Introduction

Politics, Chess, Hats

One hundred and thirty years later, I encountered the Vigilant Rifles much as Bill Gist did, by reading Sam Tupper's surprising letter. First I found a faded photocopy in the governor's papers at the state archives in Columbia. Then I located the original crammed inside a box of captured military documents at the National Archives. I had been searching for rosters of Minute Men companies in South Carolina, hoping to learn what sort of fellows joined and led these radicals. Did big planters dragoon the small fry into arms? Did young men become Young Turks to prove themselves? Once I turned up my lists, I knew, the answers would appear.

But Sam Tupper's list was confounding. Even before I tried tracing his volunteers, I saw the problem: the Vigilant Rifles were from Charleston. There was no way to answer my questions about planter–yeoman relations using these documents; there were no farms in Charleston. Age or wealth or political leadership might prove important in the decision to become a Minute Man, but that knowledge could shed little light on the organization's character in towns like Columbia, Winnsboro, or Spartanburg, or at crossroads where a church or store focused activity. For what I wanted to know, Tupper's list was useless. Charleston was different from anywhere in South Carolina, different from anywhere in the South.

That obvious fact came as an epiphany to me, since most histories of secession deny it.[1] There was not one secession crisis, I recognized, but at least eleven, overlapping yet distinct: South Carolina quit the Union on December 20, 1860, and nine other states followed on nine different dates before Tennessee lagged out on June 8, 1861. And within each of those conflicts, Southerners contested separation through scores of smaller, semipermeable struggles, linking county cliques and dividing dinner tables. Those few scholars who have offered unitary explanations of the birth of the Confederacy acknowledge differences of timing and circumstance, yet leave the bewildering, all-important "details" of local action for others to explain.

Analyzing the complex events that accomplished disunion has encouraged historians to study the dynamics of national breakup at the state level. This has been both strength and weakness. We now know well how the legislatures and conventions of the various states brought disunion off. Below this, though, differences flatten out and disappear, especially in all-important South Carolina.[2] Why did Greenville District voters support disunion? For much the same reasons Edgefield farmers or lowcountry squires did, we are told, and in much the same way. But such *dicta* are rooted deeper in assumption than research. Just how secession came to triumph at the local level, historians do not say: Charleston militants probably acted much like their country cousins. Treating Sam Tupper's list as a special case meant rejecting that logic.

It was a lot to reject. Although scholars have failed at writing anything like a real history of secession, they have done wonders at constructing rival theories. After a century of brilliant research and argument, nearly all interpretations fall into one of two camps. One school opts for a mass conversion experience to explain the Confederacy's origins. Southerners supposedly awoke spontaneously to the danger Lincoln's election posed to their interests, rallying to the Stars and Bars. There was little hesitation, less internal debate worth noting, especially in touchy South Carolina. Even in 1860, Charleston novelist William Gilmore Simms favored this perspective, calling disunion a popular "*landsturm*" against Northern aggression.[3] The other trope takes its cue from Republican wartime propaganda, claiming that the rebellion was conjured by Southern traitors (or, says a Dixie variant, patriots of greater insight than their peers). In 1861, this cabal conspired to propel the slaveholding states out of the Union, regardless of popular feeling.[4] Hear the words of South Carolina judge Alfred Proctor Aldrich, chairman of his state senate's Committee on Federal Relations, pronounced six days after the Vigilant Rifles offered their all to Governor Gist. "Whoever waited for the common people when a great movement was to be made?" The crisis was now: "We must make the move & force them to follow." Aldrich's plan to quell opposition was time-tested: assassinate the strong, shame the weak, drag the mass along.[5]

Popular uprising or Machiavellian intrigue? There are any number of elegant, often brilliant turns scholars have given these arguments, yet little progress has been made in recent years to explain just how the United States came to break up in the winter of 1860.[6] Deflecting contemporary claims and latter-day variants has become academic child's play in an age disdainful of the "will of the people" and conspiracy theories alike. Simms may have exaggerated his "*landsturm*" analysis, Romantic that he was. And whoever heard of Alfred Aldrich, anyway? The consequence is stalemate. Since David Potter's landmark narrative, *The Impending Crisis*, four decades ago, a short shelf of state-level studies and a couple of valuable biographies have appeared.[7] Each has made worthy contributions, but collectively, they have failed to revive a tired debate. Currently, scholars weigh William Freehling's masterwork, *The Road to Disunion*, but those looking for a breakthrough must be disappointed. Freehling sleuthed to solve old questions, not raise new ones.[8] The limits to the problem – what caused disunion and civil war – seem set in stone.

