Prologue

On November 19, 1860, Samuel Yoer Tupper wrote to Governor William Henry Gist, offering the services of the Vigilant Rifles for the defense of South Carolina. Defense against what, Captain Tupper's letter never said exactly. But that was hardly necessary.[1]

Across the summer and fall, white Southerners had mulled the probable outcome of the presidential election, imagining catastrophe in countless shapes and forms. With the news of Abraham Lincoln's victory on November 7, decades of dread welled up. "They are downright crazy at the South," one writer exclaimed, and in South Carolina, "the rankest & most crazy of the disunionists" held the upper hand. "The feeling of indignation and resentment was profound," Ben Whitner recalled three generations later, "and the Spirit of Secession, as the only alternative for the Southern States, seemed to be in the very air we breathed."[2]

For thirty years, South Carolina had wavered on the brink of disunion, striving to secure slavery's place in an increasingly antislavery Union. "[A]ll that we ask," mewled beset masters, "is to be let alone." Time and again, Carolinians had warned Northerners to stop meddling with their "domestic institutions," warned Southerners to make common cause in defending their rights. That talk had failed, and disastrous "[e]vents long foretold" seemed soon to sweep slavery's regime to its doom. Now the hated party of "Black Republicans" had been lifted to power. It would control Congress. Its candidate would scheme from the White House. Soon Dixie's fate would be sealed. First, bondage would be barred from the western territories and banished from federal forts and shipyards. The District of Columbia would become free soil. Then the noose would tighten round the South as Yankees grew bolder. How long it would take

Lincoln's mob to abolitionize the Supreme Court, none could say, but before that time Republicans would have nurtured a nest of Southern traitors to do their bidding. There was the real danger. "[A] stand must be made for African slavery," fire-eaters declared, "or it is forever lost."[3]

Temporizing and moderation had conjured the crisis. Even as their power in Washington faded, Southern politicians placed their faith in the fantasy of "state rights," imagining that the Constitution, interpreted by a proslavery Supreme Court, would protect against anything an anti-slavery Congress aimed their way. But, as Carolina's master strategist John C. Calhoun admitted just before his death in 1850, state rights theory ended in a *cul-de-sac*. For what happened if Southerners grew soft on slavery? Over four decades before Lincoln's election, Northern slaveholders had surrendered their bondmen with nary a whimper. Now Northern slavery existed in Delaware only, and there in name alone. Along Dixie's margins, from Maryland to Missouri, the institution was hemorrhaging badly in terms of numbers and popular support. Plant Republican power there, or anywhere in the South, and the slaveholders' world was doomed.[4] "Patronage, power, divisions at home would do the work," Congressman Laurence Keitt warned. Postmasterships, customs office appointments, and other plums would be doled out to "doughfaces," and these pliant types would enact the Republicans' program without a second thought. One morning soon, planters would wake to find their slaves unshackled, their property worthless, their civilization demolished – not by overcoming state rights principles, but by upholding them. And then it would be too late.[5]

Now was the time for action. "[I]f the people don't take some decided measure this time," one diarist declared, "I will never trust to South Carolina again." "We must face our enemies at the North and TRAITORS SOUTH," radicals raged. Caution itself came to seem a species of treachery. Republicans had "raised a pirate's flag" against law and civilization: who would not stand against them now, defending "the hope of mankind" slave society embodied? "Politicians may advise truces, legislators may make laws," Charleston's William Colcock warned, "but the spirit of abolitionism will break down all barriers and the war against slavery will never cease." Disunionists "resolved to make the plunge & take all the chances."[6]

This time – astonishingly – they succeeded. Who propelled South Carolina over the brink? How and why did they pursue that disastrous goal? And why, of all places, was it Charleston – the most divided, conservative city in the Old South – where secession passed the tipping point?[7]

Most thought they knew that disunion would fail here, as it ever had. Breaking the nation meant breaking the South and slavery too, Charlestonians had warned across three decades. And would secession not end, inevitably, in fratricidal conflict – even race war? In 1860, those sober arguments fell on deaf ears. Carolinians "say they are aware it will result in ruin and distress," one Yankee wondered, "but they don't care." Secession unleashed proslavery revolution or antislavery catastrophe, "triumph" for the master class, "or the tomb." Either outcome trumped the status quo. Some feared that waves of armed abolitionists would flood the South on the heels of Lincoln's election, emulating John Brown's stab at Harper's Ferry a year before.[8] Or suppose federal troops were dispatched to prevent the disunionist working-out of the logic of state rights? The Illinois Ape in the White House meant bayonets at South Carolina's throat. That was cause enough for the Vigilant Rifles to offer the governor their services.[9]

