

2013

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### Recommended Citation

Bailey, Kevin (2013) "The Florence Gazette and the Case for Secession in Florence and Lauderdale County," *North Alabama Historical Review*: Vol. 3 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://ir.una.edu/nahr/vol3/iss1/5>

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# The *Florence Gazette* and the Case for Secession in Florence and Lauderdale County

Kevin Bailey

In January 1861, Alabama became the fourth state to leave the Union in the wake of Abraham Lincoln's election to the presidency of the United States of America. The state would soon be joined by other slaveholding Southern states to form the Confederate States of America. However, the sentiment for disunion and the establishment of the new Southern Confederacy was not universally accepted by many Southerners. Though dissatisfied with result of the election of 1860 and apprehensive about the path of the nation, the Southerners against secession retained faith that the rule of law and the Constitution would be sufficient to carry them through what they saw as the perils of a free-soil president, fanatical abolitionists, and the inept and corrupt politicians who had led the country so far down the perceived path to ruin.

North Alabama was particularly apprehensive at the prospects of secession, both for practical and political reasons. Northern Alabamians viewed secession as a plot by political elites and slaveholding planters in the southern half of the states, to retain and bolster their political and economic strength by establishing a more formidable state

government in the wake of the state's secession.<sup>1</sup> Practically, if the state seceded from the Union and war was to break out, the fighting would enter North Alabama, and control of the Tennessee River would be a primary objective for Union forces.

Making the case for secession in Northwest Alabama was the *Florence Gazette* who, surprisingly, supported John C. Breckenridge for President in 1860. The *Gazette* became the focal point for disunion sentiment in Lauderdale County by publishing secessionists' articles and excitedly reporting on the departure of each state from the Union in the twilight of 1861. The *Gazette* featured what was considered a partisan position at the start of 1860, a radical opposition to the anti-slavery forces of the North so strident that talk of secession by Southern states was openly advocated in its pages even before Lincoln's election. What is important to note about the *Gazette's* secession campaign is the careful way in which it was conducted. North Alabama was not as dependent on large scale agriculture as the southern half of Alabama, and not necessarily as devoted to slavery the central pillar of Southern nationalism in slavery. Only eleven percent of white males in Lauderdale County owned slaves.<sup>2</sup> Therefore editors made certain to frame the argument for disunion around states' rights and only publishing the most outlandish remarks of the radical abolitionists and Republicans.

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1 See Melvin Durward Long, *Alabama in the Formation of the Confederacy* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1959).

2 Margaret M. Storey, *Loyalty and Loss - Alabama's Unionists in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004), 257.

There are three distinct phases of The *Gazette's* case for southern nationalism from mid-1860 to January 1861. The first phase consisted of the campaign of 1860 during which the *Gazette* championed John C. Breckenridge over Stephen Douglas and John Bell, attacked Republicanism, and denounced abolitionism. The *Gazette* urged the people of Lauderdale County to vote for pro-slavery Democrats in order to stave off threats of Northern aggression, and railed against abolitionists who they believed controlled the free-soil Republican Party. The second phase began in the wake of the election of 1860. The *Gazette* published an article in November of 1860 summarizing Southern Democrat's exasperation with the American republic. As the paper read, "the argument is exhausted all hope of relief in the Union through the agency of committees, congressional legislation, or constitutional amendment, is extinguished and we trust the South will not be deceived by appearances, pretenses, or guarantees."<sup>3</sup> The paper speculated wildly on the motives behind the new "black Republican" government in Washington, lambasting the Republicans and abolitionist they believed were driving the wedge between North and South. The final phase consists of active campaigning for Alabama's secession—a phase in which the rhetoric is completely unguarded. The paper ran excited reports on successful secession conventions from South Carolina to Mississippi, and urged its readers to vote for a slate of secessionist representatives for Alabama's own convention.

3 "To Our Constituents" *Florence Gazette*, December 26, 1860.

