Uncovering the Confederacy of the Mind

Or, How I Became a Belle of the
Ball in Denmark Vesey's Church

by **Blain Roberts**

Blain Roberts: "The Confederate Heritage Trust was sponsoring a Secession Gala at Gaillard Municipal Auditorium [in Charleston]. I would rub elbows with hundreds of revelers dressed in hoop skirts and militia uniforms, men and women who believed the Old South was the apex of civilization and mourned its destruction." Ruins of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. John and St. Finbar, Broad and Legare Streets, Charleston, South Carolina, 1861, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

was so rushed that I could barely maintain my balance. The struggle to pull pantyhose over my tired feet, newly liberated from a pair of running shoes that had pounded the streets of Charleston all day, was about to get the best of me. It was a memorable ordeal: pantyhose don't exactly make a regular appearance in my wardrobe. But that wasn't the most remarkable thing about that moment. It was where I was changing my clothes, and why. There I was, in the bathroom at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, slipping into a ball gown for a gala to celebrate the 150th anniversary of South Carolina's secession from the United States in 1860. For the next five hours, I would rub elbows with hundreds of revelers dressed in hoop skirts and militia uniforms, men and women who believed the Old South was the apex of civilization and mourned its destruction. Yet I was getting dressed in Emanuel. This was the congregation to which Denmark Vesey, executed in 1822 for plotting a slave rebellion in Charleston, had belonged. This was the congregation in which the black revolutionary had developed a theology of liberation that ended in a plot to undermine the foundation of the Old South. In 1822, Vesey had hoped to free slaves from the very group of people the costumed gala-goers were assembling to honor at the secession ball almost two centuries later.¹

How did I get here?

It's hard to say exactly when and where my road to the secession ball began, but Charleston itself—in June 2005—is probably as good a place as any. That month, just two weeks before we were to marry, my fiancé and I had driven from Chapel Hill to Charleston to look for an apartment. We would be moving in the fall to start our careers as professional historians. I had accepted a job at The Citadel. Ethan had earned a postdoctoral fellowship at the Avery Research Center, an African American institute affiliated with the College of Charleston. We knew we wanted to live downtown, in the heart of what is known as “Historic Charleston,” and we hoped to find what everybody wants when they move to the city: hardwood floors, high ceilings, exposed brick. Yet these quaint fantasies began to recede near Manning, South Carolina, as our formerly reliable Mazda started sputtering. We had to stop. After locating a mechanic, who told us the repairs would take three hours, I phoned the woman with whom we had made our first appointment to tell her we would be late to view her apartment. Car trouble, I explained.

Later that afternoon, we rang the bell of a beautiful antebellum home in Charleston. The owner, who lived in the top two floors and rented out the bottom, answered the door. Margaret, we'll call her, was not the kind of woman who knew people with cars that broke down. The meticulously restored basement apartment, updated with a sparkling kitchen and custom-made window treatments, appeared ready for a *Southern Living* photo shoot. As she ushered us through the rooms, we asked about the home. Did she know much about its construction? What about previous owners, or how the various floors and rooms had originally been used?

Like many Charlestonians who spend their days surrounded by the relics of the past, our prospective landlady had done her research, sort-of. The house had been built around 1840 by the Toomers, a wealthy family that included two physicians. Up until the Civil War, she informed us, the apartment we were considering had been the workspace of the servants. “Of the slaves,” I instinctively replied. They were “servants,” Margaret countered. There’s no evidence in the historical records, she continued, that the Toomers didn’t pay them. It was quite a double negative, the logic of which we have spent years pondering. (As we suspected that day — and later confirmed — plenty of evidence exists that enslaved people lived and worked in the Toomer household.) In terms of an introduction to Charleston, the exchange could not have been more revealing, though we didn’t fully appreciate this fact at that moment.²

We thanked Margaret and rushed off to the next apartment on our list, the second floor of a Charleston single house situated at the corner of Bull and Pitt Streets, just a stone’s throw from the College of Charleston campus. Raymond, the grizzled landlord who sported a long white beard and drove a pick-up, welcomed us to the house, built in the late nineteenth century and owned by his family since the 1940s. He told us stories of growing up on the peninsula before gentrification, of his time in Vietnam. He said he wanted renters who would treat the old home kindly. Like Raymond himself, the house was historic, a bit rough-around-the-edges, full of charming eccentricities. Both were a much better fit for us.

We lived on that Charleston corner for two years, enjoying the views from the rickety windows that never closed just right. Much of what we saw was predictable, given our location. We learned to anticipate the hordes of students who would stumble home on weekend nights announcing their intoxication for all to hear. We also realized we were on a major tourism route. A carriage or van packed with tourists passed by our apartment so often that we felt like we, too, were historically significant. Soon, we saw a pattern.

A carriage driven by a guide decked out in Confederate gray would meander by, its passengers engrossed in romantic tales about the Old South. Not long after, a van emblazoned with a “Gullah Tours” logo would follow. It would pause briefly in front of a house — just down the street from us — that some believe was owned by Denmark Vesey. We couldn’t hear what its guide was saying, but we were confident that it did not resemble the moonlight-and-magnolia stories spun on carriage tours. We started to wonder: did twenty-first-century Charleston have separate — even segregated — tourism industries, one that focused on the city’s white history and another that told of its black past?

