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COMMERCIAL CONVENTIONS; FROM
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WILLIAM WATSON DAVIS

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Ante-Bellum Southern Commercial Conventions

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VII. ANTE-BELLUM SOUTHERN COMMERCIAL CONVENTIONS.

BY WILLIAM WATSON DAVIS, OAK GROVE, ALA.

In our national history, the Civil War is the most vital of past events. It was the culmination of a struggle lasting forty years. The compromise of 1820, the controversy about nullification, the compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska bill, the Dred Scott decision, the formation of sectional parties, burning eloquence and fierce invective mark the course of one phase of the struggle—the political. The maelstrom of the sixties ended it.

At the South, there was another phase of the struggle. It might be termed the economic. Its aim was not the control of territory, nor was its purpose political, but the making of the South economically independent of the North. Its opponent was not the Northern populace, but Southern industrial and commercial conditions.

The index of this movement is a number of commercial conventions, beginning in the latter part of the thirties and ending with the outbreak of the war. These conventions held very much the same relation to the body economic that the great political conventions of the day did to the body politic. A study of them—fourteen in all and extending over twenty-two years—shows in the main four things: first, the actual industrial, commercial, and financial condition of the South as illustrated by statistics; second, the general attitude toward the North at successive periods during the twenty odd years preceding the war of a large and prominent class of Southern men of affairs who were not distinctly politicians; third, the existence in the South then of national ideas even now considered far advanced; fourth, and probably most important, the rise and development of the movement for Southern commercial independence.

Before this movement can be followed, the South's economic condition at home and its commercial relations abroad must be generally understood.

From early times in the history of the English colonies in America, those south of Pennsylvania,—Virginia, the Carolinas, Maryland, and Georgia,—were the agricultural section, and up to 1770 led in aggregate commerce, according to the census of 1850. The imports of the two sections—the northern colonies and the southern—were about the same with some difference in favor of the North. The exports, however, were greatly in favor of the southern colonies. The following table shows the condition during the colonial period.¹

Year.	NORTHERN COLONIES. New England, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.		SOUTHERN COLONIES. Maryland, Virginia, Carolinas, and Georgia.		AGGREGATE.	
	Exports.	Imports.	Exports.	Imports.	North.	South.
1700	\$318,000	\$795,000	\$1,656,000	\$922,000	\$1,297,000	\$2,578,000
1710	203,000	737,000	1,045,000	736,000	1,040,000	1,781,000
1720	369,000	953,000	1,971,000	644,000	1,322,000	2,615,000
1730	369,500	1,605,000	2,492,000	1,077,000	1,974,000	3,569,000
1740	544,000	1,733,000	3,037,000	2,306,000	2,277,000	3,433,000
1750	561,000	4,160,000	3,512,000	2,427,000	4,721,000	5,939,000
1760	408,000	8,938,000	3,379,000	4,120,000	9,346,000	7,517,000
1770	1,230,000	5,026,000	3,847,000	4,601,000	6,256,000	8,448,000

After the Revolution, when the colonies had become States, commerce, both exports and imports, steadily shifted in favor of the North. The fields of the South rapidly spread and with proportional rapidity did the merchant fleets of the Northern States increase.² Both the climate and the soil of the South favored the raising of staple crops, and so did her system of labor. The less fertile soil of the North with its more rigorous climate prevented the culture of great staple crops. Accordingly, from perfectly natural causes, the South continued agricultural and the North, manufacturing and commercial.³

Commerce and manufactures exert a centralizing influence. They develop cities, centers of trade. Agriculture exerts a decentralizing influence. It tends to scatter population. Thus, at

¹ *Compendium of the U. S. Census, 1850, p. 184.*

² *Compendium of the U. S. Census, 1850, p. 186.*

³ "Progress of American Commerce," in *De Bow's Review*, December, 1846.

the North we find the rise of such cities as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.⁴ They were but the exponents of the economic life of their section. At the South, as the fields of cotton and corn expanded, the Southern cities languished. The levying of a tariff increased the industrial ascendancy of the North and hampered the development of the South.⁵ Under its protecting influence manufactures increased and flourished and nourished the emporiums of trade and finance,—New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. The great market for the agricultural products of the South was Europe—England especially. To this market the planters shipped their cotton through Northern brokers and largely in Northern ships. That which did not cross the ocean went to the manufactories of the Northern States. When these ships which carried abroad the results of Southern agriculture returned to America they were freighted with foreign articles of merchandise.⁶ It was but the natural law of exchange in trade. On return, where would this foreign merchandise be landed? Would the importers seek the small town in the midst of a scattered and rural population, or great cities in the midst of a much denser population? Again by the natural laws of trade, imports into the United States sought Northern ports. At these ports operated the numerous middle men and accessories incident to an extended foreign trade,—namely, the importer, the jobber, the insurance man, the banker, and the shipper. Through these ports came to the South the return trade from Southern products sent abroad. Here yearly the Southern merchant went, bought his stock on credit (generally) and reshipped it South. The Northern importer advanced to the Southern merchant just as to-day the city merchant in the South advances to the planter. The profits of handling the bulk of the material wealth of the South and the return trade which it brought accrued to the North. Shippers' charges, importers' profits, insurance, municipal taxes on imported merchandise, similar State taxes, wharfage, and charges

⁴"Growth of New York," by Kettell, in *De Bow's Review*, January, 1848.

⁵"Progress of American Commerce," in *De Bow's Review*, December, 1846.