## The Election of 1860 and the *Florence Gazette*

The election of 1860 began in the spring with a slate of Democratic and Republican candidates seeking the nomination for President of their respective parties. The *Gazette* began its coverage of the momentous election on March 14, by throwing its support behind Robert M. Hunter, a senator from Virginia for the Democratic nomination for President.<sup>4</sup> The same issue chided the “Union-Savers” as being disloyal to the state and dismissed them as malcontents. The *Gazette* went on to praise the state government and a point was made that the State had, through acts of legislation, “provided for the military education of two poor young men from every County of the state,” and “appropriated money to clean out the Colbert shoals, in the Tennessee river, just below Florence.”<sup>5</sup> The article illustrates the *Gazette’s* consistent support of the government in Montgomery, an opinion which was not widely held in the northern half of the state. In its effort to bolster support for state, the *Gazette* republished articles from Montgomery newspapers, like the *Montgomery Mail*<sup>6</sup> and the *Montgomery Weekly Advertiser*.<sup>7</sup> Both papers uncritically published the exploits of Alabama’s premier proponent of Southern nationalism, William Lowndes Yancey.

State politics aside, the *Gazette* attacked strengthening

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4 “For President Robert M.T. Hunter of Virginia,” *Florence Gazette*, March 7, 1860.

5 “Covered Herself with Glory,” *Florence Gazette*, March 14, 1860.

6 Examples are “Thoughts for the Times” from the *Montgomery Mail* published in the *Florence Gazette* on December 26, 1860. Another example is “The Election of Lincoln is sufficient cause for Secession” from the *Montgomery Mail* in *Florence Gazette* on September 19, 1860.

7 “Mr. Yancey in Missouri, Maine, North Carolina and Virginia,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, quoted in *Florence Gazette*, September 19, 1860.

free-soil Republicans in the North, and published an article detailing William Seward's opinion on the slavery issue which the *Gazette* characterized as displaying "a cunning hate for the slaveholders."<sup>8</sup> The paper rebuked Seward's insistence that the laws of Southern states only sought to protect the slaveholder, not the slaves. The paper denounced this accusation as a lie perpetuated by abolitionists and pointed to a section from the Code of Alabama which states that it is a crime punishable by a fine of 25 dollars to commit or prevent an act of cruelty upon a slave.<sup>9</sup>

By the summer of 1860, it became clear that upcoming election would be a referendum on slavery. The *Gazette* published articles such as, "Douglas and Seward on Slavery" and "The Republican Bible," a salacious example of abolitionist rhetoric that featured such alarming language as "SLAVEHOLDERS ARE MORE CRIMINAL THAN COMMON MURDERS" and "WE ARE DETERMINED TO ABOLISH SLAVERY AT ALL HAZARDS—IN DEFIANCE OF ALL OPPOSITION OF WHAT EVER NATURE WHICH IT IS POSSIBLE FOR SLAVEOCRATS TO BRING AGAINST US."<sup>10</sup> J.L.M. Curry's eloquent and emphatic speech, "Slavery in the Territories," was carried in the *Gazette* as a two part piece in April. In the April 11 edition was an editorial further underlining the importance of the westward expansion of slavery. In this edition, the *Gazette's* editors make it clear

<sup>8</sup> "The Presidency" *Montgomery Mail*, quoted in *Florence Gazette*, September 19, 1860.

<sup>9</sup> Alabama State Legislature, "Excerpt from Code of Alabama, Section 3297, Alabama's 1852 Slave Code." Alabama Department of Archives and History. 1852. <http://www.archives.alabama.gov/cornerstone/slavecode1852/page09.html> (accessed April 22, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> "The Republican Bible," *Florence Gazette*, October 3, 1860.

that the Supreme Court in the Dredd Scott case had fully reinforced the premise of states' rights and that "it is an 'out and out' decision in the favor of slaveholders."<sup>11</sup> A month later, editors John Kennedy and S.A.M. Wood decried that the constitutional rights of the citizens are in danger lest the people stand firm with their state against the onslaught of the other sections of the nation against the besieged South.<sup>12</sup>