Sam Tupper's tale can never be told under those constraints. The trouble is, as one radical reminded the *Charleston Mercury*, "revolutions are not merely willed, they are to be carried out." Deciding is never nearly the same as doing, and the Vigilant Rifles vowed to be doers. Secession scholars have missed this point, wrangling over why Southerners came to choose political revolution in 1860, but saying little about who accomplished it and how. Eric Walther's 1992 collective biography, *The Fire-Eaters*, expertly traced the growth of a common consciousness among some of the South's most radical leaders, potential conspirators if ever there were such. But Walther's hotheads disappeared come 1860. They almost never joined active secessionist groups, or gave real speeches to actual people at specific times and places that had any discernible effect. Nor did they march in parades, disseminate pamphlets, or put their heads together with other cadres on particular occasions to plot a common course. Most were sick or dead, or out of the country, inactive, or not very important at the crucial moment when the Confederacy was taking shape.[9]

This is the same problem that plagued John McCardell's *Idea of a Southern Nation*: a great idea radical Southerners had, but how did they pull it off? Likewise, Drew Faust's *A Sacred Circle* claimed that alienated intellectuals were important in getting the South up to speed for disunion. But when crisis came, Faust's eggheads all went missing – save only eccentric Virginian Edmund Ruffin.[10] He wrote some letters, gave some speeches, signed up as a private in South Carolina's Provisional Army, and fired a symbolic first shot at Fort Sumter. Pulling that lanyard seems revolutionary enough, but not very important as to making a revolution. Analyzing this odd triggerman brings us little closer to understanding how the overthrow of the Republic was achieved.

Repeatedly the question is begged: if not these men, who organized the disunionist rallies and processions that mobilized support? Who stood for election to the secession conventions, who nominated them, and who mustered the votes to gain their victories? Who guided legislative action behind the scenes? Who gave the stump speeches and the volunteer toasts? Who serenaded fence-sitting politicians and organized mobs to quell the opposition? Who *performed* disunion – and how, and why? Of this, we know almost nothing. Which means that we know precious little about secession at all. Whoever they were, the Vigilant Rifles volunteered to do something practical to achieve disunion. I thought they deserved a closer look.

Exploring the social and cultural forces that generated Sam Tupper's letter would advance my understanding of disunion's development. For if secession was a spontaneous popular movement, how did it spread? In *The Great Fear of 1789*, French historian Georges Lefebvre offers an excellent model for Southern scholars, tracking the passage of fears of counterrevolution through particular towns on definite dates. That painstaking local history provides a solid foundation for broader analytical claims. By contrast, in Steven Channing's prize-winning *Crisis of Fear*, locality has no importance at all. South Carolina in 1860 seems gripped by the same disunionist determinations almost always at the same moment everywhere.[11] Channing knew more than he told – his book provides valuable details in abundance – but historical complexity is throttled for the sake of persuasive argument. If neighborhood meetings or particular events turned the tide of opinion, they rate no notice in his pages, or in virtually any other study of secession. As with Christianity, it seems, the Confederacy began with a virgin birth.[12]

Compared with the enormous and dynamic historiography of the English, French, Bolshevik, National Socialist, and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, among others, our understanding of the origins, mechanics, and meanings of the Southern slaveholders' uprising remains impoverished and conceptually threadbare.[13] In each of these fields, scholars have moved from pretext to context, developing insights about the political process and the social and cultural milieu in which it developed by trolling up apparently minor, everyday happenings at the local level. So should we.

Countless exceptional, supposedly unimportant or parochial incidents in the disunionist South might prompt new lines of inquiry.[14] Consider four neglected items from South Carolina in October, 1860.