In a word, yes. For the next several years, we took tours of our new city, hardly an onerous task as friends and relatives were quick to plan trips to what is considered a mecca of southern tourism. Here’s what we found. Most traditional tours of Historic Charleston regaled visitors with stories of genteel ladies and gentlemen

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56 Bull Street, Charleston, South Carolina, courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

who had forged a noble civilization, only to see it devastated by war (some guides would call it “the War of Northern Aggression”). Despite the fact that Charleston had been a black majority city for most of its history, African Americans—not to mention slaves or slavery—were rarely discussed. Indeed, if slavery came up at all, these guides did their best to deflect attention from the institution, to suggest that its role in the area’s past was marginal.

By contrast, Gullah Tours and similar outfits focused on Charleston’s black history, explicitly responding to the silences of traditional tours. In their version of the city’s past, slavery occupied center stage. On traditional tours, for example, guides took visitors to the Battery, where they pointed to Fort Sumter, in the middle of Charleston Harbor, and told how elite white Charlestonians gathered along the sea wall to watch its shelling in April 1861. The Gullah Tours van also stopped at the Battery, but the guide focused instead on Sullivan’s Island, the largest entrepôt for enslaved Africans brought to this country. “That was our Ellis Island,” he remarked. Black history guides also discussed the life of Denmark Vesey, telling how his plan to free slaves led to the establishment of The Citadel, the arsenal designed to help white Charlestonians better police their enslaved population. Traditional tours neglected these developments entirely.

Teaching at that very institution one hundred and eighty years later, I soon discovered that few Citadel students were aware of the original rationale for their college. Like most traditional tour guides, Citadel cadets preferred to ignore slavery, particularly when it came to the Civil War. While some would admit that slavery played a decisive role in the conflict, many—perhaps most—would not. It was a strange victory for me when, in my second year of teaching, one unreconstructed cadet, confronted with an avalanche of evidence that contradicted his states' rights apologia, answered an essay about Civil War causation in a terse two sentences: "I surrender. It was slavery." He earned an F for his brevity, but I was tempted, for a moment, to give him an A.

It was impossible, in short, to live in Charleston and avoid the avoidance of slavery. For two American historians living under the same roof, the lure of the phenomenon was inescapable. We started doing research. Even after we moved to California in the summer of 2007, we continued to grapple with the city's tortured relationship with slavery, making a half-dozen trips back to comb through archives, interview locals, and take more tours. By the fall of 2010, we had written a couple of articles that were in various stages of publication and laid out plans for a book. Then, in November, we started reading about an event planned in Charleston for December 20. The Confederate Heritage Trust was sponsoring a Secession Gala at Gaillard Municipal Auditorium. For \$100 a ticket, revelers could attend a grand ball to celebrate South Carolina's decision to secede from the Union, exactly one hundred and fifty years earlier. In the weeks leading up to the ball, Jeff Antley, the organizer, proposed that it was a commemoration of the brave men who "stood up for their self-government and their rights under law." The event, he insisted, "has nothing to do with slavery."³

That's how I ended up in the Emanuel A.M.E. bathroom in a fight with a pair of black pantyhose.

I was harried because I had just finished covering the NAACP protests, which, appropriately enough, I thought, used the church as a basis of operations. Once word got out about the ball, and especially about the Trust's declaration that the event—and the act of secession—had no connection to slavery, the NAACP announced that it would lead a day of demonstrations. First on its agenda had been an early afternoon march at the Francis Marion and the Embassy Suites, the official hotels for guests of the gala. (The Embassy Suites was also the original home of The Citadel, which moved to a new location several miles to the north in the 1920s.) Not certain when the protests began, I got to the Francis Marion around 2:00 p.m. The presence of police on every street corner suggested that my timing was good. Members of the local press arrived, as did a crew from a national news broadcast, and a graduate student from the University of Houston, an academic like me, interested in how the Civil War and slavery are remembered. We chatted. And waited. One local news reporter decided to fill the time by interviewing me.

I played the role of the “professional historian who could put the day’s events in historical context.” We waited some more.

As 3:00 p.m. approached, I left the hotel and walked down to the church, where a small group of protesters was gathering. This was where I should have been all along. I tiptoed in, passing the sculpture of four cherubs nestled in the vestibule, an installation dedicated to Denmark Vesey and his “righteous rebellion,” as the plaque put it. Inside, the mostly older men and women sitting in the folding chairs listened to Dot Scott, president of the local NAACP chapter, explain how the hotel picketing would work. Other leaders were there to motivate the crowd, to remind them of the message they hoped to convey. As if they needed reminding. These were veteran activists, locals who had no doubt participated in their fair share of rallies and marches. They probably already knew something that surprised me but shouldn’t have. When you march with the NAACP, you have to sign a waiver saying that you will not hold the organization responsible should you be arrested.

The waiver was superfluous, as were the police. The protestors who picketed in front of the Frances Marion, where I spent the next hour, encountered no hostile opposition, just indifferent onlookers and members of the press. With solemn faces, they carried signs that read “It’s Not About Heritage,” “South Carolina Suffers from a Confederacy of the Mind,” and “Medicaid Yes, Secession No,” the last a response to recent proposals to cut the program’s budget. Scott, who did most of the speaking, minced no words about why they were there. “Celebration in the form that they are doing at Gaillard,” she explained as she made the long picket loop in front of the hotel, “it’s just not acceptable. And that’s the statement we want to make.” One reporter wanted to know if she had a message for the gala organizers. “Take your celebration someplace else,” she declared. “And I don’t know where that someplace else is, because I don’t think there’s an appropriate place to have a celebration of the Confederacy and particularly to try and sanitize the fact the majority of the state was about slavery.” Scott made it clear that the NAACP had no quibble with the commemoration of secession. It was the celebration—the dinner, the dancing, the clinking of mint julep glasses, all mixed with a hearty dose of denial—that was unacceptable.⁴

