaking on the subject to Matthew Fontaine Maury. Maury, a naval officer and oceanographer by trade, had been on several expeditions to the Amazon and other parts of Latin America. Maury began his seemingly one-man crusade for free navigation of the Amazon River at the 1852 New Orleans convention, where he insisted, "The free navigation of the Amazon is the greatest commercial boon that the people of the South and West—indeed that the people of the United States can crave." As was common in his speeches, he went on to list the wonders of the South American climate and geography, but left little room for any discussion of the people who actually lived there. Maury insisted that if Brazil was too weak to navigate the river on its own, the emperor should open it for other nations to do the navigating.[245]

At the Baltimore convention, Maury's speech lauded Amazonia as a modern-day Eden and marveled at the interior navigability of the Amazon and La Plata Rivers. The implication of Maury's flowery remarks was that only white adventures could discover

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[244] Ibid., 28-29.

[245] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 13.

and chart the Amazon's mysteries.[246] Maury went on to say, God had ordained, "that the valley of the Amazon with all its wealth, should be tributary to, and commercially depended upon, the Atlantic slopes of North America."[247] Maury's Baltimore speech also suggested the possibility of white colonization in Amazonia and predicted, "Every immigrant that goes there will become an excellent customer to this country." He concluded his remarks stating, the valley of the Amazon was "slave-country," and that any good statesman could not fail to perceive that in the "wilderness" of the Amazon was the "safety-valve of this Union."[248] Indirectly, Maury's speech in Baltimore was advocating for colonization of the Amazon by southerners, should political circumstances in the Union necessitate it. Slavery was legal in Brazil, thus Maury wondered why bother with expansion to places like Mexico and California, where slavery was illegal, when southerners could seek out new homes in the Amazon. Maury followed his Baltimore performance with two letters to the 1853 convention that read like European travel literature, again describing Amazonia in wondrous detail, frequently using tropes of unconquered "wilderness," characterizing Brazil in the same way that other explorers had characterized the American west as a "vacant" land, ripe for settlement and exploitation.[249]

In addition to descriptions of the Amazon as a fertile, Edenic paradise, Maury also justified U.S. intervention in Brazil using political language and stereotypes of the

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[246] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 6-7.

[247] Ibid.

[248] Ibid., 8.

[249] *Proceedings of the Southern and Western Commercial Convention...1853,* 43-45.

Brazilian government. Often using the official name, "Empire of Brazil" for emphasis, Maury's 1853 letters remarked that the United States had an obligation to aid their "sister" Latin American republics against Brazil's unfriendly Amazon policies.[250] At Baltimore, Maury emphatically declared,

> I preach no crusade. But Brazil and her rulers have shutout the world from the Amazon for the last three hundred years neither using it herself nor permitting others to use it. That is God's land: it was put there to be used by man. These five Republics have the right to follow their navigable waters to the sea, the great highway of the world. They are weak and cannot enforce their rights. But they are ready to give them to us.[251]

How Maury knew that the governments of Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Colombia, and Paraguay were willing to give their rights to the United States is unknown, but he often insisted that they were. Opening the Amazon to American commerce was not only about extending hegemony over Brazil, but also over most of the countries in South America. If the United States could secure free navigation of the La Plata, it could "open" Argentina as well. At the Charleston convention, Maury declared that the Brazilian government "has no right arbitrarily to shut out the world from the navigation of [the Amazon]" and he congratulated the "enlightened liberal policy" of Bolivia, Peru, and Ecuador with regards to free navigation.[252] In response to some delegates' opposition to Maury's resolutions, he responded by insisting that Brazil was run by despots who were opposed to progress. He insisted that the convention must show that it sympathized with progressive liberals in Brazil. Maury declared, "The policy of that government [Brazil]

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[250] Ibid., 43-45.

[251] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 7.

[252] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States…1854,* 48.

had been the most illiberal, restrictive, and Japanese."[253] Maury's comparison between Brazil and Japan could not be more striking, remembering that Commodore Perry's "opening" of Japan had occurred only a year before. Maury and his supporters had successfully positioned Brazil as the southern response to northern commercial relations with the Japanese.

Support for extending American hegemony over Brazil makes increasingly more sense in the context of findings by Amy Greenberg. She has written that one explanation American expansionists used, to justify the inferiority of Latin American peoples, was Latinos' apparent inability to "improve" and cultivate their land. Stereotypes of rampant laziness in tropical countries, related to stereotypes of effeminate Latino men, fueled the desire of filibusters and expansionists to incorporate parts of Latin America into the United States. Belief in the providential destiny of the United States convinced expansionists that they were better farmers, laborers, industrialists, soldiers, and merchants, than their Latin American counterparts.[254] De Bow's use of the phrase "Anglo-Saxon amalgamation" seems unusual until seen in the light of Greenberg's study, who argues that one method of American conquest of Latin America was through the sexual conquest of Latina women. Use of the term "amalgamation" was quite common. Feminizing descriptions of the tropics, using flowery language extolling the region's beauty, fertility, and passivity, all reinforced this definition of "conquest."[255] The conventions reveal a strong trope of Brazilian despotism in expansionist discourse, not

[253] Ibid., 117.

[254] Amy Greenberg, 54-87.

[255] Ibid., 88-134. May, *The Southern Dream of a Caribbean Empire,* 5-6.

unlike American characterizations of Japan and China. Under this logic, despotic states required "opening," a forceful thrust of American military and economic power bringing American commerce to foreign shores regardless of whether or not foreign peoples accepted this commerce. The conventions assumed that Brazilians would be eternally grateful. American commerce (and perhaps settlers) would bring democracy and republican institutions to the Empire of Brazil.

