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Edmund Ruffin



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EDMUND RUFFIN'S ACCOUNT OF THE FLORIDA SECESSION CONVEN- TION, 1861

The following account of the Florida secession convention is taken from the manuscript diary of Edmund Ruffin in the Library of Congress. Ruffin was perhaps the most eminent southern authority on agriculture in the twenty years preceding the Civil War and his experiments in soil fertility, described in his *Essays on Calcareous Manures* and in the columns of the *Farmers' Register* which he edited, brought an agricultural renaissance to his native Virginia. Ruffin early became convinced that the interests of the agricultural South demanded that she cut loose from the Industrial North and form a Southern Confederacy. So ardent were his emotions on the subject that, at the first signs of secession, he hastened to South Carolina to witness her secede and then travelled down to Tallahassee to be present when Florida should withdraw from the Union. To the pages of his meticulously kept diary he confided the fullest contemporary account that we have of the Florida secession convention. The old fire-eater contrived to be in Charleston later in the spring when war broke out and to him was given the privilege of firing the first shot at Fort Sumter. At the end of the war, rather than outlive his beloved Confederacy, he took his own life. He has been the subject of a recent biography by Avery Craven, *Edmund Ruffin, Southerner*, (Appleton, New York, 1932).

DOROTHY DODD.

Tallahassee.

THE DIARY

"Jan 3rd. Rose at 3 A. M. ¹ No pain or uneasiness last night, & slept well. ² Set out on the train at 5. A number of delegates to the Convention or legislature ³ along, to sundry of whom I was introduced. Also, Mr. Bullock, ⁴ the Commissioner sent by Ala. to Fla. -Reached Tallahassee at 12 M. Met Gov. Perry as soon as reaching the hotel, & soon after was shown by him a telegraphic dispatch from Gov. Brown of Ga. stating that, in consequence of the

¹ Ruffin had spent the night at Lake City.

² He had been suffering from neuralgia.

³ The legislature was to meet in adjourned session, January 7.

⁴ E. C. Bullock.

seizure of Fort Sumter by the federal troops, he had ordered the U. S. forts at the mouth of the Savannah river, which are without garrisons, to be occupied by Ga. militia. This will be an important move, which I trust will serve to commit Ga to secession. The Convention met here, & adjourned previous to permanent organization, to the 5th. The reason-some 15 members not arrived, & tomorrow is the appointed fast day. The delay was also deemed requisite to better know the real strength of the two parties who respectively go for immediate & separate secession, & for delay & co-operation with the other southern states. It is feared that the former party is not certainly the strongest at present.-There was such a crowd at the hotel that I could not there (nor at any other,) get a comfortable room. So at night I accepted an invitation (one of several) from Mr. Beard,⁵ a former slight acquaintance, to take my quarters at his house, & went there by dark.-I was very sorry that there should be any need for the adjournment of the Convention---& in addition was displeased with one of the reasons being respect for the religious services of tomorrow. The keeping this day for fasting & humiliation, is by a recommendatory proclamation of the President of the U. S., on account of the political dangers & disasters now impending & to be produced, not by northern abolitionism, but by the spirit of resistance & disunion of the southern states. The very appointment of the day & service is a rebuke & censure of the seceding states, & of their cause, & of the very action which this Convention is assembled to consummate. And yet, the first & immediate action of the Convention is to adjourn over the fast day, in respect to its objects.

⁵ John Beard, who was a member of the convention from Leon county. Though a disunionist in 1850, Beard acted with the cooperationists.

"Jan 4th. I would not attend the religious services of the day-though I heard from some who did, that the minister of the Episcopal Church preached a strong disunion sermon, in favor of the immediate secession of this state. I afterwards heard that the bishop of that church, ⁶ who resides here, would not attend the service, because viewing the matter somewhat as I did.-Mr. Spratt, ⁷ commissioner of S. C. to Fla. arrived today from Charleston. He informed me that Fort Sumter was blockaded by the several batteries of S. C., & guarded on the water, so that no supplies could be introduced except by force. -A telegram from the war department at Washington to Pensacola was intercepted, or its contents made known, yesterday at Atlanta, Ga. & made known this morning to the Governor of Fla. It directed the reinforcement of the previous garrisons of the two forts at Pensacola, & the destruction of lbs. 5000 of gunpowder which was unprotected by any garrison in the U. S. Arsenal on the Apalachicola. There was an informal & confidential meeting of the members of the Convention with the Governor on this subject--& I have reason to believe that he was indirectly authorized to occupy the other fort at St. Augustine, & an arsenal that are not garrisoned.-From after breakfast to dark I was generally at the principal hotel, talking with various members of the Convention & others on the current events, & on secession. Many seem to attach value to my presence, & pay much respect to my arguments.-Received a letter from Edmund. ⁸ -After dark, returned to Mr. Beard's. Several gentlemen called on me today here, in my absence, & two at the hotel. After tea, Bishop Rutledge came in to visit the family. I

⁶ Francis H. Rutledge.

