THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE AND SOUTH CAROLINA'S REOPENING OF THE SLAVE TRADE IN 1803

Jed Handelsman Shugerman

In the fall of 1802, Governor John Drayton mobilized the South Carolina militia to defend the state's coast against an invasion. The source of his terror was not Napoleon's navy or the British fleet, but merely a rumor that ships carrying slaves from St. Domingue might dock at the Charleston harbor. As of 1802, the brutal slave revolution in St. Domingue had been raging for eleven years, and the violence had just reached a new terrifying peak. Based solely on the sighting of one black foreigner in Georgetown, this rumor erupted into a security crisis.¹

Back in 1787, at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, South Carolina had fought to preserve the states' right to import slaves; in fact, the state had sacrificed other interests to win a twenty-year barrier against congressional regulation of the slave trade. But soon after this compromise, in 1792, anxious about slave revolts and financial concerns, South Carolina voluntarily closed its foreign and domestic slave trade. Over the next ten years, overwhelming majorities in the South Carolina state legislature extended this ban: by 1802 the antislave trade majority stood at eight-to-one in the house, and support in the senate was so strong they did not bother to

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call the roll. However, just one year after these sweeping majorities voted to keep the trade closed, and just one year after Governor John Drayton mobilized the militia in order to prevent slaves from landing at the state’s ports, South Carolina’s legislature reopened the African slave trade. Drayton himself had supported the ban in his three years as governor, but as a state legislator in 1803 he suddenly reversed his stance and voted to reopen the slave trade. From 1804 to 1808, traders flooded Charleston with 39,075 African slaves—over one tenth of the total number of slaves brought into all of British North America over the previous 200 years—probably the strongest surge in the history of the global slave trade. Meanwhile, all of the other states maintained their prohibitions.

Historians have generally offered two explanations for South Carolina’s stunning reversal. First, the invention of a successful cotton gin created new opportunities for cotton production and a corresponding increase in the state’s demand for slaves. Second, the illegal slave trade from the volatile Caribbean terrified white South Carolinians, prompting them to seek as an alternative a legal and supposedly more docile supply of slaves from Africa. However, South Carolinians had been aware of the cotton boom and illegal slave smuggling for many years before 1803, and yet they consistently extended the prohibition. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the first few years of the nineteenth century produced no significant increase in these factors.

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2 South Carolina General Assembly, Journal of the South Carolina Senate, Dec. 6, 1803 (South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, 1851), 84 (hereinafter Senate Journal); South Carolina General Assembly, Journal of the South Carolina House of Representatives, Dec. 17, 1802, 134 (hereinafter House Journal); House Journal, Dec. 17, 1803, 150-51. The Senate in 1802 had voted to continue the ban without a roll call. The 1802 house vote was 86-11 to keep the trade closed, and the 1803 house vote was 55-46 to reopen. Because 1803 was not an election year, the membership of both houses was virtually identical from 1802 to 1803.


Certainly, both the cotton boom and the illegal slave trade contributed to the 1803 reversal, and they probably were necessary causes, but they were not quite sufficient. In fact, the apparent trigger lay beyond South Carolina’s borders: the Louisiana Purchase, the truly revolutionary event of 1803, which doubled America’s territory. Jefferson’s acquisition of Louisiana literally transformed the political landscape and heightened a fascination with the frontier, and it seems to have been a catalyst that broadened concerns about illegal slaves entering the frontier and expanded an interest in western cotton production. Because South Carolinians had first-hand experience with these issues, and because they already were absorbed with the frontier, they would have been more attuned to the impact of the purchase. Throughout the early years of the republic, South Carolina’s politicians played important national roles in opening up the frontier to American settlement and American slavery. News of the negotiations with Napoleon heightened this widespread excitement about the frontier. Throughout 1803, Charleston’s newspapers trumpeted the importance of this new frontier for national expansion and agriculture. One month after the United States Senate’s ratification of the purchase in November 1803, the state suddenly reopened the slave trade. Though there remains no direct evidence of this connection from the state politicians themselves at the moment of the reopening, the timing is striking, and other sources—newspapers, speeches by congressmen, and letters by Louisiana’s governor—connect these events.

In addition to arguing that the Louisiana Purchase triggered the reopening of South Carolina’s slave trade, this article also suggests a surprising dynamic about political interests. In many ways, the state’s politicians sacrificed their immediate financial and electoral interests for more distant sectional benefits. The coastal low country held more political power than the frontier backcountry, and the key to the slave trade act was

the support of low country representatives. One might expect the leaders of the low country to be motivated by financial and political profit. However, the records suggest that they profited little from the slave trade, and in many ways the reopening actually sacrificed financial and political interests of the low country leadership. Coastal planters had no need for importing slaves because of the sharp decline of their agricultural staples. A net exporter of slaves, the low country would have gained more by keeping supply low and sale prices high. Certainly some Charleston merchants profited as middlemen, but it is striking how little South Carolinians actually invested in the trade; in fact, local businessmen seemed to suffer as a result of the slave trade crowding out other commerce. For all these reasons, the trade seems to have been extremely unpopular with low country voters, who re-elected very few of their proslave trade legislators. Nevertheless, defying public opinion, low country senators blocked the repeated attempts to renew the ban after 1803. By choosing the expansion of slavery into the distant West over the immediate interests of security, wealth, and their constituents, the reopening demonstrates the rise of what William Freehling calls “aggressive slavery imperialism.”

The development of the American West and expansion of slavery were perhaps the two most important questions in American politics before the Civil War. Even in the years leading up to the Philadelphia Convention, many prominent framers kept their eyes on the future power of the South and West. In the Congress of the Confederation Thomas Jefferson attempted to prohibit slavery in the western territories after 1800, and when that failed by just one vote, South Carolina maneuvered to make the West open to slavery. The state ceded its western lands to the federal government just before the Constitutional Convention with a tacit understanding that the prohibition of slavery in the Northwest Ordinance would not apply to the South. This bargain suggests the beginning of a pattern of South Carolina politicians placing the long-term interests of slavery’s political power above their immediate interests and the interests of their state. Some view the Northwest Ordinance as an antislavery victory, but an equally compelling argument has been made that the Northwest Ordinance was truly a proslavery victory. The Ordinance implied that slavery would be legal elsewhere, it provided very weak enforcement mechanisms, and it failed to deprive slave owners of their rights to slaves brought into the territories

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prior to the ordinance, allowing slavery to continue in Illinois and Indiana for decades. South Carolina's strategy of immediate sacrifice in order to spread slavery would become a pattern.\textsuperscript{6}

By 1787, every state from New England to Virginia had prohibited the African slave trade, and many of the delegates from these states argued for abolishing the slave trade in the Constitution. With this struggle for future political power at the center of the constitutional debates, South Carolina's delegation led an uphill battle to keep federal restrictions off of the slave trade. Some delegates worried that slave importations would give the southern states more political power through the three-fifths compromise (and they predicted that South Carolina and Georgia would try to fill the frontier with slaves). Those who cared believed that the eventual termination of slavery depended upon its containment on the East Coast, but if slavery spread into the frontier it would become entrenched economically and politically.\textsuperscript{7}

South Carolina's delegation comprised four prominent low country planters—Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, Charles Pinckney, John Rutledge, and Pierce Butler—who fought adamantly against the Convention's consensus for prohibiting the trade and even threatened to abandon the union. The delegates eventually forged a compromise: a simple majority-rule on navigation laws (a considerable sacrifice for South Carolina and Georgia) in return for an unamendable clause prohibiting for twenty years any federal action against the slave trade. John Rutledge offered this revealing perspective: "As we are laying the foundation for a great empire,


\textsuperscript{7} James Madison, Notes of Debate in the Federal Convention of 1787, ed. Adrienne Koch (New York, 1966), 220-23, 502, 504 (quoting Gouverneur Morris, Luther Martin, and George Mason). In addition to those ten states that banned the slave trade, North Carolina had passed a highly prohibitive duty upon imported slaves. Robinson, Slavery in the Structure of American Politics, 297.
we ought to take a permanent view of the subject and not look at the present moment only."