The southern commercial conventions wanted to extend the economic reach of the southern states in tandem with the overseas expansion of the northern economy. Many convention delegates, particularly Democratic partisans, wanted the South to extend its territorial dominion as well. They believed that the southern slave regime needed to find new territory for its institution, insisting the South either must disperse its slave and immigrant populations or risk falling victim to racial and class warfare. Southerners also had to see to the founding of new slave states in order to affect the balance of power in Congress. The conventions shared the general southern fear of emancipation in Cuba and debated acquiring the island, eventually resolving in the affirmative by 1859. The conventions continued to make demands on Mexico and believed that the United States could use the land of its southern neighbor any way it wished. After initially rejecting filibusters as criminals, new radical voices in the conventions accepted filibusters as a viable way for the South to add new territories for slavery. Finally, the conventions agreed with the pleas of Matthew Fontaine Maury and others, that South America was the perfect location for both American economic exploitation and possible expansion of slavery. The territorial imperialism of the conventions was not as marked or emphatic as

the movement's commercial imperialism and demands for internal improvements, but it did become, especially in the conventions' latter period, an integral part of their agenda.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRE-EATERS: THE AFRICAN SLAVE TRADE AND SECESSION

As the sectional crisis worsened during the late 1850s, radical southern politicians assumed leadership of the southern commercial conventions. The conventions were, after all, one of the few venues where men from all regions of the South gathered. The conventions provided southern radicals, known as "fire-eaters," with a forum, where they could gain the support of most of the southern electorate. Eric Walther has written that the fire-eaters, whom he defines as those who engaged in a "persistent advocacy of southern independence," believed that southerners had a "high mission," a "duty to show the world that a slave-holding republic could not only exist but thrive."[256] The influx of radicals to the conventions resulted in an increase in southern nationalist rhetoric, tougher demands that northern lawmakers allow slavery's expansion west, sanction of Caribbean expansionism, and warnings that the Union of the two sections would not survive.

The influx of radical attendees also produced an infatuation with reviving the African slave trade during the last four conventions. The conventions were not the only forums where southern radicals promoted reopening the slave trade, as reestablishing transatlantic traffic in slaves became an integral part of the fire-eaters' agenda. Southern radicals supported reopening the trade for various reasons, ranging from a belief in the

[256] Walther, 2-3, 150.

ability of slavery to "civilize" "savage" Africans, to the economic growth that the influx of new slaves might bring to the southern economy. Others may have supported reopening the trade only in theory, hoping that the issue would be so controversial that it would hasten the Union's dissolution. The issue was, in fact, so provocative, that it generated the most intense and passionate debates of the convention movement. A significant number of delegates opposed reopening the trade, becoming increasingly frustrated as they realized that their voices were in the minority and as the conventions continued to pass official resolutions over their objections.

In his study of the late-antebellum movement to reopen the African slave trade, Ronald Takaki has written that the debate over the trade was really a debate over the morality of slavery. The slave trade debate gave southern radicals an opportunity to rehash old pro-slavery arguments, to assert why southern civilization was superior to northern civilization, and to explain how the white republic rested on black slavery. The debate was a chance for young radicals to voice their commitment to slavery and southern independence. [257] Takaki writes that if southern radicals could successfully have the slave trade reopened, they gained official constitutional sanction for slavery as a whole. If northerners blocked such a scheme, radicals could simply add the ban on the African slave trade to the list of "wrongs" the South had suffered. Takaki adds that southern radicals greatly feared that their society was unstable and could easily fall into both racial and class warfare. Adding more slaves to the southern population would allow

[257] Takaki, viii-x.

more whites to own slaves, reinforcing white egalitarianism to eliminate class struggle and further justify in their own minds the supremacy of the white race.[258]

Other American historians of this period often either repeat Takaki's arguments or cover slave trade agitation as a comical, unattainable part of the fire-eaters' agenda—the finest example of southern extremism. Hyperbolic rhetoric aside, at least within the confines of the commercial convention movement, southern radicals sincerely wanted to see the slave trade reopened. The sources also imply that radicals believed that reopening the slave trade could happen, although many of them conceded that it could only occur in an independent southern republic. Thus, reopening the transatlantic slave trade was not only a controversial issue that could *force* secession, but was also a way of *justifying* secession. If the northern states rejected this demand, southern radicals believed that creating an independent southern republic to see it and other expansionist proposals realized was worth the risk.

Takaki and other historians also do not situate the slave trade revival movement as a part of Manifest Destiny or American imperialism. As argued above, the slave trade revival movement was not simply another form of sectional or secessionist agitation, but carried on with marked sincerity. Southern radicals wanted to reinstate the African slave trade that had helped to build the European slave empires of a century before. Slave trade debates allowed delegates at the conventions to extol the supremacy of American civilization and the important role that slavery played in that civilization. Convention delegates who supported reopening the trade emphasized that its revival would allow slavery to follow the expansion of the United States (or the independent South) into any

[258] Ibid., 51, 62, 74.

new territories it acquired. They also insisted that reopening the slave trade was part of the United States' civilizing mission. In the eyes of slave trade proponents, the providential destiny of the United States meant that American society would civilize the world, how else better to aid in this process than by bringing "benighted," "savage" people to the South to be civilized.[259]

Support for Reopening the Trade

Convention speakers justified reopening the African slave trade through five distinct arguments. Delegates supported the slave trade revival because it would not only enable slavery to expand to new territory, but speakers also believed that an influx of new slaves was crucial to the South's economic growth. Equally important was the belief that the slave trade was an important civilizing mission, while other delegates stressed the importance of white egalitarianism and enabling all southern whites to be slaveholders. Finally, delegates justified the slave trade by justifying slavery. If slavery was right, they asked, how could the trade in slaves be wrong?

Slave trade advocates either forgot, or dismissed, older pro-expansion arguments that the slave population of the South must be diffused if slavery were to survive. These men were not interested in the thin settlement of new territories with a token slave population, just enough to allow for the legalization of slavery in that state. By reopening the slave trade, southern radicals wanted the slave population of new territories, whether in the west or in the Caribbean, to have as many slaves as the Deep South. The influx of new slaves from Africa would build a southern slave empire. In the heated slave trade

[259] Hietala, 133.

debate at Savannah, A. L. Scott of Virginia called it "mad policy" to promote expansion of slavery westward without providing the country with more access to slaves. Scott applauded the "wild hunt after territory to be colonized with our slaves" and lamented that the North "had at her command boundless supplies of population, which with to fill the vacant lands of the West." Scott predicted that should the government reopen the trade, "The slave population, after supplying the states would overflow into the Territories and nothing could control its natural expansion."[260]

In comments cited in a previous chapter, fire-eater William Yancey of Alabama proposed that the slave trade would enable southerners to "colonize our common territory" at the same rate as the North. Without reopening the trade, southerners would have made sacrifices for American expansion in vain. Yancey feared that before long "the whole American continent would soon be under the flag of this Union, and there would not be upon it the foot of a slave."[261] In his report on the slave trade presented to the Montgomery convention, Leonidas Spratt, fire-eater and editor of the *Charleston Mercury* argued that "It is at least certain that the foreign slave trade will give us population; that it will give us powers of extension to vacant territory."[262] Reopening the slave trade would enable slavery's expansion and enable the South to build an independent slave empire if necessary.