Just as I was about to leave to interview the other picketers at the Embassy Suites, something happened: a small contingent of white people showed up, not to heckle the protestors or stage a counter-demonstration, but to join in the march. This was interesting, I thought, especially because one of them looked like he had just walked out of Ben Silver, the tony, and traditional, men’s store that clothes many of the male residents living in the peninsula’s poshest neighborhoods. His name was Tom Turnipseed, and he had driven in from Columbia with his wife and a few other friends to protest the gala. Without a doubt, Turnipseed was the most intriguing person on the picket line. Born in Mobile, he had organized segregation academies in South Carolina in the mid-1960s and then worked as the

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executive director of George Wallace's 1968 presidential campaign. Over time, he grew uncomfortable with Wallace, but his real racial conversion occurred when he helped wage a battle against South Carolina utility companies for charging disproportionately high rates to poor residents. "For the first time in my life I worked with African American people," he said of that experience. "I just went one-eighty." He was a changed man, but there was one thing he couldn't undo. "My son," he quipped, "it's the last Confederate thing I did, is named Jefferson Davis Turnipseed . . . He's forty-two."

If Turnipseed had once been satisfied with naming his progeny after the Confederate president, someone I'd met earlier in the day went further. He spent his spare time impersonating the man. President Davis (a.k.a. Robert Hayes) had greeted me as I'd walked into the Confederate Museum, operated by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), to check out its secession day festivities. An advertisement had promised free reprints of the December 21, 1860 issue of the *Charleston Mercury* with the headline "The Union is Dissolved," but the museum settled instead for duplicates that looked like they'd been photocopied in a teachers' lounge. No matter. Meeting Jefferson Davis made up for it. Plus, I'd never visited the museum before, mainly because the place had always given me a vague sense of unease. The museum is located on the top floor of a building, a classical structure with Doric columns, that is known colloquially as the "Slave Market" but officially called "Market Hall." Before the Civil War, slaves used the sheds that extend from the back of Market Hall to sell food and handmade goods. Given this history, the complex acquired the "Slave Market" moniker, a name that logically suggests something else to most people—that slaves were sold there. They were

not, a fact that locals take pains to point out. The informational pamphlet that I received during my visit to the museum, in fact, states that the building was a market “where fruits, meats, vegetable and fish were sold—not slaves as is often incorrectly thought.” Time and again, Ethan and I had heard tour guides say the same thing. The need to clarify is almost like a tick. Obviously, I have nothing against historical accuracy, but this is different. The assertion, while true, is intended to suggest that slaves were never bought and sold in the city at all. Tour guides who offer this observation often fail to point out the locations where slaves actually were auctioned, including the Old Slave Mart, which opened as a museum in 2007. There is also the way in which the very prominence of the museum—sitting atop the hall, marked by a large sign that hangs above the front steps—obscures the site’s centrality to local black culture. Once a location where enslaved Charlestonians managed to carve out some space for themselves beyond the watchful gaze of their masters, the building now stands as a literal temple to white historical memory.⁶

I didn’t mention any of this to Robert Hayes. I was more interested in finding out what he thought about the sesquicentennial commemoration of secession. Before I could even turn on my recorder, he turned the tables. “Where are you from?” he asked. It was a query I would hear several times that day, especially at the gala, and one that I was expecting. The answer—born in Georgia, raised in southwest Louisiana—was the reason that I had made the cross-country trip to Charleston rather than Ethan. His eight years in Chapel Hill could hardly compensate for an itinerant Yankee upbringing (New York, Maryland, New Jersey, Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York again, Vermont). We well knew that southern roots were likely to elicit an assumption of unanimity on the major issues of Confederate identity and history. Of course, this fact raised a host of ethical questions for which I felt unprepared, namely: what is the appropriate response when someone believes that because you hail from the South you share a similar interpretation of its past? In the end, I admit, I ignored the philosophical in favor of the practical. In a setting in which people bearing microphones and cameras might automatically be viewed with suspicion, my southernness could prove an asset.⁷

Of course, like most white southerners, I also have ancestors who fought for the Confederacy. I am a direct descendant of half a dozen or so men, that I know of, who donned gray uniforms at some point during the war. Some owned slaves; some did not. How did these men view the conflict? I can hazard a pretty good guess about one. My great-great-grandfather, James S. Roberts Sr., was born in Barnwell, South Carolina, and moved with his family as a young boy to southwest Louisiana. He served as a private in the 6th Louisiana Cavalry, fighting in the Battle of Pleasant Hill in the northern part of the state in April 1864 and enduring a brief stint as a prisoner of war. Paroled in Natchitoches, Louisiana, a few months after the war was over, James returned to his family and later became commander of the local chapter of the United Confederate Veterans (UCV), which preceded

the Sons of Confederate Veterans (scv). A quick perusal through my hometown newspaper reveals that from 1912–1914 he attended no fewer than three veterans’ reunions, all at great distances—one in Macon, Georgia; another in Chattanooga, Tennessee; yet another in Jacksonville, Florida. Even if he did not enjoy his service in the Confederate army, he was clearly proud of it after the fact. The little genealogical research I’ve done about my mother’s side of the family reveals that my great-great-grandfather James Wesley Blain Sr., a poor farmer from Mississippi, died fighting in the Battle of Peachtree Creek near Atlanta in July 1864. Family oral history is more colorful. My grandfather always told my mother that James Wesley Blain was shot by a sniper as he headed home from Georgia to see a new son.⁸