⁷ L. S. Spratt.

⁸ Ruffin's son.

was very much pleased with the venerable old minister, & with his ardent & active patriotic sentiments. He is a native of S. Ca., & said he had himself already seceded, with his native state, & in advance of Florida. We had agreeable conversation on this & various subjects until he left at 9 o'clock, & I retired to my apartment to write these entries, & to read the N. Y. Tribune, the chief abolition newspaper.-I have learned that, when the Convention met yesterday, it was estimated that there was barely a majority of one of those who had been elected as immediate & separate secessionists-all the others being for delayed secession, or for waiting for the previous action, or co-operation, of the adjoining stronger states. It was supposed that a little delay (by the adjournment,) & conference among the members would serve to increase the majority greatly. The subsequent action of the Governor of Ga. in occupying Fort Pulaski, by committing that state, will further strengthen the party & the feeling here for immediate secession."

"5th. My birthday-67 years old. ⁹ The Convention met at 12 M. After the organization, & election of all the officers, on motion I was invited to occupy a seat in the hall, & after the recess, I was conducted to the chair assigned for me by two members deputed for the purpose. I could have preferred a less ceremonious introduction, but could not avoid it. But independent of the high compliment, I was glad to thus obtain a seat where I can hear the debates, which my deafness would prevent if outside of the bar of the hall. The proceedings of the evening session gave indications of discord, & there was great want of the exercise & knowledge of parliamentary law, & much violation of order & decorum

⁹ Ruffin was born January 5, 1794, at Coggin's Point, Prince George county, Virginia. He died June 18, 1865.

by the audience. After the adjournment, was invited & went to sup at Col. Williams' ¹⁰ house. Spent there a pleasant evening with several other guests, & especially with Judge Finley, ¹¹ a very intelligent & agreeable gentleman, a member of the Convention. After returning, heard from Mr. Beard that the fort at Mobile had been occupied by order of the Governor of Ala. I heard it whispered that similar orders had been issued here, as to the U. S. arsenal on the Apalachicola. As we have not yet heard that the powder there is destroyed, as ordered by the telegram from Washington, I trust that the orders were not only examined at Atlanta, but their further passage stopped.

"Jan 6th. Sunday. No mail, & no telegraphic news, though, as frequently, false rumors of reports of hostilities at Charleston.-At the Episcopal church.-Went, by invitation, to dine with Mr. Houston, ¹² at his residence, a mile from the town. Afternoon, went to visit (& to return the call of,) my old acquaintance Col. Ro. Gamble, who resides here, & who is now more than 80 years old. Returned to Mr. Beard's to tea. Read news papers, & as part of one, a sermon lately preached in Brooklyn by the Rev. Mr. Vandyke, which is an admirable argument against & exposition of the errors & evils of abolitionism.

"7th. The Convention met at 10 A. M. & I took my assigned seat. The commissioners of Ala. & S. C. Messrs. Bullock & Spratt, were first introduced, & invited to address the Convention. Mr. Bullock

¹⁰ R. C. Williams.

¹¹ J. J. Finley, of Jackson county, judge of the western circuit of Florida, was not a member of the convention, though he administered the oath of office to the officers of that body.

¹² Col. Edward Houston, president of the Tallahassee railroad company.

spoke for about three-quarters of an hour, & delivered a most eloquent speech, in favor of immediate & separate secession, & of the union of the southern states. Mr. Spratt followed, reading the documents of S. C. sent by him to this Convention, & following with a logical & able argument. When he had closed, to my great astonishment, (when I understood it,) Mr. Pelot,¹³ a member of ability, moved that I should be invited to address the Convention-which was carried, without dissent. I was not attending to what was said, deeming it the routine business, & with my deafness, did not know what motion was made, or voted upon, until informed by the President of the wish of the Convention. I immediately rose, & though greatly embarrassed by the novel & unlooked-for requisition, I proceeded to speak-disclaiming all authority or right to speak for Va but declaring the great importance of the early action of Fla. to hasten the secession of Va. & all the border states, which (excepting of Missouri & Delaware, I predicted would be accomplished by the 4th of March, provided Fla. & the adjoining states moved as soon as their severally meeting in Conventions permitted. I spoke earnestly, & but for a short time, & seemed to have pleased my auditors. Next, the resolution introduced on the 5th.¹⁴ was taken up & discussed, & before 1 P. M.¹⁵ was passed with but 5 dissenting votes-As follows : Whereas, All hope of the preservation of the Federal Union, upon terms consistent with the safety & honor of the slaveholding states, has been finally dissipated by the recent indications of the strength of the anti-slavery senti-

¹³ John C. Pelot, of Alachua county, had acted as temporary chairman of the convention.

