

Some Leading Secessionist Personalities

South Carolina had sent letters urging other seceded states to convene in Montgomery Alabama the first Monday in February 1861. Six states, Texas not yet having officially seceded, sent delegations. Ironically, although secession had been threatened off and on even before the adoption of the Constitution in 1789 nobody had given much thought about the form of a new central government, if any, for newly seceded states.

Of the 50 delegates who met in Montgomery to form the CSA, 49 were slave owners, with 21 being full-scale planters, defined as those owning 20 or more slaves.

During the Montgomery conference the delegates suddenly decided to form a new government with a constitution that resembled much of the USA constitution and to elect Jefferson Davis as its "provisional" government.

Some of the leading secessionists at that conference were:

-- BARNWELL, Robert T. --

Robert B. Rhett's cousin, although not nearly as radical.

An Alabama legislator who, the day before the official opening of the Montgomery convention, was instrumental in persuading others, especially the South Carolina delegation, that the convention had to assume power immediately or else court disaster.

Thereafter served as the convening officer for the Montgomery conference until Howell Cobb was elected as permanent presiding officer.

During the convention/Congress, campaigned effectively for Davis, much to Rhett's consternation.

Was Davis 1st choice to become Confederate secretary of state but Barnwell refused appointment.

-- COBB, Howell --

45, a well educated lawyer from Athens, Georgia, who had served stints as governor, Congressman, and Buchanan's secretary of the treasury.

A burly man, heavysset, with drooping eyes, and a furrowed face, looked and acted somewhat disheveled.

Cobb, who owned more than 250 slaves, declared in 1856 that he regarded slavery "as permanent -- perpetual."

A furious state rightist who had campaigned intensely to sway pro-Union Georgian politicians to secede from the Union.

By serving as permanent presiding officer of the meeting that led to the First Provisional Congress in Montgomery, Cobb was precluded from any chance to become president of the Confederacy itself.

During the war he was commissioned as a colonel and fought at Antietam before taking command as a Major General of the District of Georgia.

Was adamantly opposed to any compromise with Washington.

-- DeBOW, James D. B. --

40, born in South Carolina but later moved to New Orleans. A writer and publisher of *Review*, perhaps the most influential magazine in the South.

Was a champion of commerce and railroads in the South.

Had a gaunt and lean figure and a head of thick, dark, disheveled hair with big ears. Although thought to be ugly, he nonetheless managed to marry an attractive woman from Tennessee, giving rise to comments about "the beauty and the beast."

Despite several major differences among Southern states on various issues, including even the issue of secession, his magazine declared that Southerners were one harmonious, blended people. At the start of 1861 he wrote "...the interest of the poorest non-slaveholder among us is to make common cause with, and die in the last trenches, in defence of the slave property of his more favored neighbor."

Also argued that slavery was a God-given blessing that came from the moral injunctions of the Bible itself, apparently not realizing that much of the slavery in the Bible was not of Africans but instead of Mediterraneans by other Mediterraneans. Declared a non-slave society must reject the Bible, and that "*Christian morality can be practiced only in a slave society.*"

Asserted that the North had become inferior by too much immigration from north European peoples such as Poles, Russians, shanty Irish, and especially Germans.

Considered the Civil War the product of Northern fanaticism and misguided moral fervor represented by a small group of abolitionists and unreasoning Republicans.

-- KEITT, Lawrence M. --

36, having been raised on a large plantation in SC. A fire eater.

With Rhett, had been in the forefront calling for South Carolina's secession. As a state legislator in the early 1850s once argued "Loyalty to the Union is treason to liberty." As a Congressman in May 1856 had accompanied Preston Brooks to the Senate chamber for the caning of Senator Charles Sumner.

A gruff, burly man, with intense eyes, and a thick beard, Keitt may have developed some of his intense hatred for Unionists because his brother had been killed by slaves in Florida in 1860.

Like Stephens, Keitt remarked plainly about how slavery was indeed the cause of the whole war.

During the Montgomery convention, Keitt actively promoted Stephens for president; he described Stephens as being "the brains of Congress double-distilled."

Like Rhett, Keitt had made a career out of being a critic of government, and his seething antigovernment feelings, coupled with a dislike for Davis, couldn't change, even after a new Confederacy had been formed. Quickly lost confidence in Davis as president.