A few days before Sam Tupper wrote his letter, a shadowy faction of Charleston merchants and politicians came together under the banner of the "1860 Association," circulating secessionist pamphlets across the state and further afield. They were the only group of their kind, yet scholars have devoted little attention to their activities and impact. No one has offered an examination of the themes, structures, or rhetorical style of their tracts. Especially in the Old South – overwhelmingly rural, with relatively few newspapers and job printing establishments – figuring out how disunionist arguments were shaped and spread, who espoused them, when, where, and why, is an important task.[15]

In the same month, Charleston-born, New Orleans-based editor James D. B. DeBow noted in the back pages of his influential magazine his attendance at "a very large political gathering" at the Williamston springs, on the Georgia–South Carolina border, sometime in the past summer. No historian has mentioned this rally, although it was one of the largest secessionist meetings held in the upcountry before Lincoln's election, galvanizing popular support for radical action.[16] Indeed, it may be that, beyond Charleston, opposition to disunion in the South fought and lost its crucial battle here. Who organized the meeting, and why? Who spread word of the rally and how? Who addressed the crowds that came and who stayed away? What difference did the day's events make? Documentary evidence is plentiful, but no one has tallied it up. In truth, we know little of the local history of disunion anywhere in South Carolina or beyond. How was separation accomplished at the county and community levels?

And what of anti-secessionist feeling? How was it quashed in these crucial days? In South Carolina, disunion's triumph is supposed to have transpired relatively painlessly, especially once Republican victory made the alternative plain. But by late October, merchant-planter Christopher Fitzsimmons described Charleston's legislative delegation as "very much divided" on disunion, "and the same is said to be the case throughout the State." Three weeks later, piedmont politician Richard Griffin still saw "a minority of considerable strength" in the General Assembly opposed to separate secession. In early December, radicals recognized that there were yet sizeable pockets of opposition, especially in the upcountry and in Charleston, led by effective popular leaders. At summer's end, the chief justice of the state supreme court, the attorney general, both of South

Carolina's federal senators, several former and current congressmen, and potent planters, lawyers, politicians, and editors strongly opposed disunion over Lincoln's election. Yet they remained divided and ineffective. How this dissent was thwarted remains understudied.[17]

Who did the thwarting – who stood in the vanguard of secession at the community level – and what motivated them is almost wholly unknown. Quite shamefully, historians have substituted theoretical claims for archival research. By early October, George Tillman of Edgefield District warned moderates that "a secret, armed opposition" was taking shape "in every District of the State," under the umbrella of the "Minute Men for the Defence of Southern Rights." Already "Several *Secret* Meetings … of the *Sensational* Kind" had been held,[18] but Tillman could only guess about the group's leaders, members, aims, and methods. Historians have done little more.[19] Did they plan to march on Washington to prevent Lincoln's inauguration, or to "encounter" Republicans by some "revolutionary force *in* the Union" stopping short of secession, or were they determined to accomplish disunion no matter what?[20] So far, we know little about the paramilitary groups that spearheaded disunion at the street level.

It was with this last problem that my project began. Understanding why Carolinians stepped forward as Minute Men is particularly important. Had South Carolina not led the way, seceding unilaterally without risking a popular referendum, no other state would have leapt into the breach. Timing made that leap even trickier. Hesitation of a hundred stripes – "unmanly weakness, dreads, doubts, indecision, imbecility" – had thwarted nationalist schemes for decades, Carolina radicals knew. Delay action now for just a few weeks, and the separatist cause in Alabama would stall. The Georgia campaign would fall apart.[21] So, many foresaw, the drive for Southern independence would unravel, leaving South Carolina a tiny separate nation – "too small for a republic, too big for an insane asylum" – scrambling back toward state status. Those who stood in the radical vanguard, then, played a crucial role by preventing delay. Without their action, the South would not have created its slaveholding Confederacy in the spring of 1861 and, for good or ill, there would have been no Civil War – certainly not as it finally unfolded.[22]