¹⁴ The resolution introduced by McQueen McIntosh, of Franklin county, which committed Florida to immediate secession.

¹⁵ This was not passed until the afternoon session. *Jour. of the Conv.,-1861*, 21.

ment of the free States-Therefore, *Be it resolved by the people of Florida in Convention assembled*, That, as it is the undoubted right of the several states of the Federal Union, known as the United States of America, to withdraw from the said Union at such time & for such cause or causes as in the opinion of the people of each state, acting in their sovereign capacity, may be just and proper, in the opinion of this convention, the existing causes are such as to compel the State of Florida to proceed to exercise this right.' The passage of this resolution was followed by another to appoint a committee to draw up a form of Ordinance of Secession. These two measures are equivalent to a declaration of secession, but at an uncertain though early time. This pledge being secured, the enactment of independence may be postponed until Ala. & Miss. (whose conventions meet today,) or even Ga. next week, shall act. Still many are for speedy definite decision. Supposing that I shall witness nothing more, for some days to come, I now think of leaving to morrow, to go to witness the session of the Ala. Convention at Montgomery. If not going so soon, I shall probably be too late to be present at the act of secession there. I sent on the report of the action of the Convention, by magnetic telegraph, to the Examiner, Richmond -& trust that the annunciation was published there in an hour after the action of the Convention. This is the day for the called meeting of the legislature ¹⁶ -so that I trust my communication will have the more effect.-Heard from the Governor that he had received a dispatch stating that the elections in Ga. so far gave 170 immediate secessionists to 80 co-operationists. The remaining counties will not probably materially alter this proportion-& even if all were to go against immediate secession, they cannot

¹⁶ The legislature of Virginia.

reverse the majority. So Ga. is certain for secession.-A confidential telegraphic dispatch received today by the Governor from the U. S. Senators of Fla., & communicated in secret session to the Convention, informed that body that the policy of the federal administration was military coercion on S. C. & urged the Convention to secede forthwith.¹⁷ -In the evening, with Dr. G. T. Maxwell of Savannah, who introduced himself to me. I had been desirous of meeting & knowing him, to learn from himself, as I now sought & effected, the account of a late daring and also amusing adventure in which he had been one of the principal actors, the capturing of the U. S. armed revenue cutter in the Savannah river, as a prelude to the occupation of Fort Pulaski. With Dr. Maxwell's consent, I took notes of the affair, & wrote an account of it before going to bed. The act however was unauthorized, & went beyond the Governor's designed policy of occupying and retaining the forts. So as soon as the captors offered to him the charge of the vessel, he ordered it to be restored to the previous U. S. commander.

"Jan. 8th. The celebration of the battle of New Orleans, interrupted the proceedings of the Convention after 12 M. Sundry speeches, from distinguished members or strangers, & among them one from Mr. Bullock, which I would like to have heard, but did not go to the hall, for fear that I should be called upon, & I would especially object to speak before ladies, who made up a large part of the audience. The telegraphic wires out of order all day.

"9th.-Telegrams made public, & announced to the Convention at different times of its session, announced that the 'Star of the West,' a California sea steamer, had brought troops for the Federal Govern-