Remembering the commercial goals of the convention movement, other speakers supported reopening the trade because they believed it would strengthen the southern

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[260]"Southern Convention at Savannah." 217-219.

[261] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 587-588.

[262] Leonidas Spratt, "Report on the Slave Trade to Montgomery Convention," *De Bow's Review* 24 (June 1858): 484.

economy. Rather than pursuing the slave trade to support empire through territorial expansion, the commercial argument established the slave trade as a form of exploitive colonialism, extracting a valuable resource (labor) at great cost to Africans. A Georgia delegate at the Savannah convention remarked that with the cotton crop, the South "was the most powerful community on earth," but with the closure of the African slave trade, "the South was in danger of losing her scepter of strength and power, which now wields the commercial world." The delegate predicted that should the price of slaves rise, "the South would be driven from the market, and become the weakest of the weak."[263] A. L. Scott cited the scarcity of labor in the Border States and the inability of the south to develop its "dormant and unproductive wealth." Scott later predicted, "With all her industrial resources developed, and with the command of the markets of production, the South would occupy a position of very great strength ."[264] Leonidas Spratt predicted that the slave trade would finally fulfill the conventions' dream of bringing large-scale foreign investment to the South.[265] Other speakers echoed these sentiments, insisting that the African slave trade was the ultimate panacea to the South's economic problems.

However popular the commercial argument may have been at the conventions, it never was the major impetus behind reopening the trade. Far more often, delegates utilized discourses of civilization and providential destiny in their rhetoric. For them, the slave trade was an integral part of the America's mission to civilize the world. Virginian L. J. Gogrety declared at Knoxville that the African slave trade, so far from being evil,

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[263] "Southern Convention at Savannah." 223.

[264] Ibid., 217, 219.

[265] Spratt, 489.

did more than the greatest missionary enterprise in the cause of religion and civilization. Gogrety insisted that anyone interested in spreading religion and civilization should support the trade.[266] Leonidas Spratt echoed this sentiment the following year at Montgomery, arguing that reviving the slave trade would bring civilization and Christianity to Africans.[267] In his lengthy report on the slave trade, Spratt argued, "While the ruling race has been capable of progress—while it was continually advanced in law and arts, and is able to sustain a structure of civilization, not only over itself but over the other race connected to it—that other race has not been capable of progress."[268] In Spratt's view, the slave trade was necessary to bring uncivilized people under the tutelage of civilized whites. He also added, alluding to the reliance of slave traders on African intermediaries for acquisitions of war captives to send to America as slaves, "The slave trade does more to mitigate the barbarities of savage warfare than any other institution known to history." Spratt also devoted considerable space in his report to descriptions from a number of English scholars and missionaries reporting the "savage" and "idolatrous" life that Africans lived.[269]

Mississippi sociologist Henry Hughes drafted a report to the Vicksburg convention arguing that the South should reopen the slave trade in order to establish an African apprentice system not unlike the system operating in British colonies. Hughes declared that by denying Africans emigration to a civilized country, the laws prohibiting

[266] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 319.

[267] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 581.

[268] Spratt, 475.

[269] Ibid., 479.

the slave trade have been "the curse of Africa," and added "Africans therefore must be economized before either civilized or Christianized."[270] Hughes insisted, "To Africa, therefore, the most sublime philanthropy will be such a United States' demand for Africans," arguing that reviving the slave trade will end violence and cannibalism in Africa by making war captives more valuable.[271] After accepting an appointment by the Vicksburg convention, William Yancey wrote in an op-ed for *De Bow's Review*, could not Africa provide "from the teeming millions, the barbarian hosts, crushed, oppressed, benighted, of that fatherland…a few more subjects to be spared to civilization?"[272]

Pro-slave trade delegates also used simple white supremacy to justify reopening the trade, particularly appealing to the right of all southern whites to own slaves and solidify a classless white republic. A. L. Scott argued at Savannah that opening the slave trade was necessary to "retain certain portions of the South in their allegiance to the great principle upon with our social system reposes." Scott's "great principle," was the equality of all whites over that of blacks.[273] R. B. Baker of Alabama followed some dissenting remarks from Albert Pike by repudiating Pike's belief that someday all men will be free. Baker argued that he did not believe God ever intended blacks to be free and that republican institutions required the preservation of slavery.[274] W. B. Goulden of Georgia

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[270] Henry Hughes, "A Report on the African Apprentice System, Read at the Southern Commercial Convention," Report presented to the Southern Commercial Convention at Vicksburg, MS., May 10, 1859, 7.

[271] Ibid., 4-7.

[272] Eric Walther, *William Lowndes Yancey and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 231.

[273] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 217.

[274] Ibid., 222.

questioned the difference between buying a slave in Virginia and buying one from Africa. Goulden insisted that the cheap nature of slave labor would allow all white men to be slave owners and prevent the emergence of class warfare in the South.[275] The following year at Knoxville, J. W. Womack of Alabama stated that reopening the trade would strengthen the Union by strengthening the common bonds between all white men. Womack also added a description of the "evil" effects of emancipation on Jamaica and other British colonies that stemmed from the resulting ambiguity in racial difference.[276] Leonidas Spratt argued at Montgomery that reopening the slave trade "will bring all the ruling race to the same social stand point."[277] In defending his support for the African apprentice system, which he had referred to as "liberty labor," Henry Hughes dismissed concern over the potential freedom of blacks by stating "the eternal fact" that the "Republic is Caucasian."[278]

Other delegates sought to justify the African slave trade with arguments justifying slavery, itself. An Alabama delegate declared at Savannah that if southerners believed slavery to be a moral good, than there was no question about the morality of the slave trade.[279] Richard S. Gladney of Mississippi proposed resolutions at the Knoxville Convention endorsing the slave trade on the grounds that "slavery is neither a moral, social, or political evil, and therefore, is not a proper subject of prohibition by legislation." Gladney continued his logic, resolving, "the slave trade, is not itself wrong,

[275] Ibid., 223.