-- MEMMINGER, Christopher G. --

57, a lawyer; a naturalized citizen who was raised in SC.

A distinguished-looking aristocrat, well-dressed, detail-oriented man, with silvery hair, and a fit, erect bearing posture that exuded a sense of confidence and precision.

Served as director of a variety of professional companies and owned a large plantation house with titles to 15 slaves.

Served several years in the SC legislature, specializing in banking and monetary affairs

As late as January 1860 Memminger had opposed secession but in December 1860 actively promoted SC's secession.

Led SC's delegation at the Montgomery convention. Pursuant to a resolution that he had introduced, he was appointed chairman of the committee to report for a plan for the formation of a provisional government.

Became Davis' first secretary of treasury.

-- RHETT, Robert Barnwell --

60, a slaveholder who owned more than 400 slaves to work on his two rice plantations, and lawyer by trade; after filling several other political offices he became a U.S. Senator from South Carolina, filling the seat formerly occupied by the late John C. Calhoun.

As an odd mixture of pride, obstinacy, and extreme self-righteousness, he became a volcanic and unforgiving protector of all things Southern. Was a leading proponent of the myth that ancestors of Southern slaveholders were of Cavalier stock of old England, descended from aristocratic Norman adventurers who invaded in 1066 and conquered a churlish Saxon rabble, whose own descendants later immigrated to populate the North. (Rhett's own ancestors had been on both sides of the English Civil War.)

Purchased the *Charleston Mercury* that he used to lash out at Northerners and to stir up support for leaving the Union. During the Montgomery convention he was accused of using his newspaper to circumvent secrecy rules.

After arguing strongly that slavery could never survive Lincoln's presidency, Rhett earned the nickname "father of secession." A fire eater.

Although he was one of the prominent members of the SC delegation at the Montgomery convention he was also burdened and distracted by family illnesses.

Rhett disliked Davis without knowing almost anything about him firsthand. Even before Davis' inauguration, Rhett was already making a clear bid to undermine Davis's authority. After the war Rhett declared "... the Government of the Confederacy destroyed the Confederacy."

-- STEPHENS, Alexander Hamilton --

48, from Georgia. Even though painfully small, never weighing more than 96 pounds, with a sallow complexion, a sunken, scrawny body, and a huge head, he nevertheless issued challenges to duels on at least five occasions.

Those who saw Stephens in political meetings often thought he was a visiting teenager, or worse -- as one commentator put it, "until he occasionally blinked, he seemed stone dead."

In 1854 while in Congress he helped to pass the Kansas-Nebraska Act, one of the key events that propelled America toward war.

A political supporter of Stephen Douglas, Stephens was a powerful state rightist who, nevertheless, opposed secession.

Prior to Fort Sumter he admitted that slavery was the root cause of the Civil War.

At the Montgomery convention, he played a leading role in scripting the Confederate Constitution.

To appease politicians in the Deep South, he was chosen to be Vice President of the CSA, a choice that could not have been worse, at least from Davis' point of view.

-- TOOMBS, Robert Augustus --

50, an attorney from Georgia.

Physically the anti-Stephens, who was nevertheless his bosom buddy. His coal black, puffy eyes and robust physical appearance made him a man's man and a magnetic personality for women.

He drank, smoked, gambled, and mastered an obscene vocabulary that ranked among the most spectacular and horrifying of his time.

Although he had sunk to the bottom of his law school class, he developed success as a courtroom lawyer whose speeches often were stunning to both juries and opponents.

By 1860 he was one of the wealthiest planters in Georgia owning 176 slaves and 2,200 acres.

Initially after Lincoln was elected, Toombs resisted secession but his hotheaded rhetoric returned, and he became an ardent supporter of the revolution, concluding that Lincoln's avowed objective "... is ultimately to abolish slavery in the States." Toombs also felt Republicans would instigate "revolt and insurrection among the slaves."

Served briefly as Davis' secretary of state before resigning to take a commission as a brigadier general. He led the brigade that defended the stone bridge at Antietam that was later re-named Burnside's Bridge. While serving on active duty he often wrote to Stephens to complain about Davis.

-- WIGFALL, Louis Trezevant --

44, an attorney born in SC but had moved to Texas in 1846.

Often on the verge of public drunkenness, he was emotional, inflexible and a hawk who admitted that "Diplomacy was never my forte."