While the *Gazette* defended the peculiar institution in its pages, the political infighting that would mark the election of 1860 had already begun. It was not an escalation of the ongoing intra-Democratic battle between Breckenridge and Douglas, but instead intra-regional sparring among the supporters Breckinridge, the presumptive nominee of the South, and John Bell, a Tennessee moderate representing the Constitutional Union Party. Bell had been appalled at the growing sectional strife in the Senate and led a third party movement wholly designed to throw the election to the House of Representatives. Bell's supporters hoped that since he was the least offensive of all the partisans that he would be made president.

The *Gazette's* publishers, staunch supporters of Breckenridge, took issue with Bell as a rival for the Southern vote. The *Gazette* ran a piece denying that Breckenridge supported disunion, and attacked Bell by presenting evidence in quotations from speeches that supported a policy of

secession and disunion. The editors published such salacious

<sup>11</sup> "Judge Douglas and the Dred Scott Decision" *Montgomery Advertiser*, quoted in *Florence Gazette*, April 11, 1860.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

quotes as “I say give me separation, give me disunion, give me anything in preference to a Union sustained only by power, by Constitutional ties without reciprocal trust and confidence.”<sup>13</sup> The ire heaped on Bell, however, provided only a temporary reprieve for Stephen Douglas. The *Gazette* derisively called his plan for popular sovereignty “squatter democracy,” and published a plethora of speeches and columns from across the South condemning Douglas for his appeasement of abolitionists and challenge to Breckenridge. An article published in the October 31 edition of the *Gazette* proclaimed “Shame on Douglas” in its headline, and lambasts Douglas for perpetuating the split in the Democratic vote—even in the face of Republican majorities having been elected in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana—and pining for unity in the Democratic field. The *Gazette* wrote,

Bell men, Douglas men, and Breckenridge men, all were weighed down by these heavy abolition majorities in the North, and turned from their suicidal strife at home, to that arch enemy of the South and the Constitution; the black Republican party... we all desired that this unfortunate campaign in the South [should] be concluded without further bitterness.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore the article accuses him of slandering the South during his campaign speeches in Memphis and Huntsville and concluded by urging readers to “rise in your majesty, next Tuesday and rebuke this invader.”<sup>15</sup>

13 “Who is for Disunion? Breckinridge and Bell Side by Side,” *Florence Gazette*, September 19, 1860.

14 “Shame on Douglas,” *Florence Gazette*, October 31, 1860.

15 Ibid.

Despite the ardent campaign for Breckenridge and the warnings of the *Gazette*, its' readers did not throw their support behind the Southern Democratic candidate. As a result, Lauderdale County voted for Douglas but only by a scant eighty-four votes. The results of the election demonstrated that in more populated portions of the county and the larger towns, Douglas performed best winning Florence, Taylor's Springs, Lexington, Stutts, and Bluff Creek for a total of 790 votes. Breckenridge took Rogersville, Rawhide, Oakland, Mitchells, and Spains to garner 706 votes; and Bell took Blackburns and Waterloo for a total of 444 votes.<sup>16</sup>

### **Resistance**

In September of 1860, the *Gazette* published an article from the *Huntsville Democrat* entitled "All for Secession." Merchants from Huntsville, returning fresh from a trip to the North, insisted that if Lincoln was to be elected president that the South should take a course of secession and resistance.<sup>17</sup> Well before the election, Southern partisans determined that slavery and Southern culture could be easier preserved outside of the Union than within it. Now with the election of 1860 complete and Lincoln winning without the support of any Southern state, discussion turned to the prospects of a hostile Northern government and its implications for the South.

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16 "Election Returns," *Florence Gazette*, November 2, 1860.

17 "All for Secession," *Florence Gazette*, October 3, 1860.