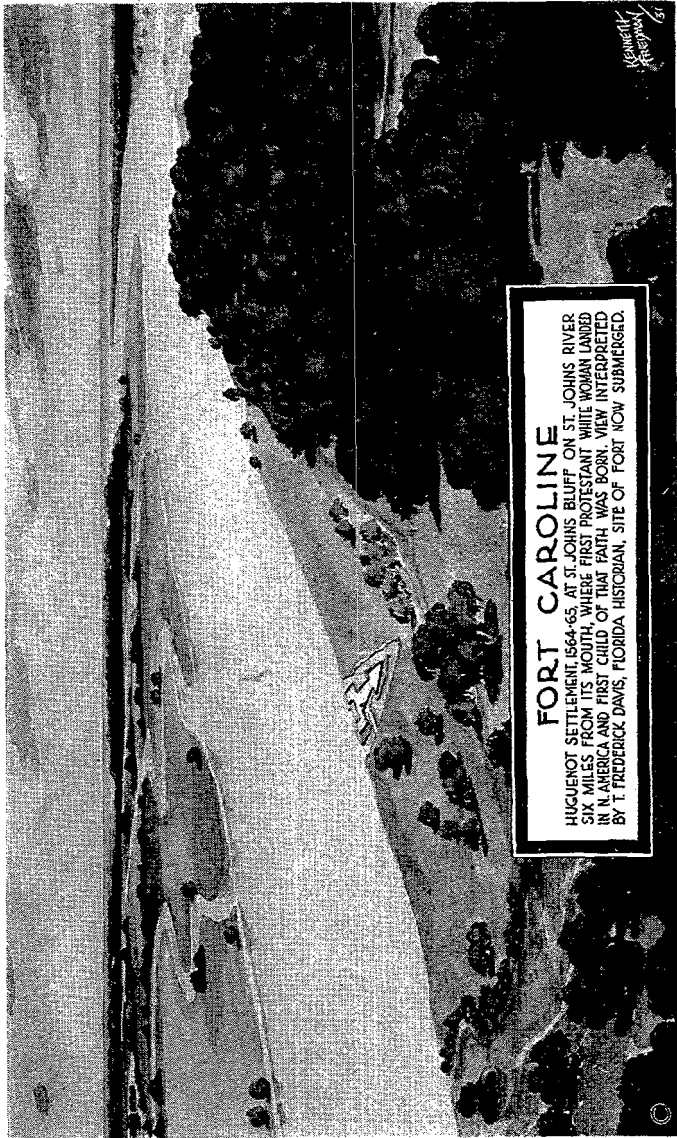
¹⁷ This dispatch was the result of a caucus of southern senators held January 5. See O. R., Series I, Vol. I, 443.

ment to Charleston harbor, & attempted to reinforce Fort Sumter, but had been repulsed & driven back by cannonading from the Carolinian batteries. This sent by Gov. Pickens. No other details. Another dispatch from New Orleans stated that troops had been embarked at Boston to reinforce the federal forts on the coast of Florida, & especially that at Key West. I was informed confidentially that Gov. Perry had yesterday given authority to Major Chase, of Pensacola, to capture the forts there, if he could attempt it with assurance of success. These forts have military garrisons, though not strong ones, & might be reinforced by men from two ships of war lying in the harbor. As nothing has been since heard, I fear that the attempt has been frustrated, or judged to be hopeless.-My previous bad cold in the head has had a new accession latterly, & with it a troublesome cough, which disturbed me last night. On this account, I deem it improper to go on to Montgomery, Ala. as I had designed, which journey would require 100 miles of stage-coach travelling, & through a whole night. Besides, if waiting to witness the consummation of secession here, I should probably be too late for that of Ala.-A long & earnest debate today, & the opposition members, (for delay, or co-operative [sic] secession-none being avowed for submission, or union-) tried every scheme to prevent the victory of the separate and immediate secessionists. It was nearly dark when the final vote on the main question was about to be put, when the majority yielded to the wishes of the minority, & adjourned to tomorrow 10 A. M. when the question will be decided. It is certain now that immediate secession will be enacted-& it is hoped that this postponement will serve to much increase the already sure majority. I have arranged to set out tomorrow afternoon for Charleston, S. C.

-Went again to see Col. Gamble & his family, and to make my excuses for not going last night to a party at his house last night [sic], to which I was invited & was expected. Some half dozen ladies there when I called, & among them the widow of Achille Murat, oldest son of the former King of Naples. This lady is daughter of Byrd Willis, formerly of Fredericksburg, Va.-The fort at St. Augustine is in possession of a volunteer garrison, under Capt. Gibbs, of that town, who requested & obtained the authority of Gov. Perry to occupy it.

"Jan. 10th. Telegram that the Convention of Miss. declared secession yesterday. The Convention here met at 11, & after hearing four or five tedious speeches from members who had steadily opposed, but now designed to vote for the action which they still argued against, the vote was taken, & resulted in the enactment of secession & independence of Florida, by 62 ayes to 7 noes. I immediately telegraphed the result to Gov. Pickens at Charleston, & to the Editors of the Enquirer at Richmond. The charge most extortionate. The message was of minimum length, (three words each, though counted as much as ten-) & for the two, I paid \$6.30, for transmission.* My departure had been arranged for 4 P. M. by taking leave of my hospitable & very agreeable host & family this morning. Set out on the train for Monticello, & there (after 6 P. M.) took a stage coach to Quitman, 27 miles, which is the present terminus of the Albany Rail Road to Savannah.-"

"*Two out of three dispatches I sent were never received."



Original painting is at the Jacksonville Public Library.