It is doubtful that Bill Gist knew anything of Sam Tupper or the Vigilant Rifles. Scanning down the 109 signatures enclosed with Tupper's letter, there were only two or three he had reason to recognize. It is unlikely that he had met even these men. Gist was a wealthy planter of temperate politics from high in the upcountry. These names belonged to Charleston men, living far – geographically, socially, culturally – from the rural world he inhabited.[10] A few – William Henry Waring, Charles Elliot Rowand Drayton, John Harleston – claimed kin to once-powerful lowcountry clans. But most patronyms petered out in obscurity: Armstrong, O'Neill, Yates, Ryan, Knauff, Brown, Smith, Jones. Attached to Tupper's letter was a note of introduction penned by George M. Coffin, senior partner in Coffin and Pringle, the prominent cotton factorage house, and private in the Vigilant Rifles. In case Gist missed the Coffin connection, a third note dropped in from Thomas Y. Simons Jr., representative from Charleston to the General Assembly, and Gist's aide-de-camp. "Tommy Skimmons" was a potent figure in the Queen City, but detested beyond its bounds for his political moderation and slippery, glad-handing style.[11]

There was no love lost between Gist and Simons, either, though in months past they had connived to win higher office. If Gist could gain a federal Senate seat, that opened the governorship for his crony. The scheme was clever, but Lincoln's triumph split the alliance. While Gist viewed Republicans' victory with increasing alarm, his partner remained steady in pursuit of the main chance. Gaining office and protecting interests was the shameless core of Simons' politics – every man's, he would have protested – not guarding abstract principles.

Those who knew him must have seen his letter's proposal as just another bagatelle.[12]

Gist surely wondered. Yet the Vigilants were not playing possum. One hundred nine men, uniformed and equipped "at *their own expense*," armed with "Minnie Rifle[s] with Sabre bayonets," could take any federal installation in Charleston – even Fort Moultrie or Fort Sumter, if they had boats. They wanted no easy assignment either. Accepted into service, Tupper hoped to "be allowed to lead the first 'forlorn hope' of Carolina troops that are sent against the enemy." His men would be stalwarts and suicide warriors both. Their company name, the bold language of Tupper's letter, and other details made plain their identity: the Vigilant Rifles were Minute Men, the first volunteers to stand up for the South in the wake of Lincoln's election. They were the very tip of the spear that sought to defend slavery and sustain Southern society. Who were they?[13]

In collective terms, we know little about the Minute Men of 1860; as individuals, almost nothing at all. A few scholars have written a few generalities about these radical organizations, but almost nothing definitive. There were Minute Men at the height of South Carolina's conflict with the federal government in 1832–1833 and groups rather like Minute Men mustered in the crisis of 1851–1852. Both movements faded out in compromise – which is to say, failure. That was no great surprise. Like the Revolutionary heroes from which Minute Men bands took their name, these groups were uniformly local and defensive in outlook. In their first reincarnation, they stood for lower tariffs and the state's right to "nullify" unpalatable federal laws. The second wave championed Southern rights against federal "tyranny," though its program of resistance was vaguer.[14] Just how far militancy might take them remained unspoken, but neither group aimed at any sort of practical action, much less breaking up the Union.

The Minute Men of 1860 shared little with earlier hotheads. They spouted the same rhetoric about defending homes against intruders, but claimed that this goal could be won only by winning independence from the Yankee-dominated Union. They were, it appears, the shock troops of the Southern revolution, committed to disunion by any means necessary. They never fought under their own banners – many went unarmed and most others carried only pistols – but in South Carolina they worked steadily to swing political sentiment over to secession. Their support proved key to disunion's success. If Carolinians hesitated to choose, Governor Gist told insiders, "I would go to Charleston, make a

speech & advise the taking of the forts at once." By their presence alone, Minute Men gave that threat teeth. Gist never needed to play his ace.[15]

How Bill Gist answered Sam Tupper's letter we do not know, but four months later Captain Tupper led his troops during the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter. The Vigilant Rifles fought in defense of their homes all over the slaveholders' republic across the next four years. Their actions declared them rebels, quite in earnest. Who dared to say they were merely acting?

Introduction

Politics, Chess, Hats

One hundred and thirty years later, I encountered the Vigilant Rifles much as Bill Gist did, by reading Sam Tupper's surprising letter. First I found a faded photocopy in the governor's papers at the state archives in Columbia. Then I located the original crammed inside a box of captured military documents at the National Archives. I had been searching for rosters of Minute Men companies in South Carolina, hoping to learn what sort of fellows joined and led these radicals. Did big planters dragoon the small fry into arms? Did young men become Young Turks to prove themselves? Once I turned up my lists, I knew, the answers would appear.