A week after the election, the *Gazette* published an article written by J.B. Campbell, a member of the Charleston Bar, outlining the general opinion of dejected Southern Democrats. “It is painfully true,” he wrote, “that the black Republican party have decided the establishment of a hostile government over the South—the weaker section and we have not the power to prevent it.”<sup>18</sup> Campbell’s argument set the tone for the campaign of resistance to the new federal government across the region. Another correspondence republished from the *Tuscaloosa Observer* between two secessionist ministers, enumerated the grievances of the South,

For many years our section has indirectly borne the burdens of the general Government... a party of the North, avowedly bent on the destruction of our property—and with it our industry and our homes. ... I cannot doubt that it is the right and duty of the people of the slaveholding states to withdraw from this Union; and to form a government of their own, united to their wants.<sup>19</sup>

In a stirring declaration of intent, the *Gazette* discarded any pretense of objectivity in an editorial entitled “Our Position.” The paper described the rivalry between the sections as an insurmountable obstacle to the continuation of the Union,

The election of a President, of any party, is in itself a matter of but temporary importance, and affords, as we

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<sup>18</sup> “Our Federal Government changed, and Practically Dismembered,” *Florence Gazette*, November 14, 1860.

<sup>19</sup> “Letters from Dr. Manly and Dr. Garland,” *Tuscaloosa Observer*, quoted in *Florence Gazette*, December 5, 1860.

have often said, no valid ground for the dissolution of the Government; but the fact once clearly established, that henceforth and forever the North and the South would be arrayed as hostile sections in a contest which could end only by the subjugation of one or the other, and in which the weaker would rapidly become still weaker and the stronger gain strength—this fact once clearly established, as it has been by the last Presidential election, proves that the Union between those two sections has practically ceased to exist, and that its mere forms are but as the chain binding together deadly enemies sharing a common doom.<sup>20</sup>

Though the editors assured the readers that every effort at reconciliation should be made, and a new Southern government should be established should a compromise fail. They called upon the people of Alabama to make “known that the powers granted under the federal Constitution, being derived from the people of the United States, shall be resumed by them, the same having been perverted to our injury and, oppression,” and that “Alabama shall declare herself a free and independent State.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore they insisted a convention should be called to create a Union among Southern states to create a nation that Alabama should join and then seek recognition from the other nations of the world, should the people permit it.<sup>22</sup>

In this open campaigning inaugurated the last phase of rallying Lauderdale County to the cause of secession, the editors of the *Gazette* sought to unite the three political factions that had contested the election. In impassioned

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20 “Our Position,” *Florence Gazette*, November 28, 1860.

21 *Ibid.*

22 *Ibid.*

articles such as, “A sober appeal to men of all parties”, the *Gazette* urged its readers to put aside the partisan infighting that had given the reins of power over to Lincoln and the “black Republicans,” and to “select as delegates the most ablest, the wisest, the best, the truest men that can be found.”<sup>23</sup> The men elected to serve in Alabama’s secession convention were “to provide the means necessary to protect us against any attempt at coercion from the Lincoln administration,” and the editors urged their readers to elect men of wisdom and statesmanship to represent them.<sup>24</sup> The paper also worked to correct some popular misconceptions about the convention. Rumors had spread that the convention was elected “for no other purpose ... than simply to declare Alabama out of the Union and then adjourn.”<sup>25</sup> The article assured the public that the purpose of the convention was to decide whether to declare Alabama’s secession. Additionally, to assuage fears of a coup by influential members of the Alabama legislature retained by oath in the newly established independent state government, all the public officials would be elected by the people of the state.<sup>26</sup> As discontent over the result of the election and fear of a hostile government in Washington grew, the fractured political arms of Lauderdale County began to mend and coalesce around advocating secession at the state convention to be held in January. The state Senator from Lauderdale County, Robert Patton, declared at a public

