

# Scandal

In the politically charged years between 1857 and 1858, James Hammond, a figure marked by controversy and scandal, was unexpectedly nominated to fill a vacant U.S. Senate seat following the death of its previous occupant. Hammond's political career had been tumultuous, characterized by a significant electoral loss in 1840 and a narrow victory in 1842 for the governorship. Despite his political ambition, his reputation was tainted by a scandalous affair involving his young nieces, which had begun in 1841.

The indiscretions commenced during his relocation to Columbia, where his nieces regularly visited. Hammond engaged in sexual activities with all four girls over a two-year span, justifying his behavior in his diary as a consequence of irresistible charm and love from the girls. He expressed a sense of victimhood, perceiving himself as deserving of praise for not going even further in these relationships. However, leading to the end of this affair was a confrontation with one of his nieces, Catherine, in 1843, which compelled him to cease his advances. A misguided communication with their father, Wade Hampton, further complicated matters, devastating Hammond's social standing.

By 1844, whispers about the affair begun to permeate the political elite, growing into a campaign aimed at tarnishing Hammond's candidacy for the Senate. Despite gaining significant public support, these rumors culminated in a definitive loss, primarily orchestrated by Hampton's political machinations, resulting in Hammond's career being declared “annihilated forever.”

In the midst of personal turmoil, Hammond also engaged in a long-term illicit relationship with an enslaved woman named Sally Johnson, which became public knowledge in 1850. His wife, Catherine, eventually left him, exacerbating his domestic woes further. Despite these scandals, in 1857, politics shifted again, and he found himself elected to the Senate, albeit amid the secessionist rhetoric and growing tensions over slavery.

With his arrival in the Senate, Hammond delivered a powerful speech defending slavery and declaring “cotton is king,” which solidified his position among Southern politicians, garnering admiration in his home state. Though his ideological stance seemed to strengthen his political image initially, it foreshadowed the dire consequences of the pending Civil War, as advocates in the South erroneously believed that a cotton-fueled economy would deter Northern aggression in future conflicts.