

The Old Gentlemen Pay a Call

On February 23, the day Lincoln arrived in Washington, he invited the delegates of the Washington Peace Convention to a reception in his parlor suite at the Willard Hotel. Among these delegates was William Cabell Rives, a former congressman and senator from Virginia, who, despite owning almost one hundred slaves, was a staunch unionist. Rives, along with other delegates, attended the Peace Convention, which had become deadlocked as both sides clung to their beliefs. Fueled by frustration, Rives delivered a passionate ninety-minute speech advocating for reconciliation, condemning the secession of states. He emphasized the futility of coercing seceding states back into the Union, predicting that without immediate concessions, Virginia and other border states would follow suit. Rives recounted witnessing the horrors of civil war while serving as America's minister to France, hoping to avert a similar fate for his homeland.

At the reception, over a hundred delegates recognized Lincoln, who towered among them and displayed an unexpectedly gracious demeanor, countering their preconceived notions. Upon meeting Rives, Lincoln remarked on his stature, intending to break the ice, but quickly added compliments regarding Rives's intellect and service. Rives, feeling small in Lincoln's presence, expressed his distress over the looming crisis, insisting that everything hinged on Lincoln's actions. Lincoln, however, responded confidently, asserting that his path was clear, highlighting the need for obeying the Constitution.

Rives later conveyed his concern that Lincoln appeared to lack a serious understanding of the urgency of the situation. Days later, the convention approved a proposed Thirteenth Amendment addressing slavery, demonstrating that the core of the issue lay in this very institution, contrary to later historical interpretations that downplayed its significance.

As Rives prepared to leave for Virginia, Lincoln requested a follow-up meeting with him and other southern delegates. The conversation grew tense as Lincoln assured them he would honor the Fugitive Slave Act but faced warnings from Rives and others about the potential dire consequences of coercion, particularly if Virginia were to secede. Lincoln promised to withdraw troops from Fort Sumter if Virginia remained in the Union, yet offered no guarantees. The meeting concluded with Lincoln questioning whether they would have spoken so freely to another president.

The Senate rejected the proposed amendment outright, but a similar proposal guaranteeing the protection of existing slavery was passed in the House and Senate. This amendment became known as the Shadow or Ghost Amendment, remaining technically unratified into the twenty-first century, despite Lincoln forwarding it for ratification by the states, adding to the complex legacy of the looming civil tensions.