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23 “A Sober Appeal to men of all Parties,” *Florence Gazette*, December 5, 1860.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 “The Powers and Functions of the Convention,” *Florence Gazette*, December 5, 1860.

meeting that “it is the right of any state to secede, from the confederacy, whenever in her own judgment a step is demanded by honor, interests, and safety of her people.”<sup>27</sup>

An article in the same issue laid out the justification for secession as a right given to the people in the Declaration of Independence, “Call it what you may, secession, or revolution, the right, peaceably, to alter, or abolish a form of government exists.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the *Gazette* published an essay that urged Alabamians to reject secession and warned secessionists to consider the consequences of declaring a rebellion against the government for independence. The paper read,

Are you prepared to precipitate your state into rebellion and civil war against the best government ever framed by the wisdom of man, and in its destruction destroy the hopes of all lovers of liberty throughout the world? Secession will entail on you a load of debt and exorbitant Taxes for the support of our Army and Navy, and splendid Government such as the pride and extravagance of our Aristocracy will require.<sup>29</sup>

However impassioned or reasonable, opposition to secession was quickly brushed aside after the *Gazette* reported “South Carolina out of the Union” and published a series of articles written for the *Montgomery Mail* further exhorting the virtues of secession and calling on citizens to be loyal to their state

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27 “Bell Douglas and Breckenridge parties coming rapidly together,” *Florence Gazette*, December 12, 1860.

28 “SECESSION,” *Florence Gazette*, December 12, 1860.

29 “A Letter From A Citizen,” *Florence Gazette*, December 12, 1860.

rather than the nation.<sup>30</sup> On January 11, 1860, the Alabama Secession Convention declared the state to be an independent republic by a vote of sixty-one to thirty-nine. In a letter by Robert Patton—who had earlier advocated for secession as a principle—sent to the *Huntsville Democrat*; the senator lamented,

Our will has been overruled by this decided majority, and now to withhold our acquiescence and take a position adverse to the Convention, could but distract the public mind, and ultimately result in civil discord and disaffection among the people of our beloved state. Above all things let us be united as one man in our future action. ... Let us feel that we are right, and trust in the interposition of a kind Providence.<sup>31</sup>

With Alabama now an independent republic and soon to be a member of the Confederate States of America, the *Gazette* had lost its battle but won the war.

Just as Lauderdale County had voted for Douglas rather than Breckenridge, the representatives to the secession convention had voted against secession.<sup>32</sup> Although Florence reluctantly left the Union along with the state, the people of Lauderdale County believed a fractious and aristocratic Southern government would be preferable to what they perceived as a belligerent abolitionist Republican regime in Washington. Speaking to Georgians and the entire South, the *Gazette* reprinted a speech from Georgia Governor Joseph E.

<sup>30</sup> "Thoughts for the Times," *Florence Gazette*, December 26, 1860.

<sup>31</sup> "Letter From Robert M. Patton to the Huntsville Democrat," *Florence Gazette*, January 16, 1861.

<sup>32</sup> Donald Bradford Dodd, *Unionism in Confederate Alabama* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms Inc., 1969), 113.

Brown, in which he declared, “We are no longer a divided people. We are one in sentiment in interest and in feeling, and will enlist under one banner for the South.”<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Clemens—speaking for pro-Union southerners who feared for the safety of their homes, their friends, and their families—put the situation into more sober and consigned terms, “The majority is against us—we must go with the State, or create civil disturbances of the most dreadful character at home. Tell them too not be deceived about the possibility of a peaceful solution of our difficulties. We shall have war, and that soon. ... Let our citizens therefore begin the work of preparation.”<sup>34</sup> Secession had come for North Alabama with or without the support of its citizens, and the region would be embattled time and time again in the great struggle over the future of the country.

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33 “Good Feeling in Georgia,” *Columbus Times*, quoted in *Florence Gazette*, January 30, 1861.

34 “Letter from Jeremy Clemens to W.B. Figures, Esq.,” *Florence Gazette*, January 16, 1861.