Mastering America

*Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood*

*Mastering America* recounts efforts of “proslavery nationalists” to navigate the nineteenth-century geopolitics of imperialism, federalism, and nationalism, and to articulate themes of American mission in overtly proslavery terms. At the heart of this study are spokesmen of the southern “Master Class” who crafted a vision of American destiny that put chattel slavery at its center.

Looking beyond previous studies of the links between these “proslavery nationalists” and secession, the book sheds new light on the relationship between the conservative Unionism of the 1850s and the key formulations of Confederate nationalism that arose during the war in the early 1860s. Bonner’s innovative research charts the crucial role these men and women played in the development of American imperialism, constitutionalism, evangelicalism, and popular patriotism.

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Interdisciplinary in its scope and intent, this series builds upon and extends Cambridge University Press’s long-standing commitment to studies on the American South. The series will offer not only the best new work on the South’s distinctive institutional, social, economic, and cultural history but also works in a national, comparative, and transnational perspective.
Mastering America

Southern Slaveholders and the Crisis of American Nationhood

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List of Abbreviations

AHR  American Historical Review
AQR  American Quarterly Review
Annals  Annals of Congress
BLY  Beinecke Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT
CG  Congressional Globe
CMPC  James D. Richardson, A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy, Including Diplomatic Correspondence, 1861–1865 (Nashville: United States Publishing Company, 1905)
CMPP  James D. Richardson, A Compilation of Messages and Papers of the Presidents (Washington, D.C., 1897)
CWH  Civil War History
DBR  De Bow’s Review
HEH  Henry E. Huntington Library, San Marino, California
JAH  Journal of American History
JDC  Dunbar Rowland, ed. Jefferson Davis, Constitutationalist: His Letters, Papers and Speeches (Jackson: Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 1923)
List of Abbreviations

JER  Journal of the Early Republic

JSH  Journal of Southern History


LVR  Library of Virginia, Richmond


OR  U.S. War Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington D.C., 1880–1901)

OR-N  U.S. War Department, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies (Washington, D.C., 1903)


PJDA  Lynda Crist, et al., eds. The Papers of Jefferson Davis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971)


SHSP  Southern Historical Society Papers

SIN  Southern Illustrated News

SLJ  Southern Literary Journal

SLM  Southern Literary Messenger

SPR  Southern Presbyterian Review

SQR  Southern Quarterly Review

SR  Southern Review


VMHB  Virginia Magazine of History and Biography

WMQ  William and Mary Quarterly, 3rd Series
On the last Thursday of November 1860, as the worst political crisis in American history intensified, the churches of New Orleans filled to capacity. The slave South’s largest and most vibrant city had marked Thanksgiving with sermons and prayers on earlier occasions. But never before had men and women left that city’s noisy streets and squares with the same sort of expectancy, nor had they ever bowed their heads with such grave questions about their future. A wrenching presidential election had just raised fundamental doubts about the fate of American slavery. With a daily influx of news detailing South Carolina’s sprint to secession, white New Orleanians had an understandable appetite for transcendent perspective.

Those who gathered in the Lafayette Square Presbyterian Church that November afternoon received a clearer message than they might have expected. Not long into his hour-long oration, the Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer cast aside his typical disavowal of “political” preaching and provided secessionists across the Deep South with the highest sanction he could muster. The native South Carolinian championed slavery, as he had when earlier speaking of Christian duties. His Thanksgiving address went much farther, however, in insisting that white mastery of black dependents involved a distinctive providential mission, which could only be pursued through radical political action. The highest responsibility of America’s master class was “to preserve and transmit our existing system of domestic servitude, with the right, unchanged by man, to go and root itself wherever Providence and nature may carry it.” With a Republican presidency of the United States now a certainty, Palmer urged his fellow slaveholders to heed his call for action. He wanted them to understand
that their proslavery mission would no longer be possible within a United States governed by Lincoln of Illinois.¹

