

The Scent of Rebellion

In the chapter "The Scent of Rebellion," we follow Edmund Ruffin's fervent journey post-election, motivated by his belief that South Carolina would lead the charge for secession after Lincoln's victory in 1860. Arriving in Columbia on November 10, 1860, he found himself celebrated as a hero, a stark contrast to his experiences back in Virginia. Remarkably, students from South Carolina College even requested him to speak, although he hesitated due to fear of failure. Nevertheless, he reveled in the admiration, taking steps to draw further attention by adorning a blue cockade on his hat—an emblem associated with the secessionist movement.

The state legislature's debate culminated in a historic vote approving a measure that, while merely a preamble, edged South Carolina closer to secession, a dream Ruffin long anticipated. He expressed his exhilaration in a letter to his sons, claiming this day was the happiest of his life and a prelude to a revolution that would liberate the slave-holding states from Northern influence.

As he traveled towards Charleston, Ruffin was met with enthusiastic cheers and applause, even being the guest of honor at a pro-secession rally that featured cannon fire and celebratory music. This Southern custom of a musical serenade was reminiscent of the camaraderie and passionate spirit surrounding the pro-secession sentiment. In Charleston, Ruffin sensed a collective fervor palpably driving the secessionist movement, which was fueled by the fear of a Black Republican government. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet captured this sentiment when he wrote about the unstoppable tide towards secession in a public letter, likening it to trying to control a tornado.

Ruffin's hopes soared as he noted that secession, once a distant dream, appeared tangible. Commentary from influential figures, like journalist Horace Greeley—the "New York Tribune" editor—encouraged this optimism, as he publicly stated that if the Cotton States believed they would thrive outside the Union, they should be allowed to leave peacefully.

Energized by his experiences in South Carolina, Ruffin traveled to Georgia to further incite secessionist sentiment. However, he was disheartened by the hesitation among Georgia's leaders. Returning to Richmond, he found criticism and condemnation awaiting him, yet he remained defiant, continuing to wear his blue cockade, emblematic of his unwavering support for what he perceived as a righteous cause.