

South Carolina became the first southern state to secede from the Union. Adopted on December 24, 1860, South Carolina's "Declaration of the Immediate Causes" made clear that the state was seceding over the issue of slavery:

We affirm that these ends for which this [Federal] Government was instituted have been defeated, and the Government itself has been made destructive of them by the action of the non-slaveholding States. Those States have assumed the right of deciding upon the propriety of our domestic institutions; and have denied the rights of property established in fifteen of the States and recognized by the Constitution; they have denounced as sinful the institution of slavery; they have permitted open establishment among them of societies, whose avowed object is to disturb the peace and to eloign [take away] the property of the citizens of other States. They have encouraged and assisted thousands of our slaves to leave their homes; and those who remain, have been incited by emissaries, books and pictures to servile insurrection.

For twenty-five years this agitation has been steadily increasing, until it has now secured to its aid the power of the common Government. Observing the forms of the Constitution, a sectional party [the Republican Party] has found within that Article establishing the Executive Department, the means of subverting the Constitution itself. A geographical line has been drawn across the Union, and all the States north of that line have united in the election of a man to the high office of President of the United States, whose opinions and purposes are hostile to slavery. He is to be entrusted with the administration of the common Government, because he has declared that that "Government cannot endure permanently half slave, half free," and that the public mind must rest in the belief that slavery is in the course of ultimate extinction.

In the months leading up to secession, given that only about a quarter of white southerners owned slaves, South Carolina's leaders were concerned about whether non-slaveholding citizens would support secession and fight for the South when war came. Of all the arguments made on behalf of secession, perhaps the most revealing—not only at the time but also for the future of race relations—pertained to the issue of white status. Below, two South Carolinians argue for secession from the standpoint of preserving white status.

White Status and Southern Secession

The following is from "The Doom of Slavery in the Union: Its Safety Out of It," a pamphlet by John Townsend, a South Carolina state senator; October 29, 1860:

...But in noticing its [abolition's] effects upon the different classes and interests in the South, we should not omit to notice its effects upon the *non-slaveholding* portion of our citizens.

Accompanied as that measure is to be, by reducing the two races to an *equality*—or, in other words, in elevating the negro slave to an equality with the white man—it will be to the non-slaveholder, equally with the largest slaveholder, the obliteration of *caste* and the deprivation of important privileges. The color of the white man is now, in the South, a title

of nobility in his relations as to the negro; and although Cuffy or Sambo [pejorative terms for a black person] may be immensely his superior in wealth, may have his thousands deposited in bank, as some of them have, and may be the owner of many slaves, as some of them are,* yet the poorest non-slaveholder, being a white man, is his superior in the eye of the law; may serve and command in the militia; may sit upon juries, to decide upon the rights of the wealthiest in the land; may give his testimony in Court, and may cast his vote, equally with the largest slaveholder, in the choice of his rulers. In no country in the world does—the poor white man, whether slaveholder or non-slaveholder, occupy so enviable a position as in the slaveholding States of the South. His color here admits him to social and civil privileges, which the white man enjoys nowhere else. In countries where negro slavery does not exist, (as in the Northern States of this Union and in Europe,) the most menial and degrading employments in society are filled by the white poor, who are hourly seen drudging in them. *Poverty*, then, in those countries, becomes the badge of inferiority, and wealth, of distinction. Hence the arrogant airs which wealth there puts on, in its intercourse with the poor man. But in the Southern slaveholding States, where these menial and degrading offices are turned over to be performed exclusively by the negro slave, the status and *color of the black race* becomes the badge of inferiority, and the poorest non-slaveholder may rejoice with the richest of his brethren of the white race, in the distinction of his color. The poorest non-slaveholder, too, except as I have before said, he be debased by his vices or his crimes, thinks and feels and acts as if he was, and always intended to be, superior to the negro. He may be poor, it is true; but there is no point upon which he is so justly proud and sensitive as his privilege of caste; and there is nothing which he would resent with more fierce indignation than the attempt of the Abolitionist to emancipate the slaves and elevate the negroes to an equality with himself and his family. The abolitionists have sent their emissaries among that class of our citizens, trying to debauch their minds by persuading them that they have no interest in preventing the abolition of slavery. But they cannot deceive any, except the most ignorant and worthless, the intelligent among them are too well aware of the degrading consequences of abolition upon themselves and their families (such as I have described them), to be entrapped by their arts. They know that, at the North and in Europe, where no slavery exists, where poverty is the mark of inferiority; where the negroes have been put upon equality with the whites, and “money makes the man,” although,—that man may be a negro;—they know, I say, that there the white man is seen *waiting* upon the negro;—there he is seen *obeying* the negro as his ostler [stableboy], his coachman, his servant and his bootblack [boot polisher]. Knowing, then, these things, and that the abolition of slavery, and the reign of negro equality here, may degrade the white man in the same way as it has done in those countries, there is no non-slaveholder with the spirit of the white race in his bosom, who would not spurn with contempt this scheme of Yankee cunning and malice.