Significantly, the only ratifying convention to focus on the slave trade clause was South Carolina’s. The Federalist low country, with its disproportionate political power, prevailed over the backcountry’s desire to keep the slave trade available. Charles Pinckney pointed out that in twenty years, Congress might fail to pass a ban, apparently presuming that proslavery interests might expand. Edward Rutledge added that the system of representation was “favorable to the southern interest,” and he suggested that the South would, “in the course of a few years, rise high in our representation, whilst other states would keep their present position. Gentlemen should keep their views into futurity.” These comments suggest that South Carolina’s leaders understood that the sectional contest for federal control over slavery had begun. As some of the antislavery delegates had feared, South Carolina’s leadership recognized that the three-fifths compromise offered the slave states considerable advantages if they could accumulate more slaves. Additionally, the representation system in the Senate provided an incentive to establish as many slave states in the West as possible in order to balance out the North. Therefore, any short-term concession on navigation acts would pay off in the long run, with the expansion of slavery producing more proslavery congressmen and senators in the nineteenth century. The twenty-year extension left a window of opportunity for the deep South to gain enough political power to block (some hoped) a federal ban on the slave trade in 1808, although the probability was very remote. At the very least, if the slave-trading states played their cards right, they might continue to extract future political bargains to keep the slave trade open.

Only months before threatening to bolt the Convention because of the slave trade issue, South Carolina had suspended its own slave importations. In order to understand this apparent paradox, one must investigate the

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politics, economics, and demographics within the state. At the turn of the century, a social and political division between South Carolina's coastal low country and its inland backcountry was well entrenched. The prosperous low country districts of Beaufort, Charleston, and Georgetown cultivated the dominant staples of eighteenth-century economy: rice in the coastal sea islands and swamps, and indigo on the coastal plains. Meanwhile, the backcountry districts of Camden, Orangeburg, Cheraws, and Ninety-Six yielded little profit before the introduction of the cotton gin. The disparities in agricultural production produced sharp contrasts in population and slave ownership, with the low country claiming three-quarters of the state's slaves but only one-fifth of the white population in 1790. Slaves constituted half of the population of Charleston and an overwhelming 77 percent of the rest of the low country. By contrast, slaves represented only one-fifth of the backcountry population. Despite the fact that almost four times as many whites lived in the backcountry than in the low country, the low country controlled both houses of the state legislature, thanks to districting and property qualifications. Furthermore, the low country's homogeneous agricultural and demographic interests tended to foster a cohesive and dominant voting block.10

The regional allocation of power translated into an intense political and partisan split. At the state convention to ratify the federal Constitution, 88 percent of the low country delegates voted in favor while 80 percent from the western half of the backcountry voted against ratification. Through the 1790s, the majority of low country voters supported the Federalists, while many residents of the backcountry embraced the newer Republican party. The two regions also split on the issue of the slave trade. In the mid-1780s, the slave trade had destabilized the South Carolina economy by draining specie out of the state and creating large debts in the low country. In 1787, the low country representatives voted 61-17 to close the trade, while the backcountry voted 29-18 to continue it.11

South Carolina exercised its right to reopen the slave trade for one year in 1792, but soon the violent events of the Haitian Revolution sent waves of panic up the Atlantic Coast. By 1800, 100,000 whites and 60,000 blacks had perished, and the former slaves had won control of the island. Thousands of Haiti's white Frenchmen (with their slaves), along with the island's free blacks, fled to American ports—to Charleston in particular.

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Already haunted by the Stono Rebellion of 1739, the low country residents would have recognized that St. Domingue’s huge black majority was perilously similar to their own. As a result, in 1792 the legislature closed both the foreign and domestic slave trade with a vote so decisive that no roll call was taken in either house. The other southern states, having already abolished the foreign slave trade, increased their own restrictions.12

Even though the government of South Carolina had taken steps against the slave trade, rumors spread that a rebellion inspired by St. Domingue would strike America. Many South Carolinians believed the French would provoke slave revolts for strategic purposes or that the Haitian revolutionaries were planning an invasion. In 1800 in Virginia, Gabriel Prosser, a slave inspired by both the American and Haitian revolutions, orchestrated a detailed plan to seize Richmond with at least two thousand rebels—and almost succeeded. The rumors and reports about the thwarted revolt sent another flash of hysteria throughout the South. Gabriel’s Rebellion then spawned conspiracies in southern Virginia in 1801 and North Carolina in 1802, making the threat of an uprising feel more imminent in South Carolina. As the thirteen-year revolution in St. Domingue reached its brutal climax in 1802, a new flood of refugees—white and black—disembarked on America’s shores.13

South Carolina’s anxieties reached their peak when two slaves confessed, in 1802, that they had planned to torch the entire city of Columbia, prompting one observer to write that the “consequences of introducing so many [slaves] into the state . . . must sooner or later be serious.” Fear of an invasion of slaves transported from St. Domingue by the French caused Drayton to mobilize the state militia. Even after the first rumor proved false, Drayton informed the state senate in December that he anticipated an assault of “French Brigands Incendiary prisoners of Colour . . . [who] intended to be landed in the Southern States.” A decade of

12 Brady, “Slave Trade,” 608-09; Alfred N. Hunt, Haiti’s Influence on Antebellum America (Baton Rouge, 1988), 4, 40. D. K. Fieldhouse, The Colonial Empires (2d ed., London, 1982) 120; DuBois, Suppression, 72. North Carolina prohibited bringing any black person from the West Indies into the state after 1794. Virginia, which had already ended its slave trade, tightened its non-importation laws in 1792, soon after the news of Haitian violence arrived. Then in 1793, both Georgia and Virginia banned the entry of free blacks from other states. In 1796, the wave of fear hit Maryland, which banned interstate importation. Georgia was temporarily the one exception to the banning of the African trade. In 1793, Georgia reopened the African slave trade, but then abolished it by statute and, even more significantly, by constitutional amendment in 1798. See Ruth Scarborough, The Opposition to Slavery in Georgia Prior to 1860 (Atlanta, 1933), 110.
slavery crises served as a stern warning to South Carolina’s leaders; the General Assembly voted in December 1802 to keep the slave trade closed. The house vote was 86-11, with only four backcountry and seven low country votes for reopening. The senate’s consensus was again so obvious that a roll call was not necessary.\textsuperscript{14}