Several of my female Roberts ancestors in Louisiana carried forth the Confederate banner as early members of the local UDC. Their major project in the 1910s was the successful campaign to name our parish after General P. G. T. Beauregard; this despite the fact that Beauregard, who grew up near New Orleans, two hundred and fifty miles away, had a loose connection to the area at best. After the war, he raised capital for the Calcasieu Sulphur and Mining Company, a corporation located about an hour south. At a festive ceremony in 1916, the group proudly presented a bust of General Beauregard to the parish courthouse, an event for which James’s daughter, Bessie Lee, “offered the use of her victrola to furnish music for the program.”⁹

In more recent decades, some in Beauregard Parish have resumed the UDC’s early-twentieth-century efforts, continuing the rather strained attempt to establish an intimate connection to the Civil War. Beauregard Parish saw no significant military action during the conflict, but in the 1990s, locals in Merryville, about ten miles from my hometown of DeRidder, jumped on the re-enactment bandwagon. They began staging the completely fictional “Battle of Bear Head Creek” every spring. I went once, missing the actual re-enactment but arriving in time to sample hardtack [a simple cracker made from flour, water, and sometimes salt, commonly used during military campaigns], the last time I will ever be so adventurous. After local African Americans complained that the event was racist, organizers demurred and transformed the event into a heritage festival with a Wild West theme. Enthusiasts in DeRidder, meanwhile, picked up the slack and inaugurated the “Battle of Hickory Creek,” another fabricated skirmish. What this latter event lacks in historical accuracy, it tries to make up for with historical authenticity. “This is not an actual battle,” the website declares, “*but is a period correct event.*”¹⁰

Then there is Thomas Watson. He is my second cousin once removed, as eccentric as they come—full-on Southern Gothic, as my parents would say—and lives in a secluded and ramshackle house in the woods near Merryville. The manager of a local theater company, Thomas draws on his thespian training every now and again, assuming the persona of General Beauregard. He is our very own Confeder-

“Before the Civil War, slaves used the sheds that extend from the back of Market Hall to sell food and handmade goods. Given this history, the complex acquired the ‘Slave Market’ moniker, a name that logically suggests that slaves were sold there. They were not, a fact that locals take pains to point out. The assertion, while true, is intended to suggest that slaves were never bought and sold in the city at all.” Market Hall, Charleston, South Carolina, photographed by Galen Parks Smith, courtesy of a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

ate in the Attic. I vividly remember going to his house back in the spring of 1998, having just finished Tony Horwitz’s hot-off-the-press book about re-enactors, for a party that had absolutely nothing to do with the Civil War. There was Thomas, outfitted in the general’s regalia. It was at that point a new hobby for him. He had just been contacted by a group of Charlestonians who were staging a commemoration of the 135th anniversary of the 1863 siege of the city, during which General Beauregard led the defense against the Union attack. Unable to find someone locally to play the general, the organizers figured that the parish that bears his name might be home to a Beauregard impersonator. Thomas was eager to take up the role, and he used this party as an occasion to practice his gait and speech. He invited me to accompany him and a few other re-enactors, by train, to the commemoration that June, but since I already had plans to travel to Europe, I had to decline. I’ve lamented that scheduling conflict ever since. He and his entourage were apparently a hit. Thomas was feted by locals during his stay in the

port city. He was even offered an open invitation by the residents of #13 Battery to come and go as he pleased. The producers of an upcoming Turner Network Civil War movie about Charleston tapped two of his friends to play Union soldiers, though Thomas was not as lucky. “Watson, in spite of his uncanny resemblance to the original General Beauregard,” reported one newspaper, “was passed over for Donald Sutherland.” Since then, Thomas has continued to don the general’s gear when duty calls. He makes a special effort to attend the Battle of Pleasant Hill re-enactment every year in honor of James S. Roberts, or “Jimmy,” as he affectionately calls him.¹¹

At the Confederate Museum in Charleston, I wondered if Robert Hayes, playing the part of Jefferson Davis, was as devoted as my cousin. He was on a tight schedule, though, so I just got down to business. What did the day mean to him? As for many others I interviewed at the gala later that night, Hayes viewed South Carolina’s secession one hundred and fifty years before as a protest. Against what, I asked. Taxes, he answered. Taxes that had been imposed by a tyrannical and overreaching federal government. The South Carolinians who gathered in Charleston in December 1860—90.5 percent of whom were slaveholders—had not rendered the Union asunder to protect their property, he insisted. As I thanked him for the interview, I learned that gala-goers that night would have to manage without the venerable Confederate president. He had already attended three balls commemorating various milestones on the path to secession. “So,” he confessed, “I’m about danced out.”¹²

Five hours later, as the bartenders were filling their ice buckets and florists were putting the final touches on table decorations, I stood on the steps of Gailard Auditorium with about one hundred other people who would not be making it to the ball either. This was the second—and major—demonstration organized by the NAACP. The interracial crowd cheered as a long line of speakers denounced the festivities that would soon be underway. “Slavery is what you defend when you have a party, a celebration, get drunk, holler loud, act like a rebel, and talk about how you’re celebrating your heritage,” announced Nelson B. Rivers III, a minister and NAACP official. “Your heritage is hatred. And we cannot allow you to make hatred something honorable . . . No matter how you dress it up, it is still slavery.” As the sun set, protestors lit candles and sang “We Shall Overcome.” They then made their way to Morris Brown A.M.E. Church for a mass meeting with more speeches, as well as a screening of scenes from *Birth of a Nation*. Watching the protestors recede into the darkness, I couldn’t help but notice the poignancy of their route. Walking west down Calhoun Street, on the right the group passed the imposing statue of John C. Calhoun himself. Calhoun stands atop an enormous ninety-foot column, a prominent—and yet oddly silent—reminder of the city’s slave past. Dedicated to a man who called southern slavery “a positive good,” the monument nevertheless says nothing about the institution Calhoun worked so

hard to defend. As a symbol of how the city deals with its history, the Calhoun monument could not be more revealing.¹³