On one other point, most ultras agreed in the fall of 1860: if not now, it would be never for secession. This was the last chance of retrieving their world from disaster. Hotheads like Robert Barnwell Rhett Jr. and John Townsend trumpeted that warning to South Carolina audiences, and that many modern historians believe as well. Once Republicans installed Southern Judases in federal offices across the region it would be too late to resist. Political patronage would corrupt loyalties, divide the South's friends, and nurture abolitionism in their midst. Like Samson shorn, slaveholders would be powerless to ward off the fatal blow Yankees longed to strike. Upon these truths Sam Tupper's Minute Men agreed.[23]

How then to deal with these Vigilant Rifles? Their experience could hardly be collapsed with that of rural Minute Men, and I was unwilling to discard their evidence simply because it did not answer to my liking the questions I posed. I never aimed at *bricolage*, but sometimes the evidence chooses the historian. Or, at least, stomps all over his plans.

Tupper's list and the letters that accompanied it held clues to a mystery in its own right, I saw: how and why radical secessionism took shape and triumphed in Charleston, transforming a notorious citadel of unionists, slowcoaches, and money-minded foot-draggers in the space of weeks into the South's most rabidly fire-eating city. "From Charleston flowed the impulse, to a very great extent, that moved the State," contemporaries agreed.[24] Could these documents explain that ill-starred inspiration? I decided to focus on the Vigilant Rifles to understand who they were, why these men became Minute Men, what the social and cultural context of their decision looked like at the local level. Naively, I put aside abstruse models and methods to see where the paper trail led.

Identifying the Vigilants was the first task. Constructing biographical information for each man would better acquaint me with the details of life in Charleston in the months leading up to disunion. The circumstances of the formation of the military company and the reasons why these particular men stepped forward would unfold. Buried beneath a mountain of worthless information, I assumed, the answers awaited. Dig and I would find my treasure. Which is to say that I planned to lick the problem I had posed just as most historians do most of the time. Soon I was beavering away at city directories and tax lists, census records, and manuscripts, piecing together the odd facts of 115 men's lives. My files, my confidence, and, I thought, my knowledge grew with each day's labor. Soon the mystery would be solved.

Then Walter Steele showed up. I never intended to cross his path. Each day, as part of my research, I read a few issues of Charleston's newspapers for the period: the radical *Mercury*, the commercial-minded *Courier*, the often-pandering *Evening News*, and others. Four or five generations ago, when Southern manuscript archives were yet in their infancy, scholars like Ulrich Phillips and Avery Craven mastered using newspapers to understand political developments. Now everyone gleans snappy quotes or colorful details from the search engines they click through, but few bother to study a body of newspapers *in extenso*. Too many pages, too much "irrelevant" information to sift! It strains the eye and breaks the back. When scholars face an embarrassment of riches in terms of manuscript evidence, delving deeply into newspapers often seems pointless, difficult, and career-killing.

I enjoy searching for needles in haystacks, though, and poring over a few pages each day – long before they showed up online – revealed much about Tupper's company I might otherwise have missed. It was exciting to see the disunionist cause gain strength and confidence, and I delighted in the details of daily life I came across. Part of that fun was sharing with friends the quaint advertisements in each issue of the *Courier* or *Mercury*. We would recite the menus of turtle soup, Boston halibut, and mutton chops eateries like the French Coffee House or Burn and Davis' Charleston Restaurant offered. We considered the benefits of Peruvian Syrup, Colleton Bitters, Sand's Sarsaparilla, or Dr. Eaton's Infantile Cordial for our various ills. "Death to Cockroaches!" we exclaimed when one located the heroic headline Van Schaak and Grierson's drugstore ("at the Sign of the Negro and the Golden Mortar") used to sell Adolph Isaacsen's Genuine Electric Powder. The humor helped pass the time as I turned the pages.[25]

But time and again, when friends were gone, Walter Steele kept popping up. Every few issues, a new advertisement for "Steele's Hat Hall," located on fashionable King Street, appeared in one paper or another. Children's hats and caps, straw plantation hats, men's dress and casual hats in a score of styles – Steele hawked them in summer and winter, in tiny corner notices and eye-catching displays, always joined to a persuasive and witty come-on. I began to look forward to each pitch as a little reward to myself, if not to my labors. Then I came upon Steele and Company's ad in the *Mercury* of October 5, 1860, short weeks before Lincoln's election. "Politics! Chess! Hats!!!" its headline announced, weaving together the topics to entice readers toward a purchase.