In coming weeks, Palmer’s words became the most influential expression of a sacred understanding of masters’ proslavery national mission. The New Orleans press circulated the address with the assurance that it rose “infinitely above the usual thought and rhetoric of a political speech” and was nothing less than “sacramental in its fervor.” A Mississippi editor who published the entire speech the week after its delivery speculated how the thirty paragraphs might be “printed in letters of gold, and spread widecast among the people.” Before the secession crisis was complete, Palmer’s words would have been available to any of his 400,000 fellow slaveholders who sought the comfort of his prophecy. Nearly 100,000 copies of the sermon would ultimately appear in pamphlet form. These were less influential than the republication of his remarks in such important southern periodicals as De Bow’s Review, the Southern Planter, and the Southern Field and Fireside. Several leading newspapers reprinted his entire address. Many others stitched together those choice passages that conveyed the sermon’s main thrust. In towns, cities, and plantations across the region, men and women of the master class reflected in their diaries and letters upon the electrifying effect of Palmer’s intervention.²

Palmer realized that far more people would encounter his message in print than hear it at the Lafayette Square Church. He thus emulated the revolutionary-era pamphleteer Thomas Paine by packing as much

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¹ There was no one “title” for Palmer’s sermon, which would variously be printed as: The South, Her Peril and Her Duty (New Orleans, LA: True Witness and Sentinel, 1860); The Rights of the South, Defended in the Pulpits (Mobile, 1860); “Why We Resist and What We Resist,” DBR 31 (February 1861); “The Trust Providentially Committed to the South in Relation to the Institution of Slavery,” Southern Planter 21 (February 1861) 115–19; Thanksgiving Sermon, Delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, December [sic] 29, 1860 (New York, 1861), and Slavery a Divine Trust. The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution as It Now Exists (New York, 1861). There are no major textual discrepancies between these printings, each of which largely match the text that has been conveniently reprinted as “The South: Her Peril and Her Duty” in Jon Wakelyn, ed. Southern Pamphlets on Secession, November 1860–April 1861 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 63–77.

meaning as possible into the key phrases he offered up that afternoon. He dramatized the “crucifying test” that faced all Americans and speculated how masters’ current actions would color “the complexion of our destiny.” Some clever writing helped him to hit upon a remarkably wide range of themes, as he took up the burden of civilization, the racial inferiority of blacks, the theological nature of providence, the harmonizing tendencies of slaveholders’ republicanism, and even a discussion of the constitutional right of secession. There was just enough of reassurance in his tone to keep the pastoral dimension in evidence. What was by turns a treatise, a sermon, and a message of consolation closed with the simple assertion that “The Position of the South is sublime.”

Palmer’s sudden fame as the South’s most notorious disunionist was unlikely. His prior career had been marked by political moderation and a scrupulous avoidance of fire-eating politics. Though he was raised in South Carolina, a hotbed of separatist sentiment, Palmer had shown little evidence during the 1850s that he would produce the nearest Confederate equivalent to Thomas Paine’s Common Sense. His national stature came as the sort of theologian, pastor, and orator who could appeal to congregations in the free states as well as in the slave states. During the late antebellum period, he had received calls from prestigious pulpits in the urban North and was unanimously elected in 1860 to the faculty of the Princeton Theological Seminary. Palmer’s decision to decline such overtures resulted not simply from his regional loyalties but from his appreciation of what might follow a successful ministry to those New Orleans merchants and planters in whose hands the seat of a continental American empire rested. In political terms, Palmer’s Unionist credentials matched those of most of his fellow Presbyterian clergy, who had formed a particularly potent mix of proslavery dogma and American nationalism over the first six decades of the nineteenth century. It was thus with a distinct tone of melancholy that Palmer turned to the cause of disunion. One of the most arresting images of the speech conveyed his genuine regret at breaking ties with the United States and his desire to continue with the work begun in its name. “If we cannot save the Union, we may save the blessings it enshrines,” he explained. “If we cannot preserve the vase, we will preserve the precious liquor it contains.”

