

To Dare

In December 1860, South Carolina's political elite convened in Columbia, shrouded in fog, for a significant convention amidst rising tensions surrounding secession. The assembly comprised 169 prominent figures, including former congressmen, governors, and senators, each with substantial wealth, most owning slaves. The convention's atmosphere was charged with both excitement for disunion and anxiety, particularly regarding the potential consequences of Abraham Lincoln's election.

The choice of Columbia as the meeting location sparked debate, with some fearing it might harbor unionist sentiment. Calls to delay the convention gained traction among conservative delegates wary of hasty action. Despite initial disagreements, the convention commenced on December 17 at the First Baptist Church, electing David Flavel Jamison as president instead of the expected Robert Barnwell Rhett, indicating a divide within the secessionists.

Jamison's speech, deliberately void of mention regarding slavery's future, encouraged patience while simultaneously echoing a revolutionary spirit with his rallying cry, "To dare! and again to dare!" However, fears of a smallpox outbreak soon overran these ambitions, leading to the convention's swift relocation to Charleston, seen by some as an act of cowardice.

Arriving in Charleston, the delegates swiftly united in support of immediate secession. Later, on December 20, a secession ordinance was hastily approved, formalizing South Carolina's disunion in a matter of minutes. The ensuing ceremony resembled a celebration, drawing comparisons with the signing of the Declaration of Independence, devoid of the solemnity that haunted the original signers. Enthusiastic crowds welcomed the delegates, particularly Robert Barnwell Rhett, who basked in recognition and adulation, markedly different from the muted response of the convention's opening.

The evening marked a high within Charleston, with cannon fire and fireworks celebrating their resolute break from the Union. Yet, amidst the jubilation, figures like James L. Petigru expressed a somber acknowledgment of the day, recognizing the gravity of their decision even as they participated in the celebrations.

As South Carolina laid bare its newfound independence, the implications loomed large. Meanwhile, within Fort Moultrie, Major Anderson and his men observed the celebrations from a distance, sensing a potent shift in the political landscape signifying an impending conflict. This chapter vividly illustrates the charged atmosphere leading to secession, interweaving the personal and political stakes of the figures involved, as South Carolina took dramatic steps toward its tumultuous future.