> IF WE DWELL ONLY UPON HATS, WE MAY TIRE YOU, so we will mingle one with the other, and if we eventually succeed in selling you one of our finest HATS for FOUR DOLLARS, it will repay us for the trouble of writing, help us pay the printer for setting up the type, and end in harmony. We all know, or should know, that Arithmetic, Geometry, Algebra, Trigonometry, and Conic Sections are branches of Mathematics. Mathematicians often bring forward suppositious cases to arrive at a just conclusion.

> We find politicians playing a four-handed game of political chess upon the chess-board of our common Uncle. A kind of "loose," "consultation game," where the players are arranged as follows: Messrs. LINCOLN and HAMLIN have the white men. Opposite to them are BELL and EVERETT, playing with pieces of uncertain and indescribable hue. BRECKINRIDGE and LANE, on the one hand, have the men black as an "Ethiop's skin," while squatted in front of them are DOUGLAS and JOHNSON, using pieces of a mixed color. In the legitimate game, the persons sitting opposite to each other play as partners, but in this political game each party appears to be laboring for itself, while the real players are the "wire-pullers." This game now playing may be called a double centre, counter gambit, and a very complicated game at that.
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> But the game of Hat or no Hat is the game now being played at STEELE & CO.'S "Hat Hall." It is not a head and tail game, it is "all head." Put down $4, and you win the Hat – no betting, no "wire-pulling."[26]

I was baffled. If the point was to sell hats, why ramble on about politics – and chess – of all things? Playfully manipulative as Steele was, he was no mad hatter. He expected readers to see in these things not disconnected entities but interrelated symbols freighted with political – and commercial – meaning. That was the trigonometric key to his gab. Suppositious patter might yield a profitable connection, leading customers to 221 King Street, Steele's Hat Hall. But, a century later, the link was lost. And if he aimed at some sort of wit, that missed me too. Confusion banished pleasure.

And so I did, again, what scholars in similar situations do most of the time. Seeing no immediate use for this document, I discounted it as trivial, odd, or irrelevant, and pushed ahead. I had no time to spare on foolishness.

But as I studied, Steele's ad appeared day after day, and putting aside the puzzle it posed proved easier said than done. What did his strange triangulation mean? Could hats have anything to do with politics or chess in the minds of Steele's readers? Was there really a mathematic to his pitch? Why trivialize politics at the height of national crisis by comparing it with a game, and why call that game chess, when Steele's description of the game seemed nothing like chess? The seeming illogic whirled in my mind. I had the serious work of a historian to do; Walter Steele beckoned me to come play in the past. Did I dare?

"Intelligibility is a system of relationships," Victorianist Walter Houghton promised. Was there then some connection here, however tenuous and convoluted, that seemed natural to Charlestonians in 1860? Could Steele's spiel have been more than humbug? Politics, chess, hats, and the relations between them, I came to imagine, might offer a new perspective on disunion in South Carolina if only I understood how Charlestonians viewed these connections. Seemingly trivial, unrelated details, they could offer clues crucial to solving the problems I was grappling with.[27]

Call these "words of power," as literary critic Northrop Frye denotes them, "conveying primarily the sense of forces and energies rather than analogues of physical[ity]."[28] What then? Expressed as a question, that concession became both mystifying and worrisome: what did politics, chess, and hats and the dynamics between them have to do with – mean to – the men who became Vigilant Rifles? The moment I considered it thus, my tidy, contextualized collective biography began growing and transforming in directions I neither desired nor anticipated. Quite unbidden, my project sprang to life.