But Sam Tupper's list was confounding. Even before I tried tracing his volunteers, I saw the problem: the Vigilant Rifles were from Charleston. There was no way to answer my questions about planter–yeoman relations using these documents; there were no farms in Charleston. Age or wealth or political leadership might prove important in the decision to become a Minute Man, but that knowledge could shed little light on the organization's character in towns like Columbia, Winnsboro, or Spartanburg, or at crossroads where a church or store focused activity. For what I wanted to know, Tupper's list was useless. Charleston was different from anywhere in South Carolina, different from anywhere in the South.

That obvious fact came as an epiphany to me, since most histories of secession deny it.[1] There was not one secession crisis, I recognized, but at least eleven, overlapping yet distinct: South Carolina quit the Union on December 20, 1860, and nine other states followed on nine different dates before Tennessee lagged out on June 8, 1861. And within

each of those conflicts, Southerners contested separation through scores of smaller, semipermeable struggles, linking county cliques and dividing dinner tables. Those few scholars who have offered unitary explanations of the birth of the Confederacy acknowledge differences of timing and circumstance, yet leave the bewildering, all-important "details" of local action for others to explain.

Analyzing the complex events that accomplished disunion has encouraged historians to study the dynamics of national breakup at the state level. This has been both strength and weakness. We now know well how the legislatures and conventions of the various states brought disunion off. Below this, though, differences flatten out and disappear, especially in all-important South Carolina.[2] Why did Greenville District voters support disunion? For much the same reasons Edgefield farmers or lowcountry squires did, we are told, and in much the same way. But such *dicta* are rooted deeper in assumption than research. Just how secession came to triumph at the local level, historians do not say: Charleston militants probably acted much like their country cousins. Treating Sam Tupper's list as a special case meant rejecting that logic.

It was a lot to reject. Although scholars have failed at writing anything like a real history of secession, they have done wonders at constructing rival theories. After a century of brilliant research and argument, nearly all interpretations fall into one of two camps. One school opts for a mass conversion experience to explain the Confederacy's origins. Southerners supposedly awoke spontaneously to the danger Lincoln's election posed to their interests, rallying to the Stars and Bars. There was little hesitation, less internal debate worth noting, especially in touchy South Carolina. Even in 1860, Charleston novelist William Gilmore Simms favored this perspective, calling disunion a popular "*landsturm*" against Northern aggression.[3] The other trope takes its cue from Republican wartime propaganda, claiming that the rebellion was conjured by Southern traitors (or, says a Dixie variant, patriots of greater insight than their peers). In 1861, this cabal conspired to propel the slaveholding states out of the Union, regardless of popular feeling.[4] Hear the words of South Carolina judge Alfred Proctor Aldrich, chairman of his state senate's Committee on Federal Relations, pronounced six days after the Vigilant Rifles offered their all to Governor Gist. "Whoever waited for the common people when a great movement was to be made?" The crisis was now: "We must make the move & force them to follow." Aldrich's plan to quell opposition was time-tested: assassinate the strong, shame the weak, drag the mass along.[5]

Popular uprising or Machiavellian intrigue? There are any number of elegant, often brilliant turns scholars have given these arguments, yet little progress has been made in recent years to explain just how the United States came to break up in the winter of 1860.[6] Deflecting contemporary claims and latter-day variants has become academic child's play in an age disdainful of the "will of the people" and conspiracy theories alike. Simms may have exaggerated his "*landsturm*" analysis, Romantic that he was. And whoever heard of Alfred Aldrich, anyway? The consequence is stalemate. Since David Potter's landmark narrative, *The Impending Crisis*, four decades ago, a short shelf of state-level studies and a couple of valuable biographies have appeared.[7] Each has made worthy contributions, but collectively, they have failed to revive a tired debate. Currently, scholars weigh William Freehling's masterwork, *The Road to Disunion*, but those looking for a breakthrough must be disappointed. Freehling sleuthed to solve old questions, not raise new ones.[8] The limits to the problem – what caused disunion and civil war – seem set in stone.

Sam Tupper's tale can never be told under those constraints. The trouble is, as one radical reminded the *Charleston Mercury*, "revolutions are not merely willed, they are to be carried out." Deciding is never nearly the same as doing, and the Vigilant Rifles vowed to be doers. Secession scholars have missed this point, wrangling over why Southerners came to choose political revolution in 1860, but saying little about who accomplished it and how. Eric Walther's 1992 collective biography, *The Fire-Eaters*, expertly traced the growth of a common consciousness among some of the South's most radical leaders, potential conspirators if ever there were such. But Walther's hotheads disappeared come 1860. They almost never joined active secessionist groups, or gave real speeches to actual people at specific times and places that had any discernible effect. Nor did they march in parades, disseminate pamphlets, or put their heads together with other cadres on particular occasions to plot a common course. Most were sick or dead, or out of the country, inactive, or not very important at the crucial moment when the Confederacy was taking shape.[9]