South Carolina’s leaders long had played an active role in the development of the frontier. In 1795, Thomas Pinckney, the envoy extraordinaire to Spain, negotiated the Treaty of San Lorenzo, otherwise known as “Pinckney’s Treaty,” which gained the Americans unrestricted use of the Mississippi River, a three-year right of deposit at the port of New Orleans, and more land for America’s western settlement. This treaty, along with Jay’s Treaty of 1795, led to a wave of new western settlement and provided a primary market route for more than half a million Americans in the West. Charles Pinckney, South Carolina’s champion in winning the slave trade compromise in 1787, served as diplomat to Spain during the subsequent Louisiana negotiations, and successfully lobbied Spain to abandon its opposition to the purchase. Another frontier advocate was Congressman William Loughton Smith of Charleston, the leading southern Federalist in the United States House. As chair of the House committee on Public Lands he drafted the Federalist Land Act of 1796, known as the “Smith Bill,” which aimed to promote frontier settlement. In 1802, Governor Drayton, a Republican, published A View of South Carolina, in which he praised the American “spirit of emigration” into the frontier that yielded a dramatic increase in the state’s “domestic strength,” as well as “breathing time . . . and opportunity” that would lead to “the advancement of learning and civilization.”\textsuperscript{15}

This preoccupation with frontier expansion dominated Charleston’s newspapers in 1803. In just its first two months of publication, the


\textsuperscript{15} John Drayton, A View of South Carolina (Charleston, 1802), 103, 112; Joseph W. Cox, Champion of Southern Federalism: Robert Goodloe Harper of South Carolina (Port Washington, NY, 1972), 54; John Garretson Clark, New Orleans, 1718-1812 (Baton Rouge, 1970), 210-12; McCoy, Elusive Republic, 196; Biographical Directory of the South Carolina House of Representatives, ed. Walter Edgar (3 vols., Columbia, 1974-1992), 3:555-59. Matthew E. Mason has argued that the nation’s newspapers focused much more on Napoleon’s military advances and Aaron Burr’s frontier conspiracy than on the slave trade debate of 1806-07, but these issues may have been more connected than they appear. See Mason’s “Slavery Overshadowed.”
Charleston Courier, the daily voice of the Federalist party, ran over fifty editorials or stories (almost one per day) about the importance of the Louisiana Territory or the danger presented by Napoleon’s France. Most of these columns (and those in other publications as well) focused primarily on the mouth of the Mississippi and did not anticipate the acquisition of so much of North America. Nevertheless, these editorials sometimes discussed the significance of the territory and the problem of slave smuggling. For example, on February 2, 1803, the Courier implied that the French were conspiring to subvert the United States by shipping in slaves from St. Domingue. The rebellion in St. Domingue, the illegal Caribbean slave trade, and Napoleon’s imperial militarism all combined to heighten the importance of security along the frontier. In response to this threat, the Courier called for American military preparation and, eventually, the annexation of the Louisiana Territory. The article “Louisiana” alerted its readers that the French possession of the territory would lead to “the dismemberment of [the American] empire, and the dissolution of our union being thereby affected.” The implication of these articles was that the United States’ survival depended upon possessing a significant amount of Louisiana.16

The Courier regarded the frontier as a field of opportunity for agricultural settlement as well as a strategic possession: “The mind of man can scarcely prescribe bounds to the probable greatness and glories of a vast nation, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean.” The West had “the most affluent fertility, and the most diversified soils and climates, designed by nature for commerce,” but on “the day the French get possession of Louisiana that prospect vanishes from the imagination.” The Courier editors believed that the Louisiana Territory secured not just protection against Napoleon but ultimately the United States’ expansion to the Pacific and its agricultural development of the entire continent. Building their interest in Louisiana’s agricultural potential, the South Carolina press also reported on the increasing demand for African slaves in the territory. Many times throughout 1803, the paper sharply criticized Jefferson for not acquiring any part of the Louisiana Territory.17

In early July, just as the news of the purchase arrived, newspapers around the country carried Ambassador Robert Livingston’s “Memorial on Louisiana,” which he presented to the French government as a series of arguments against France retaining possession of the territory. Livingston’s memorial, which conceded that the territory “cannot be profitable without

17 Ibid., Jan. 15, Mar. 17, 1803.
slaves," received national press at that moment and covered the entire front page of South Carolina's two major newspapers. The most remarkable aspect of the memorial is its sustained emphasis on the slavery question. In the first three full columns of the six-and-a-half column reprint, Livingston stressed that Louisiana's development depended upon a supply of slave labor that France could not provide: "[S]lavery alone can fertilize those colonies, and slaves cannot be procured but at a great expense. . . . How could the possession of Louisiana be useful to [France]? Who is the citizen willing to bestow large capitals upon so precarious a property with the prospect of a distant return?" The Americans, with their surplus of slaves just across the Mississippi, were the only ones who could develop this land.18

Unsympathetic northern papers quickly picked up on the slavery problem. In a piece reprinted in various northeastern papers in August 1803, "Ohio" noted Livingston's descriptions of the territory and proclaimed, "We pay fifteen million of dollars for the purchase of a country, which must in a great measure be cultivated by slaves—by American slaves!!" In an essay printed in several New England newspapers two weeks later, a Federalist writer noted a double injustice in the purchase, the first committed against the natives, the second committed against the Africans:

It may be added that Louisiana is to be a field of blood before it is a cultured field; and indeed a field of blood while it is cultivated. The natives of the soil, a numerous race, who have never injured us, and never will until encroached upon, must be driven out; and a still more numerous race from Africa must be violently brought in to toil and bleed under the lash. It is for such an extension of human liberty and of human happiness that we are called upon for such sacrifice?

"The Calculator," in a piece also circulated around northern presses, first quoted several passages from Livingston's memorial and then predicted that "thousands and hundreds of thousands more of our fellow creatures be robbed of their liberty—be snatched from the bosoms of their friends, and from all the nameless endearments of country and home, and be forced to the house of bondage." "Fabricius" added:

Have we then purchased a country, which will be of no advantage to us, unless we deprive men of their liberty, and commence Slave-traders?

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18 Charleston Times, July 18, 1803; Charleston Courier, July 1803; Columbian Centinel (Boston, MA), July 2, 1803.
This may suit very well with the ideas of those genuine Republicans of the
ancient dominion who believe that Liberty and Equality consists
principally in living by the profits of the labor of their fellow men, whom
they hold in cruel oppressive bondage.

Both writers understood that Louisiana would open up an expansive new
territory, not just for a huge influx of slaves, but also for a tremendous
importation of Africans.¹⁹

On October 26 the Republican Charleston Times printed Jefferson’s
complete address to Congress introducing the treaty for the purchase of the
Louisiana Territory, and the Courier published the address one day later.
Jefferson extolled “the fertility of that country, its climate and extent,
promise in due season important aids to our treasury, an ample provision for
our prosperity and a wide spread for the blessings of freedom and equal
laws.” With expectations similar to the Courier’s, the president recognized
the tremendous potential for western settlement, agricultural prosperity, and
economic expansion. In its editorial on the same day, the Courier heralded
the purchase as “the most agreeable [information] communicated to the
American Nation since the era of her Independence.” Considering the
extreme hostility between the Federalists and Jefferson’s Republican party,
this unqualified praise from a Federalist’s print captured the extent of the
low country’s excitement.²⁰