⁶"Reports to Charleston Convention of 1830," by George McDuffie, Robt. Y. Hayne, and F. Elmore, in *The Industrial Resources of the South and West*, vol. iii, pp. 92-116.

for re-shipment went to Northern men.⁷ The banks of this section financed the trade. The South produced while the North manipulated her productions. Each year the North was getting firmer control of Southern resources, when in the latter part of the thirties the movement for Southern commercial independence began.

This then was the economic situation which a large number of Southern men wished to correct. Their intentions at last crystallized into a commercial convention that met at Augusta, Ga., in the fall of 1837.⁸ It was the first of fourteen conventions extending down to 1859. Judged by the resolutions passed and the general tone of the proceedings, three of these meetings cannot be counted in the number of those whose avowed aim was Southern commercial and industrial independence. The conventions alluded to met in 1845, 1849, and 1852.⁹ Yet a study of their objects plainly shows that if they were carried out, the South would certainly be the greatest gainer, and in a way too that would tend toward economic independence of the North. Also, these conventions, though each separated from the other by several years, form a connecting link between the compact groups of 1837-1839 and 1853-1859. They unquestionably stand for the trend of Southern economic thought during this gap of fourteen years. While they were not meetings expressly for Southern supremacy, they can hardly be logically omitted in an account of that movement.

We have then, three disconnected series of conventions,—those of 1837-1839, four in number; those of 1845-52, three in number; those of 1853-59, seven in number. The first and third series were strictly Southern commercial independence conventions, each meeting being an adjournment of the one preceding. The second series was made up of disconnected meetings, and stands for the great manifestations of the South's part in the mighty movement for railroads and internal development.

To what primal cause, or causes, must we look for the origin of these conventions? No definite answer is apparent. All

⁷ Address of the Augusta convention (1838) to the people of the South, in *De Bow's Review*, November, 1852, p. 477.

⁸ *Georgia Messenger*, Macon, October, 26, 1837.

⁹ Reports of the proceedings of these will be found in *De Bow's Review*.

things indicate that they were simply a natural outgrowth of the economic conditions of that time.

As the conventions aimed at eradicating the financial and commercial disparity between the North and the South, and as evidence indicates that a knowledge of this condition of affairs was possessed by Southern men some years before the first meeting was called, the birth of the idea of commercial independence no doubt occurred when the disparity first began to make itself felt. In the year 1816 was first levied a tariff definitely for the protection of manufactures. These the War of 1812 had forced into existence, almost exclusively in the North. The levying of this tariff marks the formal beginning of a system which favored manufactures, and which was disadvantageous to extended agriculture, and hence to the South.¹⁰ As the North surged forward and the South dropped behind, the situation grew clearer to Southern men, and the necessity for some action was obvious. In the latter half of the thirties—1835-1840—came the formal advent of the movement. In 1835 there is a brief notice of a convention of merchants at Knoxville, in which was discussed the commercial condition of the South.¹¹ About the same time appear notices of other meetings of a local character. The idea of Southern commercial independence had crystallized far enough by 1836 to form points of consultation here and there throughout the South. The following year, on October 16, 1837, a number of these points or groups came together in the first Southern commercial convention.

Six months previous had come the financial crisis of 1837. The banking system of the country was thrown into confusion and shaken to its very foundation. This appears to have been the occasion for the meeting. Wrote John C. Calhoun on Sept. 7, five weeks before the convention opened:¹²

"Van Buren has been forced by his situation and his terror of Jackson to play directly into our hands and I am determined that he shall not escape from us. We have now a fair opportunity to

¹⁰ Reports of McDuffie, Hayne and Elmore to the convention of 1839.

¹¹ *Georgia Messenger*, 1836 and 1837.

¹² Letter of John C. Calhoun to James E. Calhoun, Sept. 7, 1837, in the "Correspondence of John C. Calhoun," Dr. J. F. Jameson, editor, in *Report of the American Historical Association*, 1899, vol. ii.

break the last of our commercial shackles. I mean the control which the North through the use of Government credit acting through the banks has exercised over our industry and commerce. How wonderful that the author of the Safety Fund System and the favorite of New York (the state above all others the most benefited by the union of bank and state) should be forced by circumstances, which he could not control, to give the fatal death blow to his own offspring and supporters!—In the meantime, it is of vast importance that the meeting in Augusta should be fully attended. Now is the time. Abbeville must send her delegates. You and McDuffie ought to be two of them. Let a meeting be called at the Court House and the nominations be made.¹³

In the resolutions of the convention of the year following occurs this clause, which evidently refers to the panic of 1837 as the creator of favorable conditions for united Southern action, and logically an occasion for the first meeting:¹⁴

“That the present condition of the commercial relations of this country and the disruption of the existing channels of trade afford an opportunity of breaking down the trammels which have so long fettered our commerce and of restoring the South to its natural advantages.”

The Augusta convention opened on Oct. 18, 1837.¹⁵ Two States were represented: South Carolina by thirteen delegates, and Georgia by sixty-five. The Hon. Kerr Boyce, of Charleston, was chosen president. Compared with the great meetings which come after, with a dozen States represented by several hundred delegates, this convention was not a large affair. Yet it is of signal importance. It was the beginning of an all-Southern movement, of which the Civil War was the end. The resolutions passed were as follows:

1. “That in the opinion of this convention the present conjuncture of our commercial affairs is eminently propitious for the establishment of a system of direct importations through our southern and southwestern cities, and that we are called upon by every consideration of interest and of patriotism to throw off the degrading shackles of our commercial dependence.

2. “That with a view to induce public spirited capitalists to

¹³ *Georgia Messenger*, Apr. 12, 1838.

¹⁴ *Georgia Messenger*, Oct. 26, 1837.