[276] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 318.

[277] Spratt, 489.

[278] Hughes, 18.

[279] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 224.

and is not therefore a proper subject of legislation, and that the attempt to suppress the African slave trade having resulted in more evil than good."[280] William Yancey passionately and defiantly declared at Montgomery, "If slavery is right, every just measure to its formation must inevitably be right."[281] Leonidas Spratt's Report on the Slave Trade agreed with Yancey, stating, "Affirmance of slavery, therefore, is in principle and effect an affirmance of the foreign slave trade."[282]

Some of these men may not have actually supported dispatching fleets of slavers to Africa and inundating New Orleans, Savannah, and Charleston slave markets with foreign laborers. Rather, by seeking the legalization of the slave trade, some delegates only sought official federal government sanction for slavery. If Washington reauthorized the transatlantic trade, then northern lawmakers had considerably less credibility when opposing southern support for slavery's expansion into the territories. If northerners failed to give into radicals' slave-trade demands, it would seem yet another attempt by northerners to harm southern institutions, both were positive outcomes for the fire-eaters. This political maneuver appears in attempts similar to South Carolina state representative E. B. Bryan's proposal that Congress repudiate the 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty and remove the U.S. Navy's obligation to police the coast of Africa for slavers.[283] At Savannah, Leonidas Spratt insisted that repealing the laws prohibiting the slave trade

[280] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 310.

[281] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 584.

[282] Spratt, 477.

[283] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 304.

would take back power from a northern-dominated Congress.[284] William Yancey, not wanting to seem too radical, requested in his 1858 Montgomery speech that Congress remove the laws banning the slave trade because they were insults to the South and repudiations of slavery. Yancey hinted that this repudiation did not necessarily mean southerners should begin crossing the ocean for slaves.[285] In an attempt to cool the rhetoric of a heated debate at the Vicksburg convention, James D. B. De Bow insisted that the convention was merely asking that the government repeal laws unfriendly to the South. The southern states were free to decide for themselves whether they wanted to engage in the African slave trade, he said.[286]

However, historians should not interpret pleas for moderation as speaking for the whole of southern radicals attending the latter conventions. When a delegate from Tennessee proposed an amendment to E. B. Bryan's resolutions regarding repudiation of the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, stating that the repudiation in no way endorsed a reopening of the African slave trade, the convention rejected the amendment.[287] Certainly, a majority of southern radicals interpreted the laws prohibiting the slave trade as an insult to the South and sought to legalize the trade as a backdoor method of getting constitutional sanction for slavery, but many of these men also sincerely wished to see the slave trade reopened. Pleas for the southern "right" to import more slaves to facilitate both the internal and external expansion of slavery were both a way to force northern

[284] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 223.

[285] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 584.

[286] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg," *De Bow's Review* 27 (October 1859): 469.

[287] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 310.

contempt, hastening secession, and a way of justifying secession as a right southerners would enjoy in an independent southern republic.

Opposition to Reopening the Trade: The Southern Whig Response

For as many men spoke passionately in favor of reopening the African slave trade, an equal number of men rose to oppose the proposition. Many of these men were whigs, elite landowners from the old plantation regions of Virginia, South Carolina, and Louisiana. These planters feared devaluation in slave property and the entry of too many average farmers into the landowning class. Others were either traditional internal improvements whigs, disgusted at the radical turn taken by the conventions, or men with strong Unionist sympathies, fearing that any attempt to reopen the African slave trade would force a political crisis that could destroy the Union. Many of these speakers opposed reopening the slave trade with the same discussion of "civilization" and providential destiny used by slave trade proponents. This debate was a debate about the nature of American civilization and the role that slavery, and slaves, played in it. These delegates wondered how a nation with such a strong civilizing mission and providential destiny could endorse such something as dehumanizing as the African slave trade.

The most common explanation for not supporting revival of the African slave trade at the latter conventions was concern for the effect that an influx of new African laborers would have on the southern economy. To be sure, many of these speakers echoed the sentiments of Alabama delegate John Cochran who stated that he opposed the slave trade on practical economic grounds, but suggested that under better circumstances, reopening the trade would have been a good idea because it rescued slaves from Africa

and brought them to civilization.[288] In his only words spoken at the conventions, notorious Virginia fire-eater Edmund Ruffin seemed to agree with these sentiments, as he only opposed reopening the slave trade on "practical grounds."[289] However, other speakers presented passionate arguments opposing the revival of the slave trade on economic grounds. Albert Pike lamented that despite what proponents claimed about expanding the slaveholding class, reopening the slave trade would eliminate the financial incentive to become a slaveholder because it would "greatly devalue the price of slaves."[290] An Alabama delegate offered an unsuccessful resolution at Knoxville insisting that repealing any laws prohibiting the African slave trade was against the "settled-policy and best interests" of the slave-holding States.[291] Another Virginia fire-eater and secessionist, Roger Pryor agreed, insisting that devaluing slave property was a form of abolitionism, making ownership of slaves no longer worthwhile. Pryor believed that reopening the slave trade was more insidious than any northern antislavery campaign.[292] In a passionate dissenting speech to the Vicksburg convention, former Mississippi governor Henry S. Foote asked, "Slavery is already unprofitable in the Chesapeake, why would we want to reopen the slave trade and make it moreso?"[293] Rather than reflecting the optimism of slave trade proponents who looked towards the day that all southern

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[288] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 222.

[289] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 589. Montgomery was also the only convention Ruffin attended. Eric Walther writes in *The Fire-eaters*, 253, that Ruffin never took the conventions very seriously and regarded all of them until 1858 as not political enough to warrant his attention.

[290] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 220.

[291] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 313.

[292] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 581.