Only three weeks after the Times and the Courier announced the
ratification of the purchase, South Carolina Governor James Richardson
called upon the General Assembly to reopen the slave trade. The governor
claimed for his reason that the existing prohibition had been “without
success,” especially along the coast; however, the timing of his
announcement is more revealing than his public explanation. Just a year
before, as Clarendon’s representative in the South Carolina House,
Richardson had voted along with the huge majority against reopening the
slave trade. Now he reversed his position dramatically. Similarly, former
governor Drayton had supported prohibitions in 1800 and in 1802, only to
reverse himself in the house in December 1803. Both men may have
worried about the illegal slave trade, but their voting histories and the
timing of the decision point to the Louisiana Purchase as the more direct
cause. Richardson did not mention the Louisiana Purchase, but he then

¹⁹ The Utica Patriot, reprinted in the Columbian Sentinel, Aug. 17, 1803 (emphasis in
the original); Litchfield Monitor, Aug. 31, 1803 (reprinted from the Connecticut Courant
[Hartford]); Connecticut Gazette (New Haven), Oct. 5, 1803 (emphasis in original);
Connecticut Courant, Aug. 31, 1803 (emphasis in original).
²⁰ Charleston Times, Oct. 26, 1803; Charleston Courier, Oct. 27, 1803.
provided no evidence either to indicate an increase in the illegal slave trade.21

Richardson may have omitted any reference to the Louisiana Purchase for several reasons. First, his constituents in South Carolina might have preferred an explanation that pertained to the state itself, not to the development of other territories. More importantly, if he proposed reopening the slave trade in order to spread slavery into the frontier, he might have provoked a more hostile congressional response. The Constitution did not permit Congress to regulate foreign slave trade until 1808, but it permitted Congress to regulate interstate commerce, and the relevance of that provision to slavery was not yet fully defined. If the governor explicitly connected the slave trade to interstate commerce, Congress might have seized upon this clause to regulate all transportation of slaves to other states. Even after Marbury v. Madison, the Supreme Court’s enforcement of constitutional protections remained unclear, and South Carolina could not rely safely upon the Federalist Supreme Court, whose majority was unsympathetic to slavery. Richardson’s speech followed a safer constitutional strategy by emphasizing internal state commerce as opposed to national or frontier demand.22

The impact of the Louisiana Purchase at the time of this debate is best revealed in the Charleston Times from November 30 through December 6, 1803. During that week, the Times devoted eight full pages to the official federal document, An Account of Louisiana, Being an Abstract of Documents in the Offices of the Department of State and of the Treasury, which Jefferson presented to Congress on November 16. This account focused on how conducive the territory was to settlement and agriculture, especially the types that required slave labor. In the November 30 edition alone, the paper described Louisiana’s rich soil and agricultural potential

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21 Governors’ Message no. 866 to the South Carolina General Assembly, Nov. 24, 1803 (South Carolina Department of Archives and History); Charleston Courier, Dec. 5, 1803, Jan. 6, 1804. On November 1, 1803, the Times announced the ratification of the Louisiana Purchase by a vote of 24-7, and the Courier announced it the next day. The senate ratified the treaty on October 21. Both newspapers also published the full text of the treaty and its conventions, taking up more than one full page, on the same day each paper announced.

22 Marbury v. Madison had established judicial review in February 1803, but it is necessary to note that Chief Justice Marshall and the Court still capitulated to Jefferson and Congress on the holding, leaving Marbury without his office, and leaving the doctrine of judicial review without strong foundation. Southerners could not expect a majority of the Court to sympathize with slavery. Chief Justice Marshall, Justices Cushing and Chase were opponents of slavery, and Justice Paterson was a New Jersey Federalist ambivalent about slavery. Justice Bushrod Washington and Chief Justice Marshall later joined the American Colonization Society, a moderate antislavery group.
seven different times; strong cotton production was mentioned five times. Detailing the land north of New Orleans along the Mississippi, the Times reported that the land was ideal for cotton production and “incapable of being exhausted. . . . It may be said with truth that, for fertility of soil, no part of the world exceeds the borders of the Mississippi; the land yields an abundance of all the necessities of life, and almost spontaneously.” For these enthusiastic South Carolinians, the descriptions in the report of Louisiana’s agricultural development sounded strikingly familiar: rice and indigo production, outpaced by a tremendous boom in cotton. What would have been unfamiliar was Louisiana’s low proportion of blacks. Jefferson’s report suggests that the population in the territory currently had almost twice as many whites as black slaves. The reader in South Carolina, observing the patterns of his own state, would interpret such a ratio as a critical shortage of slaves and an invitation to slave smuggling. In terms of the frontier’s demand for slaves, one could have easily compared Louisiana to Indiana, which from 1796 to 1807 unsuccessfully petitioned Congress to repeal the Northwest Ordinance’s prohibitions against slavery. If Indiana was campaigning to import slaves, then Louisiana’s demand certainly would be far stronger. Louisiana either would continue to smuggle slaves from the Caribbean (and thus increase the risk of revolt as South Carolinians had feared), or South Carolina could provide the legal alternative by opening the African slave trade. In the 1790s, Charleston had already established a commercial shipping link with New Orleans, through which it could distribute its slave trade into the West.

Not to be outdone by the Times’s coverage of the territory, the Courier called the Louisiana Purchase one of the most “extraordinary” acts in the history of the world, which elevated the United States to the “the foremost rank of commercial and agricultural nations.” This editorial then noted, “We understand that wagers have already been laid, that before five years from the day of taking possession of Louisiana shall have expired, an American port of entry will be opened in the American territory on the Pacific Ocean.” According to the Courier, America’s expansion across the continent was inevitable. The Courier then trumpeted the likelihood of unprecedented food production in the new territories: “The United States might soon supply the world with food. . . . It must be highly gratifying to every good heart, no matter of what nation or party, to contemplate the

23 Charleston Times, Nov. 30, 1803; An Account of Louisiana, Being an Abstract of Documents in the Offices of the Department of State and of the Treasury (Philadelphia, 1803), 10-11.
unlimited field which America at this day opens to the industrious of the human race."

Soon after the treaty's ratification, the South Carolina historian David Ramsay also praised the agricultural and imperial potential of the Louisiana Purchase. Page after page, he extolled the fertility of the Louisiana Territory and the bountiful rewards for its cultivation: "the greatest portion is so fertile, as to be equal to the support of a population far exceeding the many millions which inhabit Great Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, and Portugal—I had almost said all of Europe." By promoting agrarian life across the frontier, self-reliant farmer-citizens would live freely and establish a large, stable republic. Democracy would be safe in the hands of "the inhabitants of an empire, consisting, chiefly, of independent farmers, and stretching across the continent of North America." By Ramsey's calculations, the United States population was doubling in size every twenty-five years, so that in one hundred years, the country would contain eighty million people: "What territory can be too large for a people," he asked, "who multiply with such unequalled rapidity?" The key to republicanism's survival was the diffusion of the population, and to many South Carolinians, the key to the diffusion of the white population into the frontier was the availability of slave labor. The unity, hope, and excitement produced by the Louisiana Purchase also spread to the state legislature. On December 1, 1803, the state house passed a resolution celebrating the Louisiana Purchase by a vote of 69 to 31. At the same time, the legislature would transcend the state's sectional divisions and form a broad coalition to expand the empire of slavery.