Across the street, back at Emanuel A.M.E. Church, I made my quick and rather trying costume change in the basement bathroom. It was not as tricky as it might have been. Unlike many of the women I would soon see, I did not squeeze myself into a corset and hoopskirt, opting, instead, for “modern formal wear,” which the gala organizers had approved for those of us with no antebellum wardrobe to speak of. But even that threw me for a loop. A typical academic, I can muster up a pretty mean pantsuit and, in a pinch, a cocktail dress, but long ball gowns stretch my sartorial repertoire considerably. A friend had saved the day with a long, black velvet dress and shawl trimmed with fringe. Kind of like Scarlett O’Hara’s curtain dress, I thought. Perfect. Now presentable, my next challenge was to figure out how to cram all of my supplies into a small handbag that had, amazingly, seemed the appropriate choice back in California: a pad of paper, a digital voice recorder, a video camera, a regular camera, and a tiny surveillance camera—the type used by police during sting operations—that I had borrowed just in case recording or photography was forbidden. This last device gave my mission a slightly shady if not comic air, but I could not risk the possibility that my transcontinental trip, taken at considerable personal cost, would yield no audio or video evidence. Several friends had suggested, only somewhat facetiously, that I conceal the camera in a cameo pinned to my dress. I doubted that such an extreme measure would be necessary, but appreciated the period-correct ingenuity.

The disguise was not necessary, nor was the surveillance camera, nor even my southern accent, for that matter. In the days leading up to the ball, I had envisioned myself as a kind of spy, an intrepid investigator who would gain access to the inner sanctum of the neo-Confederate mind and expose its workings to the world. In a way, this ended up being true. Only a handful of “outsiders” like me were on hand to observe the festivities. The graduate student from Houston was there. Since no official arrangements had been made for press access, there were only a few reporters in attendance, journalists who, like the two of us, had to buy a ticket. Yet, in another sense, my covert approach was off the mark. Everyone was eager to talk, and no one made an announcement prohibiting photography or recording. Strength of conviction, I realized, goes a long way toward eradicating any misgivings that such conviction might be controversial.

The gala affair, for which I arrived promptly at 7:00 p.m., provided many such lessons. Inside the auditorium, as I clutched a mint julep and watched the excited crowd grow, I learned that it is awkward to stand around in a ball gown by yourself. Spotting a portrait that hangs in the building’s cavernous lobby—commissioned by the mayor in 1976 as a gesture of racial reconciliation—my discomfort grew. The watercolor painting is of Vesey, now an accidental guest at an event he would have found deeply troubling. No sooner had I engaged a few folks in con-

"My great-great-grandfather, James S. Roberts Sr. (left), served as a private in the 6th Louisiana Cavalry. Then there is Thomas Watson (right). He is my second cousin once removed, as eccentric as they come. The manager of a local theater company, Thomas draws on his thespian training every now and again, assuming the persona of General Beauregard. He is our very own Confederate in the Attic." Photographs courtesy of the author.

versation than we were ushered into our seats to watch a play, titled *South Carolina Secedes: A Four Act Re-enactment of South Carolina's Secession Convention*. The music that was playing before the curtain was drawn had been selected with care. It was full of those melancholy violin refrains that make you feel like you're in a Ken Burns documentary. Once the performance got underway, I found myself wishing the brave delegates of 1860 had done the deed more quickly. For an hour, the audience received a tutorial, framed by the musings of a monotone narrator, on the finer points of nineteenth-century parliamentary procedure. Another lesson learned: making momentous political decisions, even ones that tear the nation apart and plunge it into a bloody war, can be really boring.

The proceedings were interrupted by the occasional fiery speech, as a convention delegate would rise from his chair to proclaim the righteousness of South Carolina's cause or, at the end, to declare the state an independent nation. On the heels of this announcement, the men on stage led the audience in a rousing rendition of "Dixie." The enthusiasm of these moments, though, struck me as just as odd as the never-ending rounds of motions and seconds but for a different reason.

“Don’t these people know this ends badly?” I kept thinking. Watching the play also put on full display the mental gymnastics required of many Confederate devotees who deny that slavery caused the Civil War. Slavery, to my surprise, did make an appearance in the play, more than once. Describing the escalating tensions between the North and South, for example, the narrator remarked in his introduction that the debate over slavery “aggravated the situation” and that Lincoln’s election “heightened southern suspicions . . . despite assurances that slavery would not be interfered with.” Yet, at the conclusion, he asserted that the men had acted “not to preserve the institution of slavery.” “Their sacrifice,” he concluded, “was for freedom.” As I picked up my things to head into the dining room, I noticed a black security guard standing behind me. He was one of a handful of African Americans at the event, all of whom were working in the same capacity. “Can you believe this?” I muttered under my breath as I walked by, to which he smiled and replied, “I’ve been told not to say anything.”¹⁴

The most illuminating conversation of my entire trip ensued shortly thereafter, and quite by accident. I had just befriended two English journalists, one from the *Independent*, the other from the *Guardian*, both down from their New York bureaus to cover the gala. Making a beeline toward the bar, we stumbled across the path of Michael Givens, the Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans. I think we must have looked out-of-place, and, indeed, I had the distinct impression that the Brits felt like visitors from another planet. Givens could recognize curious onlookers when he saw them and, without even asking who we were or why we were there, introduced himself and launched into a twenty-minute discussion about secession and the Civil War. As far as the modern Confederate mind goes, the Commander-in-Chief of the scv is about as good as it gets. I was lucky to have bumped into him, though it was difficult for me to ignore the fact that he had a habit of addressing the two journalists (both older and male), rather than me, and that he kept calling me “sweetheart.” It’d been a long time since I was treated like a ten-year-old girl.

