Contents

List of Illustrations ix

Acknowledgments xi

Prologue 1

Introduction 7

PART ONE. THE ANTEBELLUM ERA

1. Antebellum Southern State Constitutionalism 41

PART TWO. SECESSION

2. Secession, Sovereignty, and State Constitutional Revision 73

3. Framing the Southern Republic 99

PART THREE. RECONSTRUCTION

4. Presidential Requests 125

5. Congressional Demands 154

PART FOUR. REDEMPTION

6. Reaction, Retrenchment, and Resistance 189

Conclusion 227

Appendix A: All State Constitutional Conventions 241
Appendix B: Federal Supremacy Clauses in All State Constitutions 243

Notes 257

Bibliography 313

Index 341
Illustrations

Tables

I.1. Three Waves of Southern Conventions 13
I.3. Lower House Residence Requirements in Southern State Constitutions 29
1.1. Slavery in All State Constitutions, 1776–1870 47
4.1. Locations of State Convention Halls 142
5.1. Amendment Procedures in Southern State Constitutions, 1860–1869 174
5.2. Voter Residence Requirements in Southern State Constitutions, 1776–1869 178
6.1. Public Education in Southern State Constitutions, 1776–1869 203
6.2. Education Rights and Funding during the 1870s 208
6.3. Inclusion, Removal, and Adjustment of Federal Supremacy Clauses in All State Constitutions 213

Figure

I.1. All State Constitutional Conventions, 1776–Present 12
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The South was not always the South. Of course, the people who populated the region below the Potomac River always had a similar culture and economy, but during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries southerners did not have a separate political identity. In fact, according to historian John McCardell, prior to the Revolution, “there is scant evidence that Southerners recognized that their region possessed peculiar and unifying characteristics.” At the nation’s founding, slavery was largely accepted in most of the colonies, and common opposition to Great Britain masked regional differences. Later, the differences that appeared were better characterized as economic—the commercial interests of the North versus the agricultural interests of the South. As time passed, the South became more dependent on slave labor, and the North became more industrialized; an abolition movement was born; territorial boundaries expanded; and national political parties struggled to suppress regional conflict. Some southern politicians called for unity against northern and federal encroachment, but prior to 1860, they failed to generate anything approaching majority support.

There was certainly a recognition of southern interests when delegates met in Philadelphia to draft the Constitution, but the primary conflict was not North versus South. The main debate focused on representation, which pitted big states against small states. Concessions to slaveholders—the three-fifths clause (which gave additional representation and additional electoral votes) and limits on interfering with the international slave trade until 1808—did not require southern delegates to unite and make threats or demands. Moreover, there was not a regional dynamic to the ratification process. Georgia was among the first to sign on, along with Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Opposition appeared in Massachusetts and New York as well as Virginia and South Carolina. And the last states to ratify were North Carolina and Rhode Island. So, from the outset, southerners did not see themselves as separate or otherwise isolated from the nation.

During the administration of John Adams, a states’ rights battle ensued over the Alien and Sedition Acts, which brought a strong southern
defense in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, writing on behalf of the state legislatures, argued that the powers of the federal government contained in the US Constitution were limited, and the states retained any powers that were not specifically delegated. The battle subsided in the early national period, when the party system favored the South in the federal government. Southerners united behind the Democratic Republican Party when Jefferson won the presidency in 1800, and the Virginia dynasty ruled the executive branch for another twenty-four years. This dominance undermined the power of Federalists and northern Democratic Republicans, all to the benefit of the South. In the first part of the nineteenth century, there was little need for southern states to unite against the federal government because they controlled it, and as of 1819, "regional differences had not borne the evil fruit of sectional bitterness." In 1820 the Missouri crisis had "an especially decisive impact on the course of southern political history," according to southern historian Michael Perman. The admission of this state, created from the lands of Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase, generated the first national political conflict over slavery. James Tallmadge, a congressman from New York, offered an amendment to the Missouri enabling bill that would have resulted in gradual abolition. The Senate resisted Tallmadge’s proposal, and the next Congress forged a compromise to admit Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state while restricting slavery in future territories north of the 36° 30’ line. Suddenly there was a potential threat to the South and a realization that northerners might not be so ambivalent about slave property. Historian William Cooper Jr. argues that the fight over Missouri showed that the southern states would stand together and defend their interests “ferociously.” The region was losing some of its dominance in the national government, which threatened the rights and liberty of those who held most of the political power—slaveholders.

Debates over the tariff in the 1820s also revealed a deep sectional divide. During the administration of John Quincy Adams, Congress passed a tax on imported goods to promote northern manufacturing, which harmed the South because that region did not produce such goods and would have to pay higher prices. It also curtailed British demand for southern cotton. The so-called Tariff of Abominations continued under Andrew Jackson, despite the expectation that he would reduce or eliminate it upon taking office. After four years, Jackson signed the Tariff of 1832, which reduced duties and enjoyed the sup-
port of many southerners in Congress. Nevertheless, South Carolina was not appeased by this measure, and conflict erupted between nationalist southerners and southern nationalists, with Vice President John C. Calhoun trapped in the middle.