After Governor Richardson's speech to the General Assembly urging the repeal of the ban on slave imports, a regionally balanced senate committee quickly drafted a bill for reopening the foreign slave trade. Because concerns about slave revolts had not subsided, the bill still barred slaves from the West Indies, the Bahamas, and South America, and only slaves under the age of fifteen or with a certificate of "good character" could be transported into South Carolina from another state. The only surviving account of the debate illuminates the deep concerns about the slave trade and offers evidence that the reopening clashed with the economic self-interest of the state. On December 6, St. Helena's Senator

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25 David Ramsay, An Oration on the Cession of Louisiana to the United States (Charleston, 1804), 5, 14-15, 17 (the population of the United States was 76 million in 1900); Charleston Times, Dec. 13, 1803.
Robert Barnwell, a Federalist from an island that was nearly 90 percent black, issued predictions of economic decline and slave revolts. First, an increasing supply would drive down the price of slaves, so that “negroes would soon not be worth one half of what they might now be sold for.” Such a drop in the value of slaves would hurt the low country planters the most. Second, cotton already filled “the stores of Charleston” that could not be sold “at any tolerable price.” Since Europe was embroiled in a land and naval war, Barnwell feared planters would be unable to maintain their previous level of cotton exports. The introduction of more slaves to produce even more cotton would cause the price to tumble further, thus crippling the cotton producers both old and new. The drain on savings completed Barnwell’s economic argument. He feared “ruinous speculation,” warning that everyone would accumulate massive debts “purchas[ing] negroes,” debts that the cotton market, with its fall in prices, would not be able to repay.26

Barnwell took up the topic of slave revolts, but in a revealing act of self-censorship, the Courier declined to specify them. Instead, the paper reported, “The Hon. Member adduced in support of his opinion various other arguments, still more cogent and impressive, which from reasons very obvious we decline making public.” By omitting this section for “reasons very obvious,” the Courier demonstrated how seriously the low country feared inciting a revolt. The media filtered out any mention of insurrections, proving that anxiety was widespread throughout South Carolina society. This self-censorship also suggests why South Carolina newspapers and documents have left little evidence clarifying why the slave trade was reopened.27

This fear of slave revolts also led to the argument for the diffusion of slavery, a goal that the reopening of the slave trade seems to contradict. The example of St. Domingue demonstrated that a high concentration of slaves led to uprisings, so slave populations should be more dispersed. This argument would resonate particularly with the residents of low country districts, such as Barnwell’s, where slaves outnumbered whites four to one. They would have welcomed the frontier as a safety valve for surplus of slaves, especially with the indigo market in free fall and the tobacco and rice markets declining. If the low country representatives had chosen to keep the slave trade closed, they could have taken advantage of the limited

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26 Statutes at Large of South Carolina, ed. Thomas Cooper and David J. McCord (Charleston, 1836-41), 450; Charleston Courier, Dec. 26, 1803; Lewis Cecil Gray, History of Agriculture in the Southern United States (1933; rep., Gloucester, MA, 1958), 682.
supply of slaves by selling at higher prices, and they could have sold their unneeded slaves to the backcountry, thereby reducing the dangerous population imbalance. With their apocalyptic visions of slave uprisings, the leadership of South Carolina would have been expected to maximize the diffusion from their own state. As a result, the leadership ought to have supported the ban on slave trading even more strongly. Instead, South Carolina reopened the slave trade to provide the West with a more immediate supply of Africans, preempting the Caribbean sources and promoting the frontier’s security. In doing so, South Carolina aimed to lay the foundations for a stable, thriving slave system in the West that eventually would demand more slaves from the East and spread southern political power.

Responding to Barnwell, Senator William Smith (the Republican, not the Federalist William Loughton Smith) conceded that he “would agree to put a stop to the importation of negroes, but he believed it to be impossible.” With the news of the Louisiana Purchase fresh in their minds, South Carolinians realized that the illegal slave trade that they had tolerated before 1803 would be dwarfed by a flood of illegal Caribbean slaves through the Mississippi River. Just as South Carolina’s leaders had feared how smuggled Caribbean slaves might foment a rebellion in South Carolina, they now worried about the same effect in Louisiana. In 1795, French settlers had sparked a slave uprising one hundred miles north of New Orleans, and the mixture of French settlers and smuggled slaves from the Caribbean was a frightening prospect.28

On December 6, 1803, the state senate voted to reopen the African slave trade without needing a roll call. The bill then moved to the house, where the same representatives who had banned importations overwhelmingly in 1802 now voted 55-46 to reopen the trade, with the backcountry voting 30-19 in favor, and the low country voting 27-25 against. Most of the representatives who had voted for the resolution commending Jefferson’s purchase of Louisiana also voted to reopen the slave trade. The events in the last five weeks of 1803 had shifted the political tides and transformed the seemingly entrenched attitudes about the slave trade.29

Congressional proceedings immediately after the reopening also offer significant evidence that the nation’s leadership understood the connection between the slave trade and the Louisiana Purchase. On February 14, 1804,

Congressman Thomas Lowndes explained that his state had been forced to reopen the trade in part because the demand for slaves “will be strengthened by the immense accession of territory to the United States by the cession of Louisiana.” Apparently taking Lowndes at his word, Congress moved to frustrate South Carolina’s slave merchants by prohibiting the importation into the Louisiana Territory of any slaves who had come from Africa since 1798. Connecticut Senator James Hillhouse, author of this restriction, happily admitted that his amendment would impair South Carolina’s efforts, “adding that it would do so justly.” Senator Israel Smith of Vermont further connected the Louisiana Purchase with South Carolina’s reopening of the slave trade. Senator Jesse Franklin of North Carolina announced his support for a ban in Louisiana, replying militantly, “I have no objection to sending a frigate to Charleston to prevent the landing of slaves from Africa imported by South Carolina—and frittering those nefarious traders to pieces.”

Senator William Smith of South Carolina, who had been the chief sponsor of the bill to reopen the slave trade in the state senate in 1803 and fought to keep it open until 1808, directly linked the reopening and the Louisiana Purchase in the Missouri Compromise debates in 1920. Supporting the expansion of slavery without restriction, Smith entered volumes of archival documents from the Charleston slave trade into the congressional record to demonstrate that his state’s African slave trade from 1803 to 1808 actually fed the western frontier rather than South Carolina:

The whole number imported by the merchants and planters of Charleston and its vicinity were only two thousand and six [out of 39,000, roughly five percent]. Nor were the slaves imported by the foreigners, and other

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American vessels and owners, sold to the Carolinians, only in a small part. They were sold to the people of the Western States, Georgia, New Orleans, and a considerable quantity were sent to the West Indies, especially when the market became dull in Carolina.