News of Palmer’s sermon quickly traveled through an increasingly nationalized network of print to reach New York City, where outrage rather than enthusiasm was the prevailing response to his separatist
ultimatum. The withdrawal of Louisiana from the Union would have drastic implications for the partisan system that had connected New York to the slave South, and for those increasingly intricate commercial, financial, and cultural ties on which the city’s future viability depended. The Rev. Henry Ward Beecher of Brooklyn was aware of these dangers, though he had more personal reasons to pause over Palmer’s apparent apostasy. The two men had played chess with each other when they were fellow students at Amherst College in the 1830s, and each had since attained celebrity status as their region’s most spellbinding pulpit orators. While Beecher’s memories of Palmer surely tinged his readings of the New Orleans Thanksgiving sermon, he was unlikely to have followed the sermon’s arguments with particular care or noted its tone of pathos and regret. Like many in the North, Beecher traced the current crisis to the failings of aberrant Southerners, who mocked the free states’ more genuine version of American republicanism. Beecher noted in 1861 that he had “never heard a man from the South speak of himself as an American” and that “men from the South speak of themselves as Southerners.” A year later, he explained how the rebels’ overly narrow identities had even more sinister roots, reasoning that “men brought up under the influence of slavery” were “contaminated to the very root, and cannot make good citizens.”

Beecher spoke for the common sense of the free-state majority in joining the Confederacy’s rebellion against the federal government with slaveholders’ more long-standing rebellion against civic morality and global progress. With the outbreak of war in 1861, more and more Union partisans joined Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts in arraigning white Southerners for a “triple-headed treason” that united their defiance of government sovereignty, their betrayal of national ideas, and, in their disregard for global progress toward universal freedom, their rejection of “those commanding principles of economy, morals, and Christianity without which civilization is changed into barbarism.” The Union soldiers who captured New Orleans early in 1862 displayed similar understandings. For those enlisted under the

Stars and Stripes, driving Palmer and his ilk into exile was a means of meting out punishment to selfish traitors and demonic brutes.  

These Union publicists and soldiers anticipated the judgment of many later historians, who have tended to conflate an understandable revulsion at proslavery ideology with a willful disassociation of bondage from prevailing American norms.  

The popular sanction given to secession during the winter of 1860–1 has drawn attention away from dramatic reversals such as that taken by Palmer and toward long-term patterns through which southern slaveholders seemed to have become increasingly alienated from national ideas. Their cultivation of narrow identities that caused them to “speak of themselves as Southerners” has repeatedly been held up as the key problem to be solved.  

Scholars who have documented the thoroughly “American” self-conception of Confederates have provided a cautionary note about such teleological assumptions and have reminded us how easily the fluid dynamics of nineteenth-century nationalism can be smoothed over in the quest to chart gradual developments. The following study of proslavery nationalism as it operated from the American founding through the Civil War builds on such work and thus


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remaps the relationship among nationalizing currents of the 1850s, the crisis of disunion, and the avowedly proslavery Confederacy of the early 1860s.  

At the heart of this book is the story of how slaveholders both before and after Lincoln’s election in 1860 contributed to the American project of “becoming national.” As was the case in other modern societies, this enterprise involved a “complex, uneven, and unpredictable process, forged from an interaction of cultural coalescence and specific political intervention,” as two historians have recently put it. In approaching the slippery category of nationhood, there is always a temptation to focus more on issues of self-understanding than of power. In the case of American masters, it was the potential antislavery threats posed at the national, subnational, and international levels that predominated. My desire to address the high stakes involved in this maneuvering for advantage has led me to devote the first section of this study to those geopolitical issues that informed considerations of nationhood as well as of empire, state, and sectional initiatives. Only after establishing the intricacy of slaveholders’ attempts to secure power within a federal Union do I turn in the second section to cultural developments, and in particular to assessing the increasingly ambitious plans to “nationalize” American slavery through variants of proslavery republicanism, evangelicalism, historical memory, and domesticity.