[293] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg: Debate on the Slave Trade," 220.

whites would be slave owners, these sentiments reflected a fear among many southerners that slavery could potentially disappear in the Border States. Rather than building an empire of slave states, slavery would coalesce around states in the Deep South because state governments had done little to make slavery more profitable in Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri.[294]

Dissenters also opposed revival of the African slave trade because they believed it would irrevocably harm southern civilization. Albert Pike insisted that the slave trade would "introduce hordes of barbarians into our mist" and that Southern civilization would be unable to "advance the Negro" if the trade was revived. Espousing a much older conception of slavery as a civilizing mission, Pike declared that he did not consider the slave a mere chattel, "but a human being, with a soul to be saved and a mind to be cultivated and improved until some day he might be permitted to be free." Pike hoped that one day the southern slave population would enter the ranks of civilization, thus completing the divine purpose of southern slavery. Any influx of new Africans would disrupt, if not completely derail, this process.[295] Roger Pryor agreed with Pike about the need to protect the South from hordes of "heathen" blacks. Pryor dismissed the slaveholder egalitarianism appeals of trade proponents, insisting that white supremacy united all southerners, slaveholder and non-slaveholder, alike.[296] Former Whig

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[294] These fears may also reflect the apprehension of both Lower and Upper South elites towards what Lacy Ford has termed the process of "whitening" in the states of the Upper South. Ford demonstrates in *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South*, that many officials and slaveholders in Upper South states had encouraged their citizens to sell their slaves to the Deep South in an attempt to finally rid themselves of slavery and build a white-only republic. Speakers such as Pryor and Ruffin may have seen revival of the African slave trade as only exacerbating the "whitening" process.

[295] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 220-221.

[296] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 581-582.

representative and long time adversary of William Yancey, Henry Hilliard of Alabama declared that the South was "the highest form of Christian civilization the world ever saw," but reopening the trade would endanger this civilization by inundating the South with thousands of barbarian Africans.[297]

Opposition to African slave trade revival also centered on the effect such a movement would have on the tense sectional crisis. Some delegates believed that reopening of the slave trade would be so galling to northerners that it might dissolve the Union. Wealthy Virginia planter Thomas Gholson remarked that everyone should oppose reopening the trade, the very thought was an attack upon the Union.[298] Even secessionist Roger Pryor dismissed attempts to revive the trade as feeble attempts to dissolve the Union, arguing that restoring the African slave trade could not occur "while the Union lasts."[299] Two Tennessee delegates presented minority reports to the Vicksburg convention deriding the convention's aim to reopen the trade as "utopian" and impossible in a political climate controlled by Republicans. They believed that radicals wished to play with southern fears and risk more outrage from northerners that would strengthen their secessionist cause.[300] Henry S. Foote echoed these remarks, fearing that such efforts would forever alienate northerners from showing any sympathy to the needs of the South and could irrevocably harm the Union.[301] Foote later led a contingent of Mississippi

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[297] Ibid., 592.

[298] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 224.

[299] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 582.

[300] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 98.

[301] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg: Debate on the Slave Trade," 215-220.

whigs in authoring an official protest of the Vicksburg convention. They argued that the convention did not discuss the real concerns of the South and that most southerners opposed reopening the trade. They criticized the convention for its lack of representation from the Upper South and accused the meeting of advocating disunion and giving more fuel to the Republicans.[302] The protest was a defiant culmination of the frustrated speeches of the convention movement's old guard. Figures such as Henry Foote had been integral players in the convention movement since the beginning and were no doubt disgusted and saddened when they realized that the movement they had crafted to improve the infrastructure and economic situation of the South had now become a forum for those who wished to reopen the African slave trade and destroy the Union.

Forum for the Fire-Eaters

The convention movement fell to the interests of southern radicals because the delegates could never keep out the sectional crisis. Sectionalism and the rhetoric of southern nationalism began as unwelcome guests to the conventions, but would later assume places of honor at the latter meetings. Three of the early conventions' more prominent issues—the Pacific Railroad, education reform, and territorial expansion—were loaded with sectional controversy. These sectional debates prepared the way for the clash between moderates and radicals over the African slave trade. The 1856 Savannah convention generated so much passionate debate against reopening the African slave trade mostly because the proposal had taken moderate delegates by surprise. Slave trade advocates, and fire-eaters, in general, were not the majority at Savannah, but they would

[302] "Southern Convention at Vicksburg," 470.

be the following year at Knoxville. Issues such as reopening the slave trade and propositions supporting filibusters and Cuban annexation stimulated southern radicals' interest in the conventions.[303] While James D. B. De Bow and John Quitman had been convention supporters since the movement's earliest days, most of the South's other notable fire-eaters, such as William Yancey, Roger Pryor, Edmund Ruffin, and Robert Barnwell Rhett had not attended a convention prior to 1857.[304] Other delegates often began their convention careers with moderate positions, but came to sympathize with the position of the radicals because the sectional crisis had galvanized them.

While convention speakers often went out of their way to make the meetings appear friendly to northern politics, sectional antagonism was present from some of the earliest meetings. Tennessee politician Aaron V. Brown wrote to the first New Orleans convention predicting that if the convention succeeded in its goals, "The South will cease to be traders to the North, but the North will be traders to the South. We shall then no longer be disturbed by northern fanaticism or aggression."[305] When informed that there had not been a resolution endorsing the southern Pacific Railroad, William Burwell of Virginia asked the Baltimore convention, "Where is that excitement of which we have heard for some time past?" He asked what had happened to the bold proposals and southern nationalism of the 1850 Nashville secession convention. Burwell wondered,

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[303] Johnson, 134.

[304] Notably, many of the South's most powerful moderate voices, Judah P. Benjamin, Sam Houston, Jefferson Davis, John Bell, and James Crittenden, included, either never attended a convention, or stopped attending after the railroad issue had lost momentum.

[305] *Proceedings of the South-Western Railroad Convention...1852,* 67.