It is rather bizarre for a representative who supported adding more western slave states to offer this kind of evidence. Though Smith intended to shift responsibility to other states for the African slave trade, he linked South Carolina to a strategy of supplying the West with its slaves.\(^{31}\)

The leadership of frontier communities understood South Carolina’s actions in the same light. Governor William C. C. Claiborne of Louisiana wrote to James Madison immediately after he heard that Congress had prohibited the foreign slave trade to Louisiana: “The Citizens generally can not be made to understand the present power of the State Authorities with regard to the importation into South Carolina, and many will be made to believe, that it is done with a view to make South Carolina the sole importer for Louisiana.” To the contrary, the other congressional delegations were frustrated by their inability to force South Carolina to close their monopoly. However, they understood that South Carolina specifically intended to supply Louisiana and the western frontier with slaves.\(^{32}\)

Throughout the 1790s, Louisiana’s colonial government had feared that slave revolts would spread to their part of the Caribbean, and they too had closed the slave trade. By 1800 Louisiana’s demand for new slave imports had overshadowed these fears, and the Spanish government had reopened the African trade. The United States’ acquisition of Louisiana in turn threatened the status of Louisiana’s open trade—indeed, Section 10 of the Louisiana Ordinance of 1804 prohibited the foreign slave trade—leaving South Carolina’s reopening ports the only alternative source of Africans. In 1805, Louisiana Territory reinterpretated the restriction on post-1798 Africans so as to allow the free movement of slaves into the West, which gave South Carolina a major advantage because it was the only place in the world that could legally import slaves from Africa and send them to New Orleans. Advertisements for Africans “just arrived from Charleston” regularly filled New Orleans newspapers. Disapproving congressmen complained: “African slaves, lately imported into Charleston, have been thence conveyed into the territory of Orleans, and, in their opinion, this practice will be continued to a very great extent, while there is no law to

\(^{31}\) Jervey, Slave Trade, 26-31; Annals of Congress, 16th Cong., 2d sess. 73-77. These records are also cited in Donnan, ed., Documents, 4:525 n.6.

prevent it." Confirming these charges, Charleston and New Orleans newspapers regularly reported on the slave trade and advertised their commerce. Gwendolyn Midlo Hall's study of Louisiana's slave population also offers further illustration of the significance of Charleston as a port of origin for Louisiana's slaves. In her sample of slaves imported to Louisiana between 1806 and 1810, 76 percent of these slaves arrived directly from Charleston, while only 3 percent came from other United States ports.33

Population growth rates also indicate the effect of South Carolina's supply of African slaves. From 1797 to 1806, Louisiana's slave population grew at only 2.1 percent per year, just around the natural rate of growth, despite the fact that Spain and France had opened the foreign slave trade from 1800 until the American take-over. Then, after the South Carolina trade began, the slave population in Louisiana sharply increased from 24,800 in 1806 to 34,700 in 1810 (an annual rate of 8.8 percent). The internal slave trade kept propelling this incredibly high rate of growth in the next decade. Michael Tadman estimated that from 1800 to 1809, only 1,159 slaves arrived in Louisiana from the internal slave trade, while 7,000 Africans were brought into Louisiana. The growth rates above suggest that a significant number of these Africans probably entered after 1806, and thus more of this growth is attributable to Charleston than to Louisiana's African trade before 1803. These demographics confirm the conclusion that "a substantial proportion" of South Carolina's imported slaves ended up in Louisiana.34

33 Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*, 165-66; DuBois, *Suppression*, 88; LaChance, "The Politics of Fear," 171, 180-81; Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1998), 341; Donnan, ed., *Documents*, 4: 513n, 665; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, "Louisiana Slave Database 1719-1820," in Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, ed., *Databases for the Study of Afro-Louisiana History and Genealogy, 1699-1860* (Baton Rouge, 2000). These numbers are less dramatic, but still impressive when 1811 and 1812 are included: 67 percent of the total came from Charleston, and only 17 percent came from other U.S. ports. This sample does not include slaves delivered by ships without a record of port of origin, nor does it include a large number of slaves who were bought at the port of origin and were not resold upon arrival in Louisiana. This sample also does not include the 3,300 slave refugees from St. Domingue arriving from Santiago de Cuba in 1809-10, which Hall decided not to include because they did not fit his parameters. This wave of immigration was the exception, not the rule.

34 LaChance, "Politics of Fear," 196; Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 342; Michael Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves: Masters, Traders, and Slaves in the Old South* (Madison, WI, 1989), 12; Hugh Thomas, *The Slave Trade* (New York, 1997), 548. Louisiana's slave population grew to 69,100 in 1820, an increase of 34,400, or 7.1 percent per year. Michael Tadman estimates that the internal slave trade accounted for 20,679 of the slaves, meaning that about 14,000 came from other sources. Tadman, *Speculators and Slaves*, 226. In addition to Louisiana, from 1800 to 1809, 15,000 Africans moved into Georgia, 9,000 into
Traditional explanations of the reopening of South Carolina’s slave trade focused on the cotton boom and agricultural self-interest, but these explanations do not square with the details of the situation. Cotton production had been exploding for a full decade before 1803. Whitney’s saw-tooth cotton gin, invented in 1793, spawned a series of copies that quickly spread throughout the Deep South, even into the lower Mississippi Valley. South Carolina’s political leaders, including William Loughton Smith and Pierce Butler, had been pursuing new cotton gins through the 1790s and learned of Whitney’s “superior” gin almost immediately. Cotton exports soared an incredible 11,200 percent from 1790 to 1795 as the cotton gin spread through South Carolina, and then it continued growing strongly and steadily. In 1800, Governor Drayton declared it a “matter of National Joy to find so valuable a staple as cotton is now added to the produce of the State. . . . The planting of cotton increases annually both in the lower and upper country.” Still, Drayton never asked the General Assembly to reopen the slave trade. When backcountry farmers begged for slave imports “expressly for the purpose of the cultivation of Cotton,” the legislature ignored their requests.  

The illegal importation of slaves also not a new phenomenon in 1803. Corresponding with the cotton boom, slave smuggling emerged as an apparent problem in the mid-1790s. In December 1795, Governor Arnoldus Vanderhorst informed the state senate, “I have reason to believe there have been many” slaves illegally imported. Unhindered by the prohibition, Savannah slave traders openly transported their human goods into South Carolina, and even advertised in The Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser in 1796. While South Carolina’s leadership was aware of tremendous smuggling years before 1803, the exact numbers of illegal slave imports cannot be very well documented. However, from other scholars’ population and migration calculations, one can estimate extremely conservatively that from 1790 to 1800, more than 3,000 slaves were smuggled illegally into South Carolina—ranging from one quarter to one half of the state’s total net migration of slaves for that decade. Governor John Drayton observed in 1802 that for several years, slave smuggling had

Mississippi, and 2,250 into Tennessee.

Klein, Unification, 247, 249; George Rogers, Evolution, 370. South Carolina’s exports increased from 9,840 pounds in 1790, to 93,540 pounds in 1793, then to 1,109,643 pounds in 1795, 6,425,000 in 1800, and 8,301,907 pounds in 1801. See Gray, History of Agriculture, 679. Joyce E. Chaplin, “Creating a Cotton South in Georgia and South Carolina,” Journal of Southern History, 57 (May 1991), 191; Drayton, A View of South Carolina, 146.
occurred “in a great degree,” and yet once again, neither he nor the legislature considered lifting the ban that year.\textsuperscript{36}

Another flaw in the agricultural self-interest argument is that the reopening actually contradicted the economic interests of the low country planters, whose representatives voted for the reopening. Certainly many low country residents profited from the slave trade as middlemen, buying from the Atlantic slave traders and selling to the frontier. However, the widespread economic and political costs to the lowcountry appear to outweigh these narrow benefits. Low country planters did not need more slaves, since their staples were in decline. Rice exports from Charleston, which peaked in 1793 at 102,235 barrels, fell steadily each year to 70,426 barrels in 1800—a decline of over 30 percent. Indigo exports at Charleston plummeting from 806,631 pounds in 1795 to a meager 96,121 pounds in 1798, finally dwindling to 3,400 pounds in 1801. Tobacco production substantially declined throughout the United States, and by the early 1800s almost all of the South Carolina planters ceased tobacco production in order to pursue cotton.\textsuperscript{37}

Far from needing more slaves, low country planters had been selling off surplus hands since the early 1790s. South Carolina was a net exporter of slaves in the 1790s, and even more so in the 1800s, during the reopening of the African trade.\textsuperscript{38} The reopening would slice into this potential profit in two ways. First, the backcountry planters could bypass the low country slaves and purchase the newly imported slaves. Second, the increasing supply of slaves would reduce the price of each slave, and as a result, the

\textsuperscript{36} Governor A. Vander Horst to Senate, Senate Messages from the Governor (Dec. 3, 1795, No. 15), cited in Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 15; John Drayton, A View of South Carolina, 146; Frederic Bancroft, Slave Trading in the Old South (New York, 1959), 22-23; Brady, “Slave Trade,” 619; Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 12, 226.


\textsuperscript{38} Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 227; Brady, “Slave Trade,” 618. See Philip S. Morgan, “Black Society in the Low Country,” 87. Michael Tadman estimates that the South Carolina low country’s net exportation was 2000 in the 1790s, and 11,000 in the 1800s; Patrick Brady estimates 1,393 and 12,996, respectively. The low country’s slave population growth was 11 percent from 1800 to 1810, which is far below the natural rate of 25 percent per decade, demonstrating the low country slave owners sold a considerable number of slaves out of their region. Various scholars posit a rate of 25 percent population growth per decade. Brady, “Slave Trade,” 618; Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 69-70. Even Morgan, who rejects Brady’s estimates, offers an estimate of 2 percent annual growth, which compounds to over 25 percent over a decade.
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net wealth of the low country planters would also fall. South Carolina’s merchants and planters generally did not invest in the African slave trade, and kept relatively few of the slaves that were imported. The merchants and planters of the Charleston area imported only five percent of the slaves, and most of the total number of imported slaves headed to the western frontier or the Caribbean. The increase in Africans living in South Carolina from 1800 to 1810 was surprisingly small, which indicates that the state’s internal demand did not come close to absorbing the imported African slaves. From 1800 to 1810, the increase in African adults living in South Carolina was only 15,945, suggesting that most of the imported slaves—between 20,000 and 24,000 out of the total 39,000—were shipped out of state and into the frontier.

Funnelling new slaves into the backcountry further hurt the low country planters by increasing the supply of cotton. As a result of the South’s overproduction and Europe’s return to war, the price of cotton already had plummeted from $4.50 in 1800 to $1.19 in 1801, and it remained at such low levels until the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. South Carolina’s leadership surely understood that increasing the supply of cotton would drive the price down even further and did not serve their financial self-interest. Moreover, developing the backcountry gave that region more political and economic power over the low country.

As if economic disincentives were not enough, reopening the slave trade also heightened fears of slave revolt among the low country’s already

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39 Annals of Congress, 16th Cong, 2d sess., 77, cited in Donnan, ed., Documents, 4: 525 n6; Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 227; Brady, “Slave Trade,” 618; Philip Morgan, “Black Society in the Low Country,” 87, 92. Philip Morgan contended that his estimates that the low country was a net importer of slaves is "much more plausible" than Brady’s calculations, but he did not offer a strong enough explanation for his estimates and his implausibly low "hypothetical rate of natural increase" of a mere 14 percent in the 1790s and 8 percent in the 1800s. Morgan explained that he used a 2 percent annual growth rate based upon the pattern in the 1770s and 1780s, but compounded over 10 years, a 2 percent annual rate yields a growth rate of 25 percent over a decade. This rate is almost identical to Brady’s and Tadman’s estimates. Perhaps Morgan decided to deflate the natural growth rate because of the low country’s adverse swampy conditions, although he never provides this explanation. If this is the basis of his adjustment, one must still take into account the agricultural shift from rice and indigo to short-staple cotton after 1790, which would produce lower mortality rates. If Morgan rejects the low country’s shift to short-staple cotton in order to keep the natural growth rate low, then he must explain why the low country would have any net migration at all in the first place, with the decline of all of the low country’s other staples from 1790 to 1810. Even if one averages Morgan’s estimates with Brady’s and Tadman’s, the results still demonstrate a net export of about 6,000 slaves out of the low country.

40 Gray, History of Agriculture, 682.
besieged white minority. In just the first two weeks that slave ships arrived, over 600 Africans poured into Charleston. That this influx of slaves was African and not Caribbean did little to ease public anxieties. William Freehling describes the effect of the huge numbers of African natives pouring into Charleston from 1804 to 1807 as adding "the final touch to the ominous mood of the coastal black belt," creating "a sense of ever-present danger." Some had argued that the smuggling of Caribbean slaves posed a dangerous threat, but these new African imports, "untamed" and unassimilated, proved no less frightening. The flood of slaves into Charleston choked off the port from other commercial enterprises. Ebenezer Thomas, a Charleston bookseller, recounted that his business had doubled each year from 1800 to 1803, but that from the day the slave trade reopened business throughout the city began to decline:

Previous to this, the planters had large sums of money laying idle in the banks, which they liberally expended.... A great change at once took place in everything. Vessels were fitted out in numbers, for the coast of Africa, and as fast as they returned, the slaves were bought up with avidity, not only consuming the large funds that had been accumulating, but all that could be procured, and finally exhausting credit, and mortgaging the slaves for payment; many of whom were not redeemed for ten years after.... So completely absorbed were the funds of the agriculturalists, in many instances, that those who had been in the habit of indulging in every luxury, and paying for it at the moment, took credit for a bundle of quills and a ream of paper.

Slave trading drained money away from the city without enriching the local community. The records reveal that South Carolina investors owned less than five percent of the African slaves traded through Charleston; only thirteen of the consignees for the 202 ships were from South Carolina, while ninety-one were from Britain, eighty-eight were from Rhode Island, and ten from France. South Carolina’s citizens were, at most, middlemen in the trade, and they were not reaping the profits of the trade as the direct importers from Africa.

Low country voters registered their outrage at the ballot box in 1804, probably recognizing that the slave trade offered them more financial losses than benefits. Of the twenty-five low county representatives who voted to

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reopen the trade, fourteen were not returned to the house the next year. The proslave trade majority vanished; four representatives from the Charleston area (probably responding to the city’s disapproval) switched sides to oppose the slave trade. Only the state senate, institutionally more removed from the tide of public opinion, prevented the reimposition of a ban on slave imports—and still by only one vote. Six low country senators defied the will of their constituents and voted with the backcountry to sustain slave imports. In 1805 Governor Paul Hamilton again complained that the slave trade was “productive of effects the most injurious, in draining us of our specie, thereby embarrassing our commercial men, and materially lessening the sale of our produce.” It frightened whites away from the low country, and as ever more slaves entered Charleston, he feared for the safety of the state. A two-to-one majority in the house agreed, but the senate split 16 to 16, effectively defeating the measure. Again, the votes of low county senators, contradicting their interests and constituents, proved decisive to saving the slave trade. The *National Intelligencer* in Washington denounced this failure in an editorial: “[O]ur hopes are again blasted by the decision of the senate of South-Carolina.” The next year the state legislature revisited the issue with exactly the same results.43

Two curiosities mark the state senate’s voting patterns from 1804 to 1806. First, the low country senators who voted for the slave trade lived in slave exporting districts and personally owned large numbers of slaves. One might expect that they personally would have profited by keeping the slave trade closed and increasing the value of their slaves. Furthermore, in all four of the low country districts, the proportion of slaves to the total population climbed to astounding rates—over eighty percent in each, and approaching ninety percent in Georgetown and the district of Charleston. The prospect of turning Charleston and its environs into a waystation for tens of thousands of new Africans must have been ominous indeed. The second

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peculiarity about the senate voting patterns is that the backcountry did not support the slave trade as strongly as one might expect. If the reopening truly was driven by backcountry demand, it is curious that the backcountry senators divided on each vote: 11-6 in 1804, 10-5 in 1805, and a narrow 9-7 in 1806. Clearly something more was at work in South Carolina's stubborn commitment to slave importations, a commitment that withstood scathing criticism both at home and in Congress, and that ended only when Congress banned the trade altogether in 1808.44

In the midst of the Missouri Controversy of 1820, Thomas Jefferson mused regretfully about America's slavery problem: "We have the wolf by the ears; and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go." South Carolina's first approach was to try to get a tamer wolf (from Africa, rather than the Caribbean). Second, they found a way to strengthen their grip, with a strategy of diffusion, to make sure that the wolves never formed a pack. For many diffusionists, the frontier held the key to eventual emancipation without inundating the East in free blacks. Most importantly, for South Carolina's leaders, diffusion promised to preserve slavery for as long and with as much security as possible. These proslavery strategists sacrificed South Carolina's immediate comfort and interest to help produce a frontier committed to slavery that, in the long run, would draw over 100,000 slaves out of South Carolina.45

44 Brady, "Slave Trade," 620; Annals of Congress, 9th Cong., 2d sess., 14; Dubois, Suppression, 241-46. Only Beaufort was a net importer, because its population increase of 30 percent from 1800-1810 exceeded the natural growth rate (between 20-25 percent). Georgetown's growth rate was 12 percent, Charleston District's was 5 percent, and Colleton's was 7 percent, suggesting that the low country was selling off half of its natural increase of slaves out of their region. The following low country senators voted to keep the slave trade open: Thomas Porcher of Charleston (St. John, Berkeley) inherited 169 slaves in 1800; Samuel Warren of Charleston (St. James Santee) owned 100 slaves; Mathias Hutchinson of Colleton owned 51; William B. Mitchell of Colleton owned 85 in 1800; William C. Pinckney of Colleton, a plantation owner after the 1790s until his death, owned between 68 and 95 slaves in the 1820s, Paul Michaux of Georgetown owned 32 slaves in 1800; and Leonard Dozier of Georgetown owned 14. Bailey, Morgan, and Taylor, eds., Biographical Directory of the South Carolina Senate, 1:415; 2:783, 1098, 1122, 1284; 3:1685.

45 Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, Apr. 22, 1820, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh (20 vols., Washington, DC, 1904-05), 15: 248-49; Tadman, Table 2.1, "Estimates of net interregional slave movements according to state, 1790-1859," in Speculators and Slaves, 12. In the 1800s and 1810s, South Carolina witnessed a small net increase in slaves, but in the 1820s, a net exodus of over 20,000 slaves departed South Carolina for the West. Thereafter, the frontier safety valve continued to pump, producing a net exodus out of South Carolina of 171,200 slaves from 1820 to 1860.
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Through the expansion of slavery and the inculcation of a proslavery culture, the slaveowners of South Carolina reaped crucial long-term political benefits. By establishing new slave states and increasing slave populations, South Carolina’s slave importation helped to add proslavery allies in the Congress and the Electoral College. To promote the survival of slavery, these proslavery forces sought to broaden the base of slaveownership, even if it created economic competition. In an increasingly democratic political culture, slavery could not survive as an elite, minority institution; slavery expansion had to be demographic as well as geographic. This democratization was evident in the South Carolina backcountry from 1790 to 1810, when the percentage of households owning slaves increased by 13 percent. Put into the larger political context, this expansionism was a critical step in a statewide movement towards democratic inclusiveness in South Carolina. The “democratizing” of slavery eased the way for the low country to endorse legislative reapportionment in 1808, which finally gave more representation to the backcountry. Once confident that proslavery values had trickled down to the masses in 1810, the planter elites embraced the first policy of universal white male suffrage in any of the original thirteen states. Safely inoculated with slaves and slaveholders, the

The increase in cotton production and the reopening of the slave trade explain why diffusion was delayed, but after 1820, the high demand for slaves in the West was much more powerful than South Carolina’s own demand. Proslavery diffusion was best articulated during the Missouri Compromise debate. When Senator Harrison Gray Otis, a Massachusetts Federalist, argued that the expansion of slavery increased the likelihood of the spread of French ideas and slave insurrection, James Barbour of Virginia refuted his claim by citing the “lessons of St. Domingue” that the high concentration of slaves was the cause of the revolt. Congress could avert this same fate by promoting the westward redistribution of slaves. Hunt explains the belief that the frontier safety valve would solve the South’s security problems: “Southerners saw the West as an area that could absorb virtually all potential troublemakers, both red and black, in their region.” See Hunt, Haiti’s Influence, 126.

46. Davis, Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 158; Peter Kolchin, American Slavery, 1619-1877 (New York, 1994), 96-97; Tadman, Speculators and Slaves, 42-46; Fogel and Engerman, Time on the Cross, 48; Phillips, American Negro Slavery, 165; Fogel and Engerman, Without Consent or Contract, 65. The Carolinas, Maryland, and Virginia supplied 85 percent of the slaves who moved west. Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas received 75 percent of those transported blacks. U. B. Phillips observed, “The Alabama-Mississippi population [of slaves] rose from 40,000 in round numbers in 1810 to 200,000 in 1820, 445,000 in 1830, 965,000 in 1840, 1,377,000 in 1850, and 1,660,000 in 1860. . . . In the same period the tide flowed on into the cotton lands of Arkansas and Louisiana and eventually into Texas.” Phillips, American Negro Slavery, 171.
southern frontier offered even greater opportunities for the spread of equality and a unified democracy. 47

The leaders of South Carolina had been well aware of their state's cotton surge and of the dangers of illegal slave trade, but these reasons proved insufficient to bring about reopening of the African trade. The Louisiana Purchase was the catalyst, making the two basic ingredients—cotton and slave smuggling—much more powerful than they had been before 1803. Although low country planters had been reluctant to reopen the trade in response to the local demands alone, national politics after the Louisiana Purchase changed the equation. The fact that the low country legislators voted to reopen the slave trade despite so many costs to their own immediate economic and electoral interests illustrates the importance of ideology and long-term political strategy. South Carolina's leaders overcame their fear and ignored their economic self-interest to pursue a vision of frontier expansion deeply intertwined with slavery. South Carolina's slavery imperialists turned Jefferson's antislavery diffusion strategy on its head and built within Jefferson's "Empire of Liberty" the foundation for a vast and unified democratic confederacy of slavery.

47 Klein, Unification, 252; Lacy K. Ford Jr., Origins of Southern Radicalism: The South Carolina Upcountry, 1800-1860 (New York, 1988), 102; Frehling, Reintegration of American History, 185. William Frehling writes, "The racial foundation of Southwide unity, however, was a two-edged sword. For racism to unite nonslaveholders and slaveholders, the black race had to be significantly present." As a result, the frontier created both the opportunity to expand slavery and the incentive to keep increasing the slave population in those areas.