In a five month period, he was in a fistfight, two duels, three near-duels, and one shooting – leaving one dead, and two wounded, himself included.

Sam Houston called Wigfall "a little demented either from hard drink, or from the troubles of a bad conscience." A fire eater.

Was appointed to U.S. Senate from Texas in 1859 before being expelled in 1861, instantly making him a celebrity.

Lincoln's election convinced Yancey that the time had come for secession; however he was considered too radical to be part of the Alabama delegation at the Montgomery convention but instead became a political envoy for Davis.

-- WISE, Henry Alexander --

At 54, had served in Congress for 11 years before becoming governor of Virginia, having won more votes than any other Virginia politician in the 19th Century.

George Meade's brother-in-law.

He was erratic, slovenly, dribbling tobacco juice down his chin: one contemporary considered him to be a buffoon, a pompous windbag, and an ambitious weasel.

While Minister to Brazil in the 1840s, he spent much of his time attacking the American involvement in the African slave trade, which he opposed on humanitarian grounds but also because of what he saw as hypocrisy of Northern ship owners.

Initially during the Virginia convention he gave little support to the secessionist movement, but kept aiming to delay and drive opponents to distraction.

Shortly after Fort Sumter he initiated and organized assaults upon Harpers Ferry and the Gosport Naval Yard. For the remainder of the war he served in the coastal defenses as well as in the defense of Richmond and Petersburg. He served with Lee in the retreat to Appomattox and allegedly was promoted to Major General at Saylor's Creek.

-- YANCEY, William Lowndes --

A quick-tempered, pasty-faced 46 year-old attorney born in Georgia who grew up in New York, where he lived with his step-father, a Presbyterian minister.

After moving to South Carolina he married a woman who owned 35 slaves. In 1838 he killed his wife's uncle and was convicted for manslaughter, serving a three-month sentence.

Yancey began to develop a furious fixation on what he conceived to be the threat posed toward the gentle and maternal South by malignant abolitionist zealots, coupled with a belief in the evil of all compromise. He repeatedly asked groups around the South to "fire the Southern heart" against the hated Yankees. A fire eater.

In his maiden speech in Congress in 1844 he argued that Great Britain did not favor the abolition of slavery out of humanitarian reasons but rather sought to eliminate the comparative advantage of slaveholding areas.

As a member of the Alabama delegation to the Montgomery convention in 1860, he was prepared to lead a walkout of the convention if the convention failed to adopt a resolution endorsing positive federal protection of all private property, including slaves, in the territories.

The First CSA Cabinet

- Attorney General – **Judah P. Benjamin**, 49 of Louisiana; had once challenged Davis to a duel. Later will serve briefly as secretary of war and then for three years as secretary of state. Sometimes called the brains of the Confederacy.
- Secretary of Navy – **Stephen R. Mallory**, a former U.S. Senator from Florida. While in the Senate he had served as Chairman of the Naval Affairs committee.
- Secretary of Treasury – **Christopher G. Memminger**, a wealthy attorney from South Carolina. Prior to his appointment, he and Davis were not known to each other. His doctrinaire, laissez-faire economic beliefs will rob him of the flexibility and boldness needed for successful planning and administration of CSA finances.
- Secretary of War – **Leroy Pope Walker**, a 44 year old attorney from Alabama, who will last less than seven months.
- Postmaster General – **John H. Reagan**, a former judge, 42 of Texas. Davis' old friend who nevertheless had told Davis he would not vote for him for president.
- Secretary of State – **Robert A. Toombs**, 50 of Georgia, who will soon resign to become a brigadier general, after becoming bored being a foreign minister of a nation with no foreign relations, or so he said.

References and Further Reading:

American National Biographical, The Oxford Press (1999)

Boatner, Mark M. III, *The Civil War Dictionary*, (Revised Edition) Vintage Books (1959)

Davis, William C., *Look Away! – History of the Confederate States of America*, The Free Press (2002)

Eicher, David J., *Dixie Betrayed – How the South Really Lost the Civil War*, Little Brown & Company (2006)

Levine, Bruce. *The Fall of the House of Dixie* Random House (2013)

McPherson, James M., *Battle Cry of Freedom – The Civil War Era* (Illustrated Edition), Oxford Press, (2003)

Williams, David, *Bitterly Divided – The South's Inner Civil War*, The New Press (2008)