"Was it mere political pretense?"[306] Burwell would not be the only speaker to draw a connection between southern independence and the ideas proposed by the conventions. In Albert Pike's "symbolic secession movement" at the 1854 convention in which he urged the creation of a Pacific Railroad corporation owned only by the southern states, he declared, "We must be free and independent, and therefore it is that I urge upon the South to unite and build this road."[307] While Pike never advocated for the secession of southern states from the Union, he did stress that in order to face the northern industrial machine, southerners had to unite under a common purpose. For Pike, the Pacific Railroad was that purpose; southerners had to unite because to allow northern interests to build a southern transcontinental route would ruin the southern economy and would be an indelible insult on the southern people.[308]

At the 1855 convention, Pike's rhetoric increased in urgency, as he believed southerners needed to unite behind all internal improvements projects. Pike insisted it was "the duty of the Southern States firmly to unite among themselves, forgetting all partisan differences and the insanities of all former contests by which they have been heretofore divided."[309] Pike went on to list over several paragraphs nearly all of the improvement proposals embraced by the conventions and related how the survival of southern civilization required their implementation. Pike concluded, saying, "The

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[306] *Baltimore South and Western Commercial Convention,* 9.

[307] *The Journal of the Proceedings of the Commercial Convention of the Southern and Western States...1854* 84. Also see Reed, *New Orleans and the Railroads,* 78. Reed notes that for Pike, it was unimportant whether or not this southern corporation actually turned a profit. What was important was providing the initial capital and the united front it could present.

[308] Ibid., 60.

[309] *Proceedings of the Southern Commercial Convention...1855,* 10.

prejudices of the world are against our Southern institutions, and that all the world is prepared to war against these institutions…I hold that the only method is to make the South strong to defend her rights and to resent all insults, by whomever offered."[310] Pike believed that northerners had already made the first move. Northern capital had embarked on a program of improvement and empire building and that if the South did not act quickly, it would become nothing more than a colony of the "new nation" the North was building. Most of the sectionalism of the convention movement up to 1855 resembled rhetoric similar to Pike's. No one advocated southern secession from the Union, not even William Burwell. They did want, however, to energize southerners towards improving their section and extending the South's economic hegemony. The early conventions believed that the South should present a united front in all areas, whether in response to northern "fanaticism and aggression," or Stephen Douglas' attempt to build a transcontinental railroad out of Chicago.

The convention movement's change in tone at Savannah in 1856 and afterwards reflected the escalation of the sectional crisis. Southerners became more frustrated at northern expansion. The formation of the Republican Party, events in Kansas, and the apprehension of William Walker convinced southerners that government in Washington was not on their side. Anglophobia convinced southerners of abolitionist schemes to end slavery in Cuba and the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* suggested that abolitionist northerners were no longer satisfied with merely stopping slavery's expansion west. Within this tense political climate, it is not surprising that the Savannah convention turned out as it did. Southern radicals no doubt sensed an opportunity to spread their

[310] Ibid., 11.

message to individuals who would perhaps be more open to aggressive proposals than they were only a few years earlier. With rhetoric continuously moving to the extremes, it would have been difficult for any moderate voices to find many listeners.

The formation of a special "free trade" committee at the Savannah convention to analyze and report on the prospects of eliminating all import tariffs perhaps best describes this change in the conventions. The men who the convention appointed to the committee—most of whom were not actually in attendance—was a who's-who of southern radicals. The list included William Yancey, Aaron V. Brown, John Quitman, Pierre Soulé, James Seddon, and David Atchison, among others.[311] The convention had gone out of its way to appoint a committee of known radicals to analyze a proposal—elimination of all import tariffs—that Congress would probably never implement.

The motion that sent the convention into an initial furor was one by A. L. Scott of Virginia, calling for an investigation into the present condition and "future prospects" of slavery in the U.S. and other parts of the world, as well as the practicality and legality of reopening the African slave trade.[312] Interestingly, it seemed as if the first clause of Scott's motion bothered delegates more than the second, which created uproar of its own. Scott's motion implied that slavery might not only be in dire trouble in the United States but in Cuba and Brazil, as well. Some delegates seemed incensed that Scott even felt the need to ask about the "future prospects" of slavery and no such committee convened. Scott's motion had touched a nerve, insulting those Unionist delegates who had faith in Republican promises not to touch slavery "as it was," and encouraging radical delegates

[311] "Southern Convention at Savannah," 94.

[312] Ibid., 92.

who believed an emancipation law was imminent. The debate on reopening the slave trade at Savannah—which required its own article in *De Bow's Review*—indicated that not only were moderate delegates stunned, many of whom struggled to articulate why exactly they opposed the slave trade, radical delegates appeared well prepared and numerous. No evidence suggests that radicals from across the South conspired to hijack the 1856 convention; rather, it seemed to happen organically, suggesting that the radicalization of the South's minor politicians had already been under way. Appearance of the slave trade issue had materialized in southern political culture before Savannah. Scott, and other radicals, obviously felt that revival of the African slave trade was within the stated goals of the convention movement.

The following year at Knoxville, attention not only focused on the slave trade, but also witnessed heated rhetoric regarding issues that the conventions had long discussed, such as education reform and publication of southern literature. Before the convention had even officially opened, a debate ensued over which newspaper reporters to grant seats. Roger Pryor and Benjamin Yancey led a contingent of radicals who insisted that the convention not allow any newspapers loyal to the Republican Party to cover the meeting. When James D. B. De Bow, the presiding officer, decided to make a fair decision regarding the reporters from the chair, Yancey accused him of being an autocrat, sending the convention into disorder, but the northern journalists eventually received a seat.[313] Later, Richard S. Gladney of Mississippi proposed a resolution stating that "the great evils which threaten our Union, are the results of vicious theories and principles propagated by books, periodicals, newspapers, literary, and theological institutions" of

[313] "The Southern Convention at Knoxville," 305-306.

the northern states, justifying the need for the South to possess its own publishing houses, magazines, schools, and seminaries.[314] De Bow's presiding speech was rife with veiled references to secession and southern political independence. While De Bow insisted that he wished for the southern states to remain in the Union, he stressed that the convention must strengthen the South in preparation for the time when the Union dissolved. Speaking as if to justify future secession, De Bow predicted that soon Mexico, Central America, Cuba, and the West Indies would become part of the independent South's sphere of influence and the Atlantic slave trade reopened.[315] Should northern aggression threaten the South and its institutions, De Bow confidently predicted, "Upon her soil she will prove to be as invincible as the Macedonian phalanxes," noting that slavery and the military culture of southern society could spare more men to the armed services than any other modern nation.[316] Finally, De Bow's speech disdained northern antislavery politics, stating that northern sectionalism "threatens and promotes servile insurrection, the laying waste of fields, the paralysis of industry, the recession of civilization, the damming up of all outlets of population and escape."[317] While fear of servile insurrection had long been a southern concern regarding abolitionism, irrespective of the convention movement, use of the phrases, "paralysis of industry," "recession of civilization," and "the damming up of all outlets of population and escape," were De Bow's attempt to combat northern sectional politics with the convention movement. The convention had sought economic

[314] Ibid., 310.