This is the same problem that plagued John McCardell's *Idea of a Southern Nation*: a great idea radical Southerners had, but how did they pull it off? Likewise, Drew Faust's *A Sacred Circle* claimed that alienated intellectuals were important in getting the South up to speed for disunion. But when crisis came, Faust's eggheads all went missing – save only eccentric Virginian Edmund Ruffin.[10] He wrote some letters, gave

some speeches, signed up as a private in South Carolina's Provisional Army, and fired a symbolic first shot at Fort Sumter. Pulling that lanyard seems revolutionary enough, but not very important as to making a revolution. Analyzing this odd triggerman brings us little closer to understanding how the overthrow of the Republic was achieved.

Repeatedly the question is begged: if not these men, who organized the disunionist rallies and processions that mobilized support? Who stood for election to the secession conventions, who nominated them, and who mustered the votes to gain their victories? Who guided legislative action behind the scenes? Who gave the stump speeches and the volunteer toasts? Who serenaded fence-sitting politicians and organized mobs to quell the opposition? Who *performed* disunion – and how, and why? Of this, we know almost nothing. Which means that we know precious little about secession at all. Whoever they were, the Vigilant Rifles volunteered to do something practical to achieve disunion. I thought they deserved a closer look.

Exploring the social and cultural forces that generated Sam Tupper's letter would advance my understanding of disunion's development. For if secession was a spontaneous popular movement, how did it spread? In *The Great Fear of 1789*, French historian Georges Lefebvre offers an excellent model for Southern scholars, tracking the passage of fears of counterrevolution through particular towns on definite dates. That painstaking local history provides a solid foundation for broader analytical claims. By contrast, in Steven Channing's prize-winning *Crisis of Fear*, locality has no importance at all. South Carolina in 1860 seems gripped by the same disunionist determinations almost always at the same moment everywhere.[11] Channing knew more than he told – his book provides valuable details in abundance – but historical complexity is throttled for the sake of persuasive argument. If neighborhood meetings or particular events turned the tide of opinion, they rate no notice in his pages, or in virtually any other study of secession. As with Christianity, it seems, the Confederacy began with a virgin birth.[12]

Compared with the enormous and dynamic historiography of the English, French, Bolshevik, National Socialist, and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, among others, our understanding of the origins, mechanics, and meanings of the Southern slaveholders' uprising remains impoverished and conceptually threadbare.[13] In each of these fields, scholars have moved from pretext to context, developing insights about the political process and the social and cultural milieu in which it developed by trolling up apparently minor, everyday happenings at the local level. So should we.

Countless exceptional, supposedly unimportant or parochial incidents in the disunionist South might prompt new lines of inquiry.[14] Consider four neglected items from South Carolina in October, 1860.

A few days before Sam Tupper wrote his letter, a shadowy faction of Charleston merchants and politicians came together under the banner of the "1860 Association," circulating secessionist pamphlets across the state and further afield. They were the only group of their kind, yet scholars have devoted little attention to their activities and impact. No one has offered an examination of the themes, structures, or rhetorical style of their tracts. Especially in the Old South – overwhelmingly rural, with relatively few newspapers and job printing establishments – figuring out how disunionist arguments were shaped and spread, who espoused them, when, where, and why, is an important task.[15]

In the same month, Charleston-born, New Orleans-based editor James D. B. DeBow noted in the back pages of his influential magazine his attendance at "a very large political gathering" at the Williamston springs, on the Georgia–South Carolina border, sometime in the past summer. No historian has mentioned this rally, although it was one of the largest secessionist meetings held in the upcountry before Lincoln's election, galvanizing popular support for radical action.[16] Indeed, it may be that, beyond Charleston, opposition to disunion in the South fought and lost its crucial battle here. Who organized the meeting, and why? Who spread word of the rally and how? Who addressed the crowds that came and who stayed away? What difference did the day's events make? Documentary evidence is plentiful, but no one has tallied it up. In truth, we know little of the local history of disunion anywhere in South Carolina or beyond. How was separation accomplished at the county and community levels?

And what of anti-secessionist feeling? How was it quashed in these crucial days? In South Carolina, disunion's triumph is supposed to have transpired relatively painlessly, especially once Republican victory made the alternative plain. But by late October, merchant-planter Christopher Fitzsimmons described Charleston's legislative delegation as "very much divided" on disunion, "and the same is said to be the case throughout the State." Three weeks later, piedmont politician Richard Griffin still saw "a minority of considerable strength" in the General Assembly opposed to separate secession. In early December, radicals recognized that there were yet sizeable pockets of opposition, especially in the upcountry and in Charleston, led by effective popular leaders. At summer's end, the chief justice of the state supreme court, the attorney general, both of South