9 Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny, “Introduction: From the Moment of Social History to the Work of Cultural Representation,” in Becoming National: A Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8. These scholars go on to explain how if “politics is the ground upon which the category of the nation was first proposed,” then “culture is the terrain where it is elaborated.” I have found such a formulation a compelling alternative to John Breuilly’s overly stark emphasis on the political nature of nationalist claims (as set forth in Nationalism and the State [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992]) and Benedict Anderson's more influential overview, whose search for alternatives to state-centered narratives at times obscures the workings of politics and power (see Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism [Verso: London, 1981]). An older, but still relevant, warning about the connections between cultural analysis and the “hard surfaces” of those “political, economic, stratificatory realities within which men are everywhere contained” can be found in Cliftord Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.
My analysis of the nationalist visions of proslavery Southerners relies on three discrete bodies of scholarship. Most notable has been that ever more sophisticated work on the intellectual life of the antebellum master class. By recovering important texts and recasting critical episodes, this work has set a new standard in American intellectual history.\(^\text{10}\) By demonstrating slaveholders’ dexterity in shuttling between “American” and “southern” identities as they navigated the crisis of Union, historians such as Drew Faust, Eugene Genovese, and Michael O’Brien have also demonstrated anew the wisdom of David Potter’s justly influential insight that Americans, by 1860, were “separated by a common nationalism.”\(^\text{11}\)

A second body of works has helped me to consider American slaveholders as one among several “master classes,” who together witnessed the loss of their human property over a century-long “age of emancipation.” Studies that compare American masters to their colonial counterparts in other plantation zones have helped me more fully to appreciate advantages that came with access to governmental power and to a series


of signal triumphs in defining the United States’ burgeoning republican order. We take for granted the extent to which slaveholders tried to shape the Confederate States of America in their own self-image. Both hindsight and a certain national provincialism obscure how successful men like Palmer were during the 1850s in framing a proslavery version of American nationhood that sought to assimilate bondage to republican norms.12

Scholarship on the contours of modern nationalism has provided me a final means of honing my understanding of proslavery Americanism and its place within larger networks of power and meaning. Social scientists who write in a comparative vein have helped me to appreciate the depth of slaveholders’ commitment to the “nationalizing states” of both the Union and the Confederacy. This perspective helps to remind how little masters had in common (except on perhaps a rhetorical level) with such classic “state-seeking nations” as Ireland, Poland, and other colonized peoples excluded from the meaningful exercise of political and cultural power.13

Historians of nationalist projects in other times and places have similarly helped me better to understand the central role that politics, religion,

The men and women featured in this book were “representative” of the southern master class in one basic sense – as a group, they helped to fashion a powerful set of ideas, images, and political programs that represented to the world at large a collectivity variously known as the “slave interest,” the “slave power,” or, most simply and most effectively, “the South.” As public figures, these individuals enjoyed unusual access to power and publicity and they displayed a rare talent for systematic and nuanced expression. These qualities made them no more “typical” of the approximately 400,000 slaveholders as a class than Beecher and other free labor “nationalizers” were “typical” of the even larger white middle-class populace of the North. Making this basic distinction between “representativeness” and “typicality” helps to clarify a crucial point and to shed light on a related matter – the need to assess the historical significance of individual nationalists not only according to the cogency of their programs but also according to their effectiveness in touching a chord with a broader constituency of fellow masters.\footnote{It is important to note that while proslavery nationalists spoke to fellow masters, they employed language capable of appealing to southern white yeomen and to northern allies as well. These dimensions of proslavery discourse deserve further attention.}

Proslavery Americanism circulated far from the bustle of southern cities, and beyond the realm of printed polemics (the two most important sites of “master class nationalism”). Its image of the world-historical significance of modern “Christianized” bondage increasingly shaped the sensibilities of a plantation world where a complex blend of challenges, struggles, vulnerabilities, and assertions confronted slaveholders on a daily basis. One particularly resonant locale for considering the links between widely shared ideas and particular practices was the coastal rice-growing community of Midway, Georgia, where Lincoln’s election was felt as deeply as it was in Palmer’s New Orleans, or in Beecher’s New York. Here, a remarkable testimonial record left by the prominent Jones family reminds us of how many intricate dramas and dilemmas emerged during the closing days of 1860. Such dramas need not have driven broader
historical development in order to exemplify deeper currents of shifting allegiances and understandings.