McCardell begins his treatment of southern nationalism with the controversy surrounding the tariff. Many of the prominent political leaders in South Carolina, including Calhoun, Henry Laurens Pinckney, Stephen D. Miller, William Harper, and Robert Turnbull, believed the best course of action was to secure southern interests within the Union. Others, however, used this crisis to push for a separate southern nation. The southern nationalists tended to be young professionals who had only recently attained their status in society: Governor James Hamilton, Thomas Cooper, George McDuffie, E. W. Johnson, Warren Davis, and Robert Barnwell Rhett (who changed his name from the decidedly less aristocratic “Smith”). These men leveraged the call for a state convention, which issued the ordinance of nullification on behalf of “the great Southern section of the Union.” Calhoun managed to avert disaster through a compromise that allowed both South Carolina and Andrew Jackson to save face.

The rise of abolitionism coincided with the sectional fight over the tariff. The Nat Turner Rebellion took place in the summer of 1831, the same year William Lloyd Garrison began publishing his antislavery newspaper *The Liberator*. These events sparked a debate in the South over the future of slavery, most famously in the Virginia legislature. Those who favored abolition were in the minority, so slavery survived, but defenders of the institution were forced to answer arguments from fellow southerners, along with those from northerners like Garrison. This resulted in a departure from the previous view of slavery as inextricable—Jefferson’s idea that we had “the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other.” Slavery was no longer a necessary evil; it was a positive good according to southern intellectuals such as Thomas Dew, William A. Smith, Thornton Stringfellow, and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. Calhoun adopted the perspective in 1837 that the South had a “superior civilization” due to the righteous and just arrangements of a society in which benevolent masters oversaw happy slaves. In many ways, southerners needed to believe in this idea because, with the growth of cotton as a cash crop, the economy was more and more dependent on human chattel. The defense of slavery quickly began to
draw the region together. Madison and others may have recognized a divide between South and North at the founding, but the divide was growing into a chasm and unleashing fissures in the sectional alignment of the United States.

There was an active group of southerners who wanted to create a separate nation to defend the interests of the South—the fire-eaters. In his book on the subject, Eric Walther focuses on Nathaniel Beverley Tucker (Virginia), William Lowndes Yancey (Alabama), John Anthony Quitman (Mississippi), Robert Barnwell Rhett (South Carolina), Laurence M. Keitt (South Carolina), Louis T. Wigfall (South Carolina), James D. B. De Bow (South Carolina, Louisiana), Edmund Ruffin (Virginia), and William Porcher Miles (South Carolina). It is not surprising that the list is dominated by South Carolinians. The fire-eaters took a variety of approaches in their effort to unite the region, including the spread of southern nationalist and pro-slavery literature, the call for systems of education so southerners did not have to receive schooling in the North, attempts to expand slaveholding territory not just west but also south to Cuba and other parts of the Caribbean, and the creation of southern rights associations and southern commercial associations (which both relied on conventions).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, most of the political elites in southern states acted to secure their interests within the Union, despite pleas from the fire-eaters. Over time, however, the slavery issue steadily drove the South away from the nation and pushed it together into a political unit. John C. Calhoun is representative of the shift. He initially saw secession as dangerous, but by the time of his death in 1850, he believed it to be inevitable. That same year, Mississippi sent out a call for a convention of the southern states to be held in Nashville. It began:

The fact can no longer be disguised, that our brethren of the free States, so called, disregarding the compromises of the constitution—compromises without which it never would have received the sanction of the slaveholding States, are determined to pursue towards those States a course of policy, and to adopt a system of legislation by Congress, destructive of their best rights and most cherished domestic institutions. . . . Abolish slavery, and you convert the fair and blooming fields of the South into barren heaths; their high-souled and chivalrous proprietors into abject dependents—and the now happy and contented slaves into squalid and degraded objects of misery and wretchedness!
Once it gathered, the goal of the Nashville Convention was to foster southern unity in the face of northern threats to slavery, building on the movement in Congress.\textsuperscript{21} There was particular concern about David Wilmot’s proviso, which eliminated slavery in the new territories acquired after the Mexican-American War. Most delegates from outside the Deep South were ambivalent about the project, and the convention failed to agree on a method of resistance. Limited participation and partisan conflict only added to the problems. There were ultimately two sessions that never managed to unify southerners, but scholar Thelma Jennings argues that “the experience increased the feeling of southern nationalism and undoubtedly paved the way for a Southern Confederacy in 1861.”\textsuperscript{22}

In 1850 another national debate over slavery and the admission of new states revealed a continuing lack of unity in the South. Henry Clay’s national compromise generated conflict within the region between Whigs and Democrats.\textsuperscript{23} The final decade before the Civil War saw a rising abolitionist movement, publication of \textit{Uncle Tom’s Cabin}, passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the fight over popular sovereignty, the \textit{Dred Scott} decision, and John Brown’s raid on Harpers Ferry. Another key development of the 1850s was the founding and electoral success of the Republican Party—a political organization openly hostile to slavery and southern interests. Northern Whigs turned into Republicans, and southern Whigs began to lose any purpose and disappear.\textsuperscript{24} The cross-regional political system broke down as opposing sides organized by geography rather than ideology. The question was no longer whether the South would unite, but how.