[315] De Bow, 238.

[316] Ibid., 237.

[317] Ibid., 232.

livelihood for the South, the spread of American civilization through commercial and territorial expansion, and the ability to spread the South's slave population to the "vacant" territories of the West.

In his address after taking the chair as president of the 1858 convention, Andrew P. Calhoun of South Carolina set the tone for the meeting, stating, "The slaveholder and his slaves, the slave states and their institutions, are the objects of their remorseless hatred."[318] William Yancey's lengthy speech to the Montgomery convention made similar indictments of northern aggression. Not willing to imitate De Bow's veiled references to secession, Yancey outright predicted the founding of an independent southern republic, marked by a "unity of climate, a unity of soil, a unity of production, and a unity of social relations." Yancey united the goals of the convention with the justifications for secession when he declared, the South should be "permitted to enter upon the great industrial race of the whole world untrammeled."[319] Mississippi Governor John J. McRae proposed a resolution of secession in his letter to the Vicksburg convention, stating, "The success of the Republican Party in the election of a President of the United States by a sectional majority in 1860…will be dissolution of the compact of the existing Union of the States."[320] McRae said that if the South could not succeed in preventing the election of a Republican president, then the only solution was the formation of a separate government. A movement that had begun with appeals to

[318] "Late Southern Convention at Montgomery," 576.

[319] Ibid., 584. Eric Walther has suggested that Yancey's Montgomery speech, which spanned two days, was a defining moment of Yancey's career and the secession crisis, galvanizing many of the men in attendance and those who may have read the published version of the speech. Walther, *The Fire-Eaters*, 69-70.

[320] "The Late Southern Convention: Proceedings of the Southern Convention held at Vicksburg," 96.

southern commercial independence in 1845 and 1849 had evolved into gatherings making veiled predictions of southern political independence, which later quickly transitioned to blunt predictions of secession.

Conventions after 1856 did not stop discussing internal improvements, nor, with the exception of 1858, did they devote a majority of their time to discussing Caribbean expansion or the African slave trade. The general priorities of the convention—improvement and expansion—did not change, but the rhetoric increased in volume and intensity. The African slave trade was an extreme proposal for solving the South's perceived economic and political woes. The proposition to revive the slave trade gave the fire-eaters a direct interest in the conventions. Before the 1856 convention, conventions had rarely discussed issues on the radicals' agenda. Although a minority, they took control of the movement and used it to advocate for secession through the slave trade issue. The tone, rhetoric, optimism, and frustrations of convention delegates always had reflected those same elements as they appeared in southern political culture overall. Once revival of the African slave trade became a possibility, however remote, it appeared in the convention minutes and the meetings would never be the same again. Much like internal and education improvements, commercial empire, and territorial expansion, the African slave trade debate utilized discourses of providential destiny, progress, civilization, race, and empire. In this way, southern radicals took hold of the conventions without having to change the movement's ultimate goals or underlying themes.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The period between 1840 and 1860 was an era of unprecedented growth in the United States. Territorially, the United States had settled the boundary with Canada, acquired the Oregon Territory from Britain, and secured two cessions from Mexico, one as the result of a war of conquest, and the other the result of further demands made by Americans upon the Mexican state. Filibusters, missionaries, and expansionists set their sights on other lands as well, including Hawaii, Cuba, and Nicaragua, but were unable to annex those places to the United States during this period. Commercially, the United States extended its economic hegemony over countries in Latin America, opened trade with China in 1844, and forcefully "opened" Japan in 1853. Finally, the United States experienced two large demographic shifts during this period. Frequent economic crises, such as the Panic of 1837, drove many Americans to move west and colonize the areas of the Louisiana Purchase and Mexican Cession. In addition, waves of immigrants from Ireland and Germany began arriving in the United States at an unprecedented rate. This influx of new citizens allowed the United States to expand its population over acquired territories in a relatively short period.

The men who assembled at the southern commercial conventions believed that too much of this growth was occurring in the northern states and solely benefiting

northern merchants and businesses. The convention delegates were aware that most of the immigrants who arrived in the United States arrived at northern ports. Northerners formed the bulk of settlers to California and other new territories in the West. Northerners also formed the majority of filibuster movements, and northern banks financed American commercial interests in Latin America, China, and Japan. To add a further insult to this list was the glaring disparity between northern and southern representatives in Congress. During the period 1840-1860, five free states joined the Union, whereas the country only admitted two slave states. At the same time, the slave population of states in the Upper South was greatly decreasing, and some leaders in the Deep South feared that Upper South politicians would eventually switch their allegiance to the North.

Southern merchants, business leaders, and urban activists organized the southern commercial convention movement because they wanted the South to have an equal—if not greater—share in the growing American empire. Commercially, they sought to expand the South's commercial hegemony to all available parts of the world. Territorially, they sought the colonization and admission of new slave states not only in the new territories of the West, but in Caribbean and Central American regions, as well. Under "whig" leadership, the conventions sought to bind the Union the closer together and build a strong, unified American nation-state through internal improvement projects and education reform. Finally, the latter conventions sought to offset European immigration to northern states and facilitate further southern colonization of the West by reopening the African slave trade.