Steele and his mathematicians were correct, I think: "suppositious cases" may indeed lead "to a just conclusion," if the peculiar principles of social geometry and cultural accounting that held sway in Charleston can be delineated. That is a very big "if." "Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears," novelist Italo Calvino reminds us, "even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else." We must resist discounting that warning, tracing out a neat, satisfying, functionalist history "too probable to be real." Teasing out metaphors rather than plunking down models is vexing labor, but it is the only work historians are really fitted for.[29] If any consider my analysis in these pages messy, implausible, frustrating, I have strained to let it be so. The past is just like that.

Let me mitigate mess by sketching big themes of this long study in short order. Secession, I argue, was not a coordinated movement that swept across the South, dominated by anything like a united cabal, party, plan, or ideology. The context of crisis I describe is a city riven by contradictions. In Charleston – oddly and crucially the "ground zero" of disunion – it was not even the central goal of the men who accomplished it. Rather, disunion there was driven by a series of discrete, disconnected events performed at the street level, focused on asserting internal unity, nearly all of which achieved nothing practical, except to close off avenues of political retreat until, finally, the mousetrap snapped. Come 1860, it was Charleston's manifold social contradictions that drove disunion forward. So it was not men with a history of political extremism or a strong stake in slavery who propelled the separatist movement, but rather young, single, unpropertied men – clerks, mostly – usually with no stake in slavery who took the leading role, almost accidentally, in wrecking their world.

The complex, intersecting reasons for this vanguard status, I sum up in the triangulation of fear, honor, and interest. White, male Charlestonians – particularly those of the *petit bourgeoisie* – came especially to fear each other, their own shortcomings, and their future prospects for political unity and economic prosperity. They were anxious to behave honorably at the hour of crisis, performing masculinity properly before their fellows, not least to avoid being pointed out as the true source of crisis. They recognized that marching in parades, serenading, wearing cockades, and other public demonstrations worked doubly to their interest. Whether secession succeeded, these men were determined to be seen as having performed their part as patriots, not foot-draggers. This was, in many ways, a revolution propelled by social conformity, enacted by the most conservative segment of Charleston's population, aiming at something quite other than disunion itself.

Tracing the origins, permutations, and consequences of fear, honor, and interest through the precise and peculiar meanings of politics, chess, and hats, *Performing Disunion* shows how the events of 1860 drew upon a host of other aspects of social contradiction in antebellum Charleston, stretching back across three decades: the conflict between honor and respectability, the corrupt and divided nature of local politics, the aggressive cult of chivalry and chess mania, the political economy of hats, and the voluntarist hypermasculinity of firefighting culture. The same men – nearly all of them heretofore unstudied and of little apparent importance – show up again and again in these snapshots of context, contradiction, and crisis, changing clothes, transferring memberships, shifting allegiances, inching the Queen City imperceptibly toward the tipping point. Careful study of clues within and between these incidents casts up commonalities and slippages that, cumulatively, offer a micro-history of the coming of the Civil War that is new, richly human, and quite confounding.

This book asks more of readers than most historical works – the puzzling title of this introduction hints at that – and purposely rejects linear narrative in favor of triangulating analysis. Instead of pushing from point to point, Alpha to Omega, each point here plays into at least two others: there was always a triangulating draw and drag that made contingency real. As it turned out, the Vigilant Rifles helped drive the slaveholding South to disaster, but who could have seen that coming? Scholars have missed it for a century and a half. Smoothing things into a briefer, more straightforward narrative or a tidier, predictable analysis ruins my "very complicated game" – and history, too, I think. So "we will mingle" here many topics, many lives, many problems, "one with the other," *á là* Steele.