The following is from “The Interest in Slavery of the Southern Non-Slaveholder,” a booklet by James D. B. DeBow, a publisher and essayist, Charleston; December 5, 1860:

...*The non-slaveholder of the South preserves the status of the white man, and is not regarded as an inferior or a dependent.* He is not told that the Declaration of Independence, when it says that all men are born free and equal, refers to the negro equally with himself. It is not

proposed to him that the free negro's vote shall weigh equally with his own at the ballot-box, and that the little children of both colors shall be mixed in the classes and benches of the school-house, and embrace each other filially in its outside sports. It never occurs to him, that a white man could be degraded enough to boast in a public assembly, as was recently done in New York, of having actually slept with a negro. And his patriotic ire would crush with a blow the free negro who would dare, in his presence, as is done in the free States, to characterize the father of the country as a "scoundrel." No white man at the South serves another as a body servant, to clean his boots, wait on his table, and perform the menial services of his household. His blood revolts against this, and his necessities never drive him to it. He is a companion and an equal. When in the employ of the slaveholder, or in intercourse with him, he enters his hall, and has a seat at his table. If a distinction exists, it is only that which education and refinement may give, and this is so courteously exhibited as scarcely to strike attention. The poor white laborer at the North is at the bottom of the social ladder, whilst his brother here has ascended several steps and can look down upon those who are beneath him, at an infinite remove.

* Many readers are shocked to discover that some free blacks in the South owned slaves. Free blacks in general found the acquisition of even modest amounts of real estate and personal holdings to be extremely difficult. Free blacks faced repressive legal codes, prejudice that kept them from securing jobs, competition from slaves and whites in various occupations, and, because they were coming out of slavery, a deficiency in skills needed to compete economically. As a result, only a tiny portion of the free black population accumulated even small amounts of property. To the extent that this property included slaves, it was often done to deliver family members or friends from the ownership of white masters. In many slave states it was illegal to grant slaves their freedom; they had to continue under someone's ownership, and far better that it should be by a black relative or friend than by anyone else.

There were a few places in the South where black slaveholding was more concentrated and mainly commercial in nature. These areas included Charleston, South Carolina, and New Orleans, Louisiana—as well as some rural areas in both of those states. The vast majority of these “black” slaveowners were mulatto, or mixed race. These better-off mulattoes were either descendants of southern white fathers who had given financial assistance or assets to their mulatto children, or immigrants from the Caribbean who had arrived in the United States with significant wealth or connections. Their endeavors typically entailed either larger-scale agriculture or the trades (skilled manual labor). While these mulatto slaveowners had to endure color prejudice themselves, they also identified with the dominant white caste and looked down upon darker-complected blacks, whether slave or free. (Their attitude was very different from mulattoes today who tend to identify as black.) In how they treated their slaves, they varied little from white slaveowners. Most considered their slaves primarily as chattel property, just like their white counterparts. There were also some dark-complected blacks, though a small minority of colored slaveowners, who held slaves as chattel. (For further information on black property ownership, which includes discussion of black slaveholding, see *Black Property Owners in the South, 1790-1915*, by Loren Schweninger, University of Illinois Press, 1990.)