Foundational to the convention movement was the delegates' strong belief in slavery. Like southern culture at large, convention delegates viewed slavery as the bedrock of American civilization. Slavery for blacks meant freedom for whites. Both concepts of republicanism and democracy rested on black slavery. Southern whigs believed slavery supported republican government because it reinforced social differences among whites, as well as notions of a proper, ordered society. At the same time, southern democrats understood that black slavery created white equality. In this way, democrats believed that southern society did not have class divisions, so long as all whites were part of the master race. Northern society, however, did have class divisions. In the view of southerners, poor men and women of Anglo-Saxon extraction toiled as "wage slaves" in New England factories alongside racially inferior Irish immigrants and free blacks. Average Midwestern farmers toiled in their own land without the aid of black slave labor. Northern political machines and political parties seemingly controlled the wills of the northern electorate, praying on the poor and immigrants. Southerners believed that northern whites were slaves, thus the true republic did not and could not operate in the North—northern society was not a part of American civilization.

Convention delegates believed that southern society was superior to northern society, thus it did not make sense to them that northerners had taken the lead in constructing America's empire. Belief in Manifest Destiny informed expansionists that God had destined the United States to possess an empire, to spread its civilization to backward and vacant parts of the globe. Discourses of empire, civilizing mission, and the myth of the "vacant" west were central to the rhetoric of the commercial conventions. While they disagreed over methods, both commercial and territorial expansionists

believed the United States had a duty to spread its civilization. Southern radicals who advocated for reopening the African slave trade believed that the trade would bring civilization to Africans as well as help the United States to colonize its territorial possessions, and build a stronger white republic by allowing more whites to own slaves.

Unionist "whigs" held sway at the earliest conventions. While they sought to strengthen southern interests in the American empire, they also sought to strengthen the American nation-state and had little time for sectional antagonism. Delegates often went out of their way to assert the conventions as not only non-sectional, but non-partisan, as well. However, pro-slavery discourses, debates over slavery's role in American civilization, and the political climate of the era prevented the early conventions from keeping sectionalism completely at bay. During the middle part of the movement, when the central focus was constructing a southern transcontinental railroad, sectionalism found a more receptive forum as delegates lamented the domination of railroad construction at the hands of northern capital. The constant airing of southern grievances attracted radicals to the movement, although initially, their interest was minimal. As the sectional crisis worsened, it radicalized larger numbers of southern politicians. Demand for southern acquisition of Cuba and Nicaragua, and reopening the African slave trade, appeared in southern political discourse and eventually appeared in the commercial conventions. Southern radicalism was a late arrival in the convention movement, but once the slave trade and Caribbean expansion became major topics at the conventions, southern radicals took over the movement.

Radicals believed that slavery was under attack, both at home, and abroad. While they feared despotism would bring the ruin of the Brazilian slave regime, radicals

suspected Britain and northern abolitionists were scheming to undermine slavery in Cuba. Slavery expansionists demanded the United States annex Cuba, as well as other regions in Latin America, allowing for the "regeneration" of former slave regimes and protection of the white republic at home. The African slave trade reflected further desire to protect slavery by flooding the market with slaves, ensuring that all white men could become slaveholders. An influx of new African labor would allow slavery to expand to the west and south. Southern nationalists saw these strategies as giving the South the economic standing it needed to form an independent republic and save American civilization. Insistence that annexing Caribbean countries and reopening the African slave trade were necessary for the preservation of the republic provided southern radicals with yet another justification for secession.

The conventions were important forums for the creation of southern national identity. Because of the collision of sectionalism with beliefs in American providential destiny, slavery as central to American society, and the apparent foreignness of mechanized northern society, many southern elites came to view the South as possessing a distinct national identity. Southern nationalism encouraged radicals by providing justifications for secession. As the conventions advocated building the American nation-state, southern nationalists sought the same for their section. Only through a united front, these nationalists believed, could southerners not only affirm white supremacy, protect slavery from abolitionist agitation, and embark on important projects like the Pacific Railroad, but they could also set the political groundwork for the day when the southern nation controlled its own destiny, either within the Union or out of it.

The Southern Commercial Conventions affected very few changes in government policy. While some calls for internal improvement construction, and the establishment of southern schools, did gain traction in Congress and state legislatures, and the conventions did have some influence over acquisition of the Gadsden Purchase, the conventions' tangible accomplishments were minor. Southerners would not complete their Pacific Railroad until the 1870s, the United States never annexed Cuba and Nicaragua (although it certainly attempted to do so decades later), southerners did not add any slave states after Texas in 1845, and the African slave trade was not reopened, not even by the Confederacy.

However, the antebellum commercial conventions are more important for the political climate they reflected rather than for any of their accomplishments. The teleological nature of traditional southern history has distracted historians away from the conventions. The conventions did little to exacerbate the sectional crisis. Likewise, they also did little to heal sectional wounds and prevent further escalation of rhetoric. The conventions were an outgrowth, rather than a cause, of the corrosive and explosive political currents running in antebellum political culture. The conventions indicate not only the sentiments that destroyed all southern bonds of affection for the Union, but also demonstrated that many southerners sought to avoid disunion. The conventions tell the stories of Unionist whigs, who sought to convert the South into an economically powerful and technologically advanced region of the world. By not falling into a teleological trap of only examining southern democrats and extremists, this study has elucidated the voices of internal improvement supporters, Unionists, and southern men who were strikingly uneasy about slavery.

Most importantly, the conventions situate imperialism and Manifest Destiny as central to the sectional crisis. While previous historians have recognized the importance of the pro-slavery argument and southern nationalism in bring about secession, few have recognized the important role that empire played in this process. Southerners chafed at northern domination of the American empire because they believed that the American empire was for everyone, slaveholder and non-slaveholder, alike. Delegates believed that men of both sections had acquired the territories of the West through "common conquest." Additionally, belief that slavery was the bedrock of American civilization made northern domination of the empire especially galling to southerners. Southerners wondered how American expansion could civilize the world if northerners were doing the expanding. Imperial expansion exacerbated the sectional crisis by encouraging a discussion over the nature of American civilization. The commercial conventions demonstrate that many southern men worried about the place of slavery in America's empire. Radical delegates believed that if there was no place for slavery in the American empire, then there was no place for the southern man in it, as well. Southern radicals sought secession to save both slavery and Manifest Destiny from the clutches of northern abolitionists.

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