Readers so indulgent deserve at the outset to understand something of what I am playing at here. *Performing Disunion* accelerates through three sections. The six chapters of "Context" elaborate the cultural terrain and political economy generating the social contradictions that created the Vigilant Rifles. Chapter 1 examines the flawed and distorted images of antebellum Charleston that persist in contemporary scholarship and public memory. Chapters 2 to 4 explore complementary ecologies of the city, viewed from the perspective of an outsider approaching by water, rail, and road. Close readers will recognize these different axes as points of entry to relations of exchange, production, and consumption: there is no need for Marxist analysis to be as recondite as some studies make it, I wish to suggest. Collectively, these chapters present Charleston as anything but united and besieged. It was a deeply divided place, wildly fearful of internal subversion. Waterfront divisions and the growth of wage labor conjured anxieties over class conflict. Rival codes of honor and respectability battled for dominance, providing purchase for the city's emergent bourgeoisie and its reserve army of clerks, bookkeepers, and shopmen. Individual beliefs and anxieties were submerged in political and social imperatives of performance that made life itself a kind of melodrama. Chapter 5 turns to examine the city's African American population – or, more properly, white attitudes toward that black presence – asking why white Charlestonians came to fear their own police – and the class and ethnic groups they fronted for – as much as the slaves they aimed to dominate and exploit.[30] Chapter 6 explains the rise of paramilitary groups in the late 1850s in the context of a divided and floundering state militia. The line between military service and social recreation was never so plain, I contend, and the decision to support unilateral secession ultimately came down to a consumer choice that worried all. The political imperative of social unity, what I call the South Carolina jeremiad, was undermined everywhere in Charleston.

All of this goes to establish a central irony: the crisis of disunion in Charleston focused inward, not out. The drive for secession from the Union emerged within the context of a pervasive fear of social division within Charleston itself. This book's second section, "Contradictions," demonstrates how attempts to resolve political, social, and economic disunity became displaced upon a fractured, leaderless, ad hoc movement for disunion and saw it triumph. Nine chapters here elaborate how politics, chess, and hats were understood in the Queen City, tracing the themes Walter Steele's advertisement trumpets according to the categories he applies to them – as play, theater, commerce, and subversion. In Chapters 7 and 8, the conflict between honor and respectability as competing status systems is explored across the 1850s, with specific focus on the troubled career of William Taber. Chapters 9 and 10 trace the politics of secession at the street level, arguing that parades, flag raisings, and other forgotten social dramas served to promote social unity – and momentarily allay personal ambivalence – even as they marched Charlestonians toward the precipice. The surprising sources of street-level radicalism are considered in Chapters 11 and 12: the pursuit of social capital and the chance to nurture homosocial intimacy propelled an unlikely mania for chess in the years before disunion, I argue. The same thwarted young men who clustered around chessboards in Charleston after 1857 played out heroic, hypermasculine dreams in the streets come 1860. Chapters 13 to 15 turn from social to economic contradictions, showing how a dread of debt and disloyalty galvanized the fascination with and fear of hats that made Walter Steele a wealthy and powerful figure on King Street. Politics, chess, and hats, then, serve here as perspectives on the all-encompassing crisis Charlestonians faced at the hour of secession, lenses through which I trace the decisions that led specific men to stand in the vanguard of a revolution they never aimed to undertake.

The final chapters of *Performing Disunion* turn from contradiction to "Crisis." What kind of men became Minute Men? Chapters 16 to 18 show that the Vigilant Rifles were the logical offshoot of the Vigilant Fire Engine Company (themselves linked closely to the Charleston Chess Club), a group split between young, unmarried, propertyless pen-pushers and older, wealthier, commercial patrons. Fighting fires was the closest thing to military service in antebellum Charleston, and a splendid way of bonding the divergent codes of honor and respectability. In the last chapter, Minute Men membership in the Vigilant Rifles is contrasted with the characteristics of Charleston firemen, demonstrating strong continuity, along with an explanation of why the most militant secessionists were those with the smallest stake in disunion. Like most Charlestonians, I argue, Vigilant Rifles were play revolutionaries, swept up at last in a movement they could not control.