We know from surviving correspondence that the fifty-two-year-old Mary Jones reacted to Lincoln’s election with every bit as much alarm as her slaveholding husband (and first cousin) Charles, who had made a name for himself as the South’s most celebrated white evangelist to southern African-Americans. The Joneses’ Unionism had a sentimental dimension, reaching back to the patriotic martyrdom suffered by their grandfather, who had died while defending Savannah from the British assault in 1779. At least as important, however, was their intuitive sense of how much they had benefited from a Union that assured the viability of their world of slaves and rice and cotton. In the half-century that followed American independence, Low Country Georgia had profited as much as any region from the political stability fostered by a federalized American Union. Seen from the Jones plantation residences of “Liberty Hall,” “Retreat,” and “Montevideo” there was little contradictory about amassing republican wealth on the basis of rice cultivated by enslaved workers, nor was there any real incongruity in the fact that the Joneses’ chief slave driver, Pulaski, had been named in honor of one of those revolutionary patriots whose actions had created North America’s most powerful federal state.16

Wielding power in the realm of national politics was something that the Jones family largely left to others, however. Their contributions as nationalists came less in the establishment of a federal polity friendly to slavery than in the imperatives of American religious life and of patriotic culture. A counterpart to Charles’ efforts to gain national support for his evangelical campaign could be seen in Mary’s work on behalf of George Washington’s Mount Vernon during the 1850s. It was altogether natural for her to join other “Southern Ladies” to preserve a working plantation as a national shrine. Having invested her energies in such patriotic endeavors made it just as natural that the crisis of 1860 would tug at Mary’s heartstrings and force her to renegotiate commitments that had not only connected the North and the South but also unified a sense of Unionist political obligation within her white household. In 1860, Mary

Jones set about an especially difficult task in writing to her oldest son, Charles C. Jones Jr., who was then serving a term as the mayor of Savannah. She asked him to remember the day “when your brother and yourself were very little fellows” and had taken a trip to Independence Hall in Philadelphia. “At the foot of Washington’s statue,” Mary Jones had “pledged you both to support and defend the Union.” With a full appreciation of imminent changes, Mary Jones assured her son that “That Union has passed away and you are free from your mother’s vow.” With this release came validation of her son’s enthusiastic support for the state militia forces that the previous day had captured federal installations in Savannah harbor.17

The gesture of family unity must have been appreciated by Charles Jones Jr., whose secessionist leanings had become well known by this time. He reciprocated his mother’s generosity a few weeks later, when he enclosed in a letter five chestnuts he had recently gathered from Washington’s Mount Vernon estate. After suggesting that transplantation to Low Country Georgia would allow new trees to thrive, the young Jones explained his actions lest his mother mistake his broader meaning. “The memory of Washington is still as dear and . . . as sacred, as ever it was; and I know that no one more patriotically cherishes that memory or those relics than you.” Moving into the future need not break all historical ties, he continued, noting that “the dissolution of the Union cannot silence those consecrated voices of the past, nor can it rob us of the relationship which we bear to . . . the Father of our Country.” He closed with the simple observation that Washington “was one of us.”

The fate of those chestnuts was uncertain. If Virginia transplants did survive the Low Country’s summertime heat, they would grow to maturity amidst a world of free black labor rather than plantation slavery. In dissolving a union they had helped to shape, the Jones family followed other southern masters in precipitating a revolution that accomplished their own destruction. Mayor Jones suppressed all discussion of this possibility in 1861 and instead focused on how his mother, in rearing new trees, might maintain connection to a shrine suddenly separated from Georgia by a new international border. The family was elated by news in April that Virginia had finally joined the Confederate States of America and had thus brought Washington’s home, along with the rest of that state’s historical associations, into a new slaveholding nation. The day that Virginia

17 All quotations from correspondence of Mary and Charles Jones Jr. appear in Myers, ed. The Children of Pride, 38, 48, 51.
seceded, Charles Jones shared his hopes once more with his mother and imagined how “a great Southern army” might make a Mount Vernon pilgrimage of its own before long. Jones spoke of the impending war in terms of national integrity rather than of slavery, though his diagnosis clearly rested on anxieties about the menace posed by a free-soil Republican party. Looking forward from 1861, he imagined how an invigorated Confederate populace might transform the process of “becoming national” from the traditional political, diplomatic, religious, and cultural initiatives toward a military effort. Southern masters seemed to be on the brink of a campaign for a new American nation, destined to enshrine elements of the past within a bracing new polity. To do so required making war on apostate Yankee Republicans, and thus to “redeem the tomb of Washington from the dominion of that fanatical rule.”