Givens cited some fairly classic defenses of Lost Cause propaganda to distance the South from the peculiar institution: England brought slavery to the colonies; the North profited from slavery, too; slavery was enshrined in the law, so if the North didn’t like it, it could have just passed new ones; northern states pursued gradual, rather than immediate, abolition. Some claims took my breath away. Southerners despised slavery, he said, and had established more anti-slavery societies on the eve of the war than had northerners. The fact that southern states ratified the Thirteenth Amendment, he continued, proved they disliked slavery. My response to the latter—that ratification was a condition of readmission to the Union after the war (not to mention the fact that some states actually failed to ratify despite the requirement)—was met with a stern, “Honey-child, that’s not true.” “I don’t expect you to be a genius on American history,” he offered at one

point. “Does a PhD count?” I thought as he kept talking. Givens, too, proved adept at a certain kind of intellectual compartmentalization. He conceded that South Carolina’s delegates had penned a document four days after the secession vote explaining that slavery had been their main concern. (In the “Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from this Federal Union,” they mentioned slavery over a dozen times.) But “that’s just a few men that wrote that,” he insisted, “[men] that we don’t agree with. Don’t paint me with that brush.” Plus, he said, their real motivation for talking about slavery in the “Declaration of the Immediate Causes” had nothing to do with any desire to defend it. The federal government had agreed to protect slavery in the Constitution; now it was violating its word. The South Carolina planters, in other words, simply wanted to demonstrate that the government was hypocritical. Sensing that the three of us remained unconvinced despite each new line of reasoning, he finally asked, “Can you not be selective about what you’re nostalgic about?”¹⁵

And that, in the end, is precisely the issue. The men and women who attended the Secession Gala believe you can pick and choose. Those who protested at the NAACP demonstrations insist that you cannot. Both groups agree on one thing, though—nostalgia is not just about the past. Robert Hayes had said as much at the Confederate Museum. What was going on in Charleston that day, he told me, was a statement about the present. As a strategy to deal with what he views as a federal government run amok, secession is alive and well. “Quite frankly, ma’am,” he quipped, channeling his inner Rhett Butler, “we’re trying to do it again.” Frankly, I had harbored some doubts about the link between the current Confederate mania—a connection first bandied about in April 2010, when the Virginia governor proclaimed April Confederate History Month without making any mention of slavery—and the antigovernment sentiment unleashed by the Tea Party movement. It seemed too easy. My interviews in Charleston, however, suggested I should have been less skeptical. Most conversational roads led to taxes, Sarah Palin, and the Tea Party. With obvious pride, Hayes reminded me that Sarah Palin’s husband, Todd, had at one time been a card-carrying member of the Alaska Independence Party, which has advocated the state’s secession from the United States. (Sarah Palin has never been a member, but has addressed the group several times.) Michael Givens argued that the Tea Party was fighting for the same thing that his ancestors had fought for one hundred and fifty years before: smaller government and lower taxes. “Did you watch the [play] tonight? It was about tariffs.” “But you,” he charged me and the reporters, “you’re still worried about slavery.”¹⁶

I guess we were. Two hours later, as the crowd began to thin and I made my way to the door, I was still pondering slavery’s absence at the ball when a woman grabbed me by the arm. Though I had not spoken with her directly, she had been milling around during some of my earlier conversations. She said she felt compelled to stop me because she knew that I was interested in historical accuracy. She

“No sooner had I engaged a few folks in conversation than we were ushered into our seats to watch a play, titled South Carolina Secedes: A Four Act Re-enactment of South Carolina’s Secession Convention . . . Is this Confederacy of the Mind—one that fantasizes about an imagined past where slavery did not matter, one that fabricates history and connections to the Civil War and yet insists on accuracy in period costume—cause for concern or simply an opportunity for a good laugh?” The Secession Ball and the end of the play, courtesy of the author.

wanted to set the record straight. There was an urgency to her tone—indeed, for a moment I suspected that she felt compelled to correct or at least complicate what some of her fellow revelers had said—and so I retrieved my pen and paper for one last interview. My hunch was wrong. She wanted me to know that she had overheard a woman (the graduate student from Houston, as it turns out) saying things about antebellum women’s clothing that were just not right. The young woman, it seems, didn’t know her hoop skirts from her petticoats.

