

# The Correspondent

The Correspondent, William Russell, found himself increasingly skeptical about the possibility of restoring the Union during his April 3 meeting with Southern commissioners Martin Crawford and John Forsyth. As he noted in his diary, the commissioners conveyed an air of entitlement, believing they were representatives of a foreign nation engaged in negotiations with "Yankeedom." Their indignation was palpable, as they expressed frustration over the government's refusal to engage with them on matters relating to their desire for separation. This encounter prompted Russell to question the viability of reunification, as the commissioners seemed fully convinced of the legitimacy of their cause and the separation of the Southern states from the Union. Their belief in their own moral high ground seemed firmly entrenched, leaving Russell with doubts about whether any peaceful reconciliation was possible.

Just two days later, Russell met with the three commissioners, including André Roman from Louisiana, and other secessionist figures like Colonel George E. Pickett. They dined together at Gautier's, a renowned French restaurant famous for its extravagant displays, such as a large cake at Christmas. During the meal, Russell observed the deep animosity the Southern figures harbored toward President Lincoln and Northern politicians. The conversation revealed intense hatred toward New England, with the Southern commissioners speaking harshly about the region and its people. Russell noted that their anger seemed disproportionate, possibly fueled by the region's deeply entrenched societal structures, including the institution of slavery. As they discussed matters of honor, their staunch defense of dueling was particularly striking, with them also claiming that Northern men were cowardly. They pointed to the 1856 caning of Senator Charles Sumner as evidence, oversimplifying the incident and blaming Sumner for not engaging in a duel, ignoring the complexities surrounding the event.

The conversation took a troubling turn when slavery was discussed, with the Southern commissioners asserting ideas that Russell found difficult to comprehend. They claimed that white men in slave states were physically superior to their counterparts in free states, weaving together peculiar moral and physical theories that left Russell perplexed. He observed that while Southerners frequently traveled North, many Northerners avoided the South due to safety concerns. This contrast in attitudes revealed a disconnect between the two regions and further solidified Russell's belief that the deep divisions between the North and South could not be easily bridged. His interactions with the Southern figures painted a stark picture of the ideological chasm separating the two sides. Their views on race, honor, and the moral justification for slavery created an environment in which dialogue seemed futile, and reconciliation appeared increasingly unlikely.

Russell's growing concerns were compounded by his observations of William Seward, who seemed to have a fundamental misunderstanding of the situation. Seward, the Secretary of State, considered the Southerners to be outdated and backward, yet he had never even visited the South to understand its people and culture firsthand. Seward's belief that secession could be peacefully resolved was in stark contrast to Russell's firsthand experiences with the Southern commissioners. Seward's view that the Southern states would eventually return to the Union once they realized the North's intentions were benign was naïve in Russell's eyes. This naive optimism, especially coming from such a high-ranking official, left Russell with little confidence in the North's ability to handle the secession crisis effectively. It was clear to Russell that the South's commitment to its cause was far stronger than Seward had anticipated, and the North's strategies would need to shift dramatically if reconciliation were to be achieved.

Russell, now fully aware of the growing tensions between the North and South, felt compelled to witness the situation firsthand in Charleston. He planned a trip to the South to assess the situation more closely, believing that firsthand experience would give him a clearer understanding of the escalating conflict. Despite feeling a sense of urgency, Russell delayed his departure from Washington for six days, perhaps unsure

of what he would find or feeling hesitant to immerse himself further in a situation that seemed increasingly volatile. However, the delays only heightened his sense of foreboding, as the political and social dynamics he observed from his interactions in Washington and with the Southern commissioners suggested that the nation was on the brink of a larger, unavoidable conflict. With growing apprehension, Russell knew that the time for action was approaching, and the fate of the Union hung in the balance.