It's worth noting too what's not in this book. As this is a study of the men who stood at the forefront of the Southern revolution at street level, the voices and actions of Charleston women are deliberately disentangled in these pages, not least because these men's actions aimed at just such a disentangling. Close readers will note that women – or images of women – appear throughout *Performing Disunion*, but almost always on the margins, behind curtains, sitting separately from these ambivalent, self-deceiving, chauvinist men. Although estimable scholars like Stephen Berry have argued that the measure of manhood in the late antebellum South entailed the achievement of close, companionate relations with women, that is not the story the documents taught me as I studied gender relations in Charleston.[31] For the men whose flawed choices I delineate, women were objects of both desire and dread, but men's chief focus was always, necessarily, their relations with other men. So some may find my discussion of melodrama early on uncharged by heterosexual eros. That merely suggests how sentimentalized and uninquisitive our understanding of melodrama has become.[32] Against that view, in Chapter 8, I offer a parable on how William Taber managed across the course of several years to wind up getting himself shot: although that cad was scarcely uninterested in women, it was fraught ties with other men, shaped by honor's ethos and the countervailing tide of respectability, that guided his choices and led to his doom. Later on, in my discussion of chess as a site of homosocial cathexis, parallels between Taber and Paul Morphy should become clear. Last, I think that – as with the African Americans they helped hold in bondage – the almost unmoored young men at the center of my study really never doubted their ability to dominate, denigrate, and segregate the women in their lives. So I have no wish to perfume these pages – and these fellows – by suggesting otherwise.[33] Making sense of Charleston men's fraught and often foolish ties to other men is enough to contend with, anyway.

Readers deserve a brief word on method, too. Some will see this study as an example of the not-so-"New Cultural History" once in vogue, although never so much among Americanists. I hope these pages go farther than that. My attitude toward that estimable scholarship is rather like Huck Finn's complaint about the widow's cooking. There was nothing wrong with it, "only everything was cooked by itself."

> In a barrel of odds and ends it is different; things get mixed up, and the juice kind of swaps around, and the things go better.[34]

That is all the theory I will offer at this point. Searching for meanings that people, places, objects, and events held for actors in the past has become almost paint-by-numbers in recent decades. Few have considered how meanings intersect, how cultural grammars influenced (and were influenced by) social and political dynamics. I aim here to sketch a contrapuntal history in the same way pianist and social analyst Glenn Gould hoped to render the contradictions inherent in cultural geography.[35] How

Charlestonians struggled with the tensions between the elements considered in these pages, how that struggle led to Civil War, is the contextual problem I aim to resolve.

That the relations between these elements are serendipitous and contrived, contingent and artificial, there is no denying. Steele posited only suppositious connections between politics, chess, and hats. It is I who link those to the process of disunion directly. Still, I hope this interpretive essay will not be read as an arbitrary I-say.[36] Many questions examined here are impossible to answer with anything more than the educated guess I call deep empiricism. Many gaps in the record remain where only conjecture is possible. Yet I do not see these as failures of research or flaws of method. We cannot really as historians tromp through the past gathering up evidence for our arguments like so much firewood.[37] At best, I think, we can spy upon the past, overhearing schemes, weighing silences, trailing ambiguities, gathering clues. This microhistory is intended as a compassionate and faithful part of that broader cross-cultural task.[38]

These are not, in the end, such strange ideas. For hundreds of years, learned men and women have understood the phenomena of *camera obscura*: by cutting a small hole in the wall of a blacked-out room or compartment, the view outside is projected upon the opposite wall. These drawing tools supplied the model for the first cameras, but were also effective weapons of espionage, and by the eighteenth century were often disguised as books. This work follows in that tradition. Like the first photographers who captivated Victorians with new notions of art and new ways of seeing, in this study I have struggled to compose a "picture from nature." My success, if any there be, comes despite my best efforts. While I was beating the bushes for customers to photograph, the Vigilant Rifles strolled into my studio unbidden. I posed them for a group portrait, yet, as the results show, there was no suppressing individual peculiarities. And the backdrop for their picture, Steele's enigmatic headline – *Politics! Chess! Hats!!!* – was chosen neither by me nor by them, though critics might accuse each of influencing the other.[39]

The final product, still dark with shadows and hazy around the edges, is only a crude daguerreotype of one corner of secession and a few of the men who made it, frozen at a particular moment in time. Whether the picture presented here is a true mirror of nature, others must judge. But sometimes, as I have already argued, the unanticipated may offer a clue to verisimilitude. By that standard, I am a fortunate detective-daguerreotypist indeed, for Sam Tupper and his men and their world came out looking unlike anything I had ever expected.