

The Awakening

James Henry Hammond, an atypical planter in the South during the 19th century, was a prominent figure influenced by his minority status at birth. Born in 1807 to a failed father, Hammond was instilled with immense ambition and a yearning for recognition. Educated at a modest preparatory school, he attended South Carolina College thanks to his father's role as a steward there. The college maintained strict rules to uphold gentlemanly behavior while fostering a fierce sensitivity to honor among its male students, which often resulted in violent confrontations.

During his time at college, Hammond reportedly had a close relationship with Thomas Jefferson Withers, which has spurred speculation about their connection. After graduating, Hammond faced disappointment in securing a respectable position, eventually becoming a teacher. However, following strategic marital choices and by aligning himself with influential political radicals like John C. Calhoun, he advanced quickly. His marriage to Catherine Fitzsimons, a wealthy heiress known for her wealth rather than beauty, catapulted him into affluence.

Hammond's estate grew to encompass extensive land and enslaved people, reflecting the Southern economy's dependence on slavery. He recognized the financial implications of enslaved labor and maintained a strategy of strict control over his workers. Despite the harsh realities of slavery, he pursued a dominant strategy, enforcing marriage and birth regulations among his enslaved population, while employing brutal punishments for disobedience.

Hammond's effective involvement in pro-slavery politics established him as a significant voice in Congress, defending slavery against growing abolitionist sentiments. His inaugural pro-slavery speech in Congress garnered national attention, framing slavery as a benevolent system. Nonetheless, he contended with personal health issues that plagued him throughout his political career.

Later, seeking greater status, he aimed for the governorship of South Carolina, constructing an opulent home in Columbia to establish his place among the planter elite. In his quest for recognition, Hammond's ambitions ultimately led him to navigate the complexities of Southern society, balancing personal prestige with the inherent challenges of his position in a deeply divided region.