I have no idea if my fellow historian does or does not understand the intricacies of antebellum dress, but in that exchange with the fashion expert, the final in a long and at times perplexing day, I wondered: is it worth worrying about people like this, or should we just be amused instead? Is this Confederacy of the Mind—one that fantasizes about an imagined past where slavery did not matter, one that fabricates history and connections to the Civil War and yet insists on accuracy in period costume—cause for concern or simply an opportunity for a good laugh? My own mind, still reckoning with Charleston’s secession ball, is conflicted. On the one hand, these “modern day secessionists,” as one man called himself, have yoked southern secession to a national political movement that has considerable momentum and real consequences. In some quarters, threatening secession has

become a logical extension of the campaign against a strong, and thus illegitimate, federal government—one led, not insignificantly, by the nation’s first black president. Indeed, these ideological strands fit together seamlessly, as Texas Governor Rick Perry illustrated back in 2009 when he said that he hoped his state could remain a part of the United States, “but who knows what may come of that.” In the wake of President Obama’s re-election in November 2012, which motivated disgruntled residents in all fifty states to file secession petitions on the White House’s “We the People” website, Governor Perry backtracked. Still, in his state alone, over 50,000 people had signed a secession petition on the website within one week. Not surprisingly, during that same one-week period, the seven states to acquire enough signatures to prompt an official White House response were in the South.¹⁷

On the other hand, some evidence seems to be pointing in a different direction—to the possibility that those who celebrate a whitewashed Confederate history are increasingly marginalized. In 2010, when the Virginia governor issued his slavery-free proclamation about Confederate History Month, condemnation was swift, and he, just as swiftly, apologized and backtracked. When the SCV staged a re-enactment of the inauguration of Jefferson Davis in Montgomery in February 2011, the number of participants dwarfed those who had shown up to watch. By contrast, at a similar event in Montgomery in 1961 marking the 100th anniversary of the secession crisis, 50,000 people flocked to a week-long celebration. Five thousand people attended the city’s centennial ball alone. The speeches in Montgomery this time around reflected a mood of pessimism that was visible in the small turnout. Drawing what is surely one of the most specious, and insensitive, historical analogies in recent memory, one SCV member insisted that modern Confederates were being forced to the back of the bus, like Rosa Parks, and they weren’t going to take it anymore.¹⁸

Even in Charleston, the cradle of the Confederacy, the secession ball in December 2010 was not as grand as anticipated. The Confederate Heritage Trust made five hundred gala tickets available, but only about three hundred were sold (a few of them to people like me). And while several state and local politicians performed in the play re-enacting the secession vote, Charleston Mayor Joe Riley denounced the gala affair, calling it “unfortunate.” That morning, moreover, he dedicated a historical marker to secession at the former location of Institute Hall, where the ordinance of secession was signed in December 1860. In his remarks, Riley stated unequivocally that “the cause of this disastrous secession was an expressed need to protect the inhumane and immoral institution of slavery.” This was too much for one member of the crowd. In a moment that recalled South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson’s infamous outburst during President Obama’s speech on health care reform, he shouted, “You’re a liar!” Yet, the dedication proceeded without further incident. Fifty years earlier, on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Civil War, defiance represented the norm rather than the exception in Charleston.

"One SCV member insisted that modern Confederates were being forced to the back of the bus, like Rosa Parks [here], and they weren't going to take it anymore. There is surely no greater sign of how contorted the Confederacy of the Mind has become than the invocation of Parks, a woman who struggled to overthrow the legacies of slavery long after the Civil War." Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration Records of the U.S. Information Agency, Record Group 306.

In April 1961, the national Civil War Centennial Commission was scheduled to hold one of its meetings in the city. Local whites protested when delegates from New Jersey asked that the Francis Marion Hotel accommodate one of its members, a black woman. White Charlestonians refused to integrate the hotel, forcing a compromise and marring the reputation and success of the centennial commemoration nationwide. Against the backdrop of an emboldened Civil Rights Movement, the battle in Charleston in 1961—and the centennial in southern states more generally—represented an opportunity for segregationists to shore up their vision of the past and present.¹⁹

Charleston's 2010 secession festivities, along with similar observances since then, suggest that a repeat victory may be harder to attain during the sesquicentennial commemoration of the Civil War. Frustration with this reality is apparent. There is surely no greater sign of how contorted the Confederacy of the Mind has become than the invocation of Parks, an icon of the Civil Rights Movement, a woman who struggled to overthrow the legacies of slavery long after the Civil War. In the same vein, neo-Confederates in the last decade or so have conjured up thousands of African Americans who voluntarily fought in the Confederate

army. One wonders what will be next, singing “We Shall Overcome” along with “Dixie”? Transforming abolitionist Frederick Douglass into a fire-eater? Indeed, perhaps we should be prepared for a summoning of the spirit of the Charlestonian most feared by white southerners during the nineteenth century: Denmark Vesey. By divorcing Vesey, like the Civil War, from the institution of slavery, neo-Confederates could whitewash the black revolutionary’s story. They could rewrite it into a tale of the triumph of individual liberty against oppressive government power, an imagined past if ever there were one. Incongruities like these may strike many of us as bizarre. Indeed, my own brush with the spirit of Vesey—becoming a belle of the ball in his church—certainly gave me pause. But the Confederacy of the Mind wanders free, accommodating the grossest of distortions, reconciling the most grievous of contradictions.

NOTES

1. Denmark Vesey, a former slave who bought his freedom with the proceeds from a lottery ticket before planning the rebellion, was a member of the church’s Cow Alley congregation, located in the Hamstead neighborhood. Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go Out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004), 110–111.

2. The home was built either by Dr. Anthony V. Toomer, or by his son, Dr. Henry V. Toomer. For details on the house, see Jonathan H. Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston: A Guide to the City’s Architecture* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 591; Dr. Henry V. Toomer owned nine slaves in 1850. Bureau of the Census, *1850 United States Census, Slave Schedule, Parishes of St. Philip and St. Michael, Charleston, South Carolina*.

3. Robert Behre, “Secession Ball Stirs Controversy,” *The State*, 3 December 2010, accessed 10 December 2010, <http://www.thestate.com/2010/12/03/1588659/secession-ball-stirs-controversy.html>.

4. Dot Scott, interview by Blain Roberts and others, 20 December 2010, Charleston, South Carolina.

5. Tom Turnipseed, interview by Blain Roberts, 20 December 2010, Charleston, South Carolina.

6. For more on the history of the Market Hall complex, see Poston, *The Buildings of Charleston*, 395–396, and Maurie D. McMinnis, *The Politics of Taste in Antebellum Charleston* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 22, 122, and 124; Confederate Museum informational pamphlet, in possession of author; Not until 1985, in fact, did the official history manual that prospective tour guides must master to become certified acknowledge that slaves had once been sold at the Old Slave Mart. Discussing the building, the 1964 manual stated that “Charleston NEVER had a slave market.” See Mary A. Sparkman, “Lectures for Guides of Historic Charleston,” (Charleston, 1964), n.p., South Carolina Reading Room, Charleston County Public Library. The 1985 version, still used as late as 2011, omitted this inaccurate statement, but some guides nevertheless failed to mention the site and its function on their tours. Robert Stockton, ed., “Information for Guides of Historic Charleston” (Charleston: Charleston Tourism Commission, 1985), 36, in possession of author.

7. Robert Allen, interview by Blain Roberts, 20 December 2010, Charleston, South Carolina.

8. “Returned from Reunion,” *DeRidder (La.) Enterprise and Messenger*, 25 March 1912, n.p.; “U.C.V. Elect Officers,” *DeRidder (La.) Enterprise and Messenger*, 19 April 1913; “Left for Reunion,” *DeRidder (La.) Enterprise and Messenger*, 7 May 1914, 1.

9. UDC Minutes, March 5, 1916, reprinted in Beauregard Parish Historical Society, *History of Beauregard Parish, Louisiana* (Dallas: Curtis Media Corporation, 1986), 57.
10. Emphasis mine. Battle of Hickory Creek website, accessed 16 February 2010, <http://www.confederateveterans.com/battleofhickorycreek.html>.
11. Quote from unidentified newspaper clipping, in possession of Thomas Watson. The re-enactment was called the "War at Flood Tide." See "Civil War Buffs Stage Re-enactment of Siege," *Charleston Post and Courier*, 11 June 1998, 2. The Turner Network movie, *The Hunley*, aired in 1999.
12. Manisha Sinha, *The Counterrevolution of Slavery: Politics and Ideology in Antebellum South Carolina* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 243; Allen, interview by Roberts.
13. Nelson B. Rivers III, 20 December 2010, Charleston, South Carolina.
14. Narrator, "South Carolina Secedes: A Four Act Re-enactment of South Carolina's Secession Convention," 20 December 2010, Gaillard Municipal Auditorium, Charleston, South Carolina.
15. Michael Givens, interview by Blain Roberts, David Usborne, and Edward Pilkington, 20 December 2010, Charleston, South Carolina; South Carolina Secession Convention, "Declaration of the Immediate Causes which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from this Federal Union," in *The Confederate and Neo-Confederate Reader: The "Great Truth" About the "Lost Cause,"* ed. James W. Loewen and Edward H. Sebesta (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 111–117; Givens, interview by Roberts, et. al.
16. Allen, interview by Roberts; See, for example, Jon Meacham, "Southern Discomfort," 10 April 2010, *New York Times*, accessed 11 April 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/11/opinion/11meacham.html>; Givens, interview by Roberts, et al.
17. James C. McKinley Jr., "Texas Governor's Talk Stirs Furor," *New York Times*, 17 April 2009, accessed February 28, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/04/18/us/politics/18texas.html>; Elyse Siegel, "Rick Perry Takes Stand on Texas Secession Issue," *Huffington Post*, 12 November 2012, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/11/12/rick-perry-secession_n_2120453.html, accessed February 15, 2013, and Sarah Parness, "States with Most Signatures to Secede Took Millions in Federal Money," *abcnews.com*, 14 November 2012, <http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2012/11/states-with-most-signatures-to-secede-took-millions-in-federal-money/>, accessed February 15, 2012.
18. Robert J. Cook, *Troubled Commemoration: The American Civil War Centennial, 1961–1965* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007), 81–82; Campbell Robertson, "Marking Davis's Confederate Inauguration," *New York Times*, 20 February 2011, accessed 27 February 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/us/21davis.html>. YouTube has several videos of the speech during which the Rosa Parks comparison is made. See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wip79_qttJY.
19. Robert Behre, "Riley to Participate in Area's Observance of Start of Civil War," *Charleston Post and Courier*, 16 December 2010, accessed 27 February 2011, <http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2010/dec/16/obama-receives-invitation/>. Politicians who performed in the play include Larry Grooms, state senator; Harry B. "Chip" Limehouse, state representative; Tim Mallard, city councilman; Glenn F. McConnell, state senator and senate president pro tempore; and Daniel B. Verdin III, state senator. Program, "South Carolina Secedes: A Four Act Re-Enactment of South Carolina's Secession Convention"; Robert Behre, "Historical Secession Marker Unveiled, Protests Ongoing," *Charleston Post and Courier*, 20 December 2010, accessed 27 February 2011, <http://www.postandcourier.com/news/2010/dec/20/unveiling-historical-secession-marker-includes-cro/>; Ibid; For more on the Civil War Centennial and the events that transpired in Charleston, see Cook